



# Beginner Certificate in Classical Education for Parents

with Dr. Matthew Post

## Lesson 2: A Brief History of American Education

### Outline:

All education responds to the question “What is the good life?” (Either consciously or not)

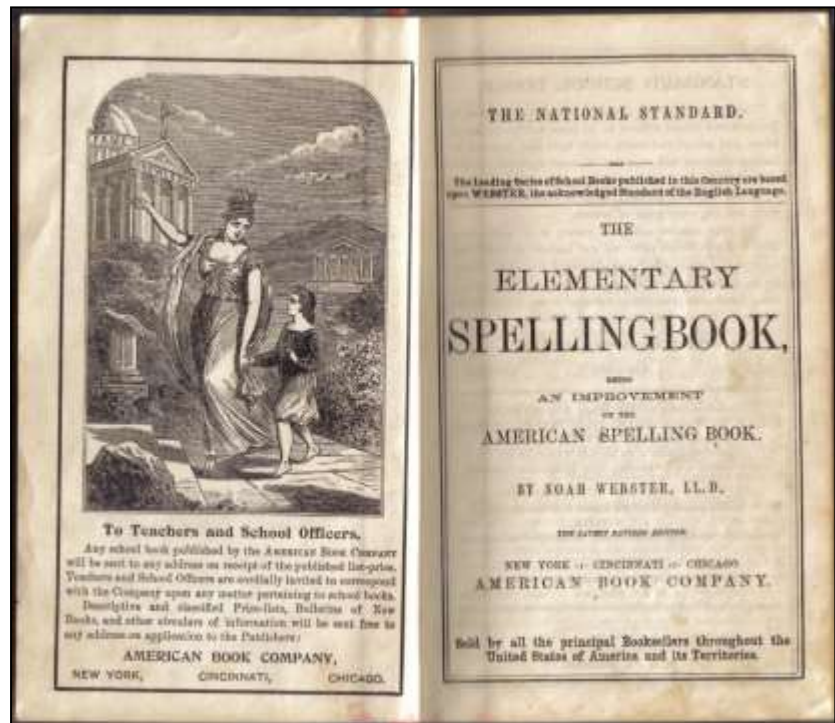
#### American Education - 17th and 18th Centuries

- A robust sense of *scholé*
- Formal education was rare.
- Focused on literacy oriented to a telos of reading the Bible and prayers
- Job training was done by apprenticeship.
- Education was typically at home.
- Public Education spreads after the American Revolution.
- Classical Subjects were taught (Greek, Latin, Geometry, Logic, Rhetoric, etc.)
- Texts typically from Europe.
- The Pedagogical Approach:
  - Emphasis on memorization
  - Work done at school, not home.
  - Much corporeal punishment.
  - One-room schoolhouses were typical.
- 70+ students with a single teacher so often disorganized and harsh environment
- Older students help teach younger and great sense of community
- The writer of the “Federalist” writings certainly showed knowledge of classics as well as European enlightenment thinkers.
- Even the Founding Fathers who did not get a formal education were autodidacts and read the classics for themselves (i.e. Alexander Hamilton)
- Teachers were often volunteers, minimally paid, and lacked training.
- There was a large shift in Education after Noah Webster.



*From the 1690 textbook, “The  
New England Primer”*

- Webster produced a “speller” (a book that taught grammar and spelling).
  - The speller gave more value to English than Latin or Greek grammar and sought to do away with British spelling and culture.
  - Taught a method of learning grammar: Syllables -> phonetics -> word -> grammar
  - Webster’s speller emphasized acquiring property OVER virtue. He agreed with Locke that virtue is impractical and aristocratic (i.e. courage leads to dueling)
  - Taught that virtue does not help acquire property, but “character” still necessary for property so education still focused on acquiring character.
  - The speller included the Great Books, but not the Bible because Webster sought to be “non- sectarian.”
- Webster was very influenced by Rousseau's philosophy. He even changed his focus later to issues of language and control.
- There was a growing (but small) interest in society to educate minorities like women and black people. (i.e. Abigail Adams was very well educated).
- Religious conflict lead many to turn against religion of any kind. They instead valued whatever would lead to prosperity. (Although, there was still not a turn to atheism or secularism.)
  - There were major difficulties when governments tied to ensure that all citizens be the same religion or denomination. This pushed people to greater acceptance of other beliefs.
- There was a shift to the idea of a bureaucratic “Police State” -- from the Greek word “Polis” (πόλις) meaning city-state (NOT the modern meaning).
  - A Police (πόλις) State has laws that support the “culture” rather than religion.
  - A top-down structure - direct all as one culture
- Secularization led to the idea that hierarchy ought to be based on amount of knowledge rather than antiquated



*Noah Webster's Speller*



religious traditions. This meant that science and professionalization were encouraged.

## American Education in the 19th Century

- Victor Cousin's "[Report on the State of Public Education in Prussia](#)" was an important work presenting the German progressive model of education.
- This interest led to the [Horace Mann Reforms](#).
  - These reforms to public education were influential in many ways. They changed the classical model to have education focus on patriotism, social conformity, and what is necessary to get a job.
- 19<sup>th</sup> Century Educational Developments:
  - Separation by age
  - Lecture focused
  - Credentialing
  - Teaching a profession
  - Discussion of Pedagogy and how to teach teachers
  - Secularization in public education (due to the fact that people would resent tax money going to a school run by another denomination or religion)
  - The stage is set for progressive education.
  - Influenced by the German model
- Following the Mann Reforms there was a greater focus on specialized, patriotic, standardized, socializing students (to getting students to attend to the social needs of the country)
- Centralization and hierarchy in schools based on expertise – Creates conflict between hierarchy of school and democracy being admired
- Dewey responds to this:
  - *Ideas that are compatible with Classical Education:*
    - To live well more important than job training
    - Critical thinking is greater than rote memorization
    - Teachers ought to care about students and their needs
    - It is more important that teachers are passionate than well trained.
  - *Ideas that are NOT compatible with Classical Education:*
    - Character formation is to make good cogs in the society (rather than full humans)
    - Education should be in order to change the society as the primary end (changing society is a good goal but not as the primary one)
  - Progressive education:
    - Follow latest fashions rather than responding to unchanging standards of right and wrong.
    - Care about providing education to the underserved, but often achieves this by lowering standards so that all can have equality



rather than the classical idea that the best education for one is the best education for all.

- Focus on experiential education and avoid great books any time experience might be used instead.
- Often leads to rejection of faith and the arts for only what is new and cultivates “21<sup>st</sup> Century Skills”

## Review of Issues

- There is a distinction between one supreme goal vs. a variety of goals.
  - American education started with single goal of access to worship, scripture, and prayer.
  - Progressive Education distinctively has a wide variety of disciplines (with different goals)
  - Progressive Education has a hierarchy of goals but makes disciplines more dispersed.
- Moral Formation Aim
- Professionalization – salary vs. “Intangibles” (a.k.a. fulfillment, etc.)
- Discipline
  - Most think corporeal punishment is bad but this seeps into grading – some propose motivation should not be by threats (even if threats of bad grades). Classical Education says there must be high standards and education should help all rise to the standard.
- A simple distinction between classical and progressive model – Skills (critical thinking) vs. Form (Great Books and Traditional Liberal Arts – content)
  - Progressives say Classical Education reading great books and such but not emphasize skills (form) – Progressives think this lead to dogmatism
  - Classical Education looks at Progressive Education and sees only an emphasis on learning form (critical skills) only without content and say this leads to nihilism.





- It is fair to say that form without content can lead to nihilism and content without form can lead to dogmatism. Right classical education is about the marriage of form and content.

## Key Takeaways from the American Education History

- A conflict between Christians drove secularization
  - Classical Education needs to use critical thinking to work at figuring out how to have right discussions with those with whom we disagree (still hold to the truth but have the ability to discuss)
- Classical Education must be maintained through an education system
  - Historically, classics started to disappear at highest level with the (University) German Research Model and this eventually became the example for lower levels.
  - Classical Education must be in effect at all levels
  - Teach the whole community to understand Classical Education