



Comments on SCHOOL: The Story of American Public Education
by David Tyack

*As debate swirls today around American public schools, a new PBS series, **SCHOOL: The Story of American Public Education** airs September 3-4, 2001 from 9-11 p.m. on PBS stations nationwide (check local listings.) The lead consultant for this new series is David Tyack, Professor of Education and History at Stanford University. He is the author of many books including **The One Best System: A History Of American Urban Education**, and co-author of **Tinkering Toward Utopia: A Century Of Public School And Reform**.*

Q: Professor Tyack, why did you want to become involved in this historical series, SCHOOL?

I was very impressed with previous historical documentaries by Sarah Mondale and Sarah Patton. I felt that they had a gift of telling important stories vividly and insightfully. They know how to use history to provide historical context for the crucial decisions we need to make in education. The series **SCHOOL** won't solve the big problems of creating quality and high standards that we face, but it could help to raise the level of thinking and discussion about what has worked and what has not, what ideals have shaped our system of schooling, and what is the most important unfinished business for education.

Right now there's a lot of talk about public schools, much of it alarmist. For two decades we have heard a drum-beat of criticism of educators and schooling. To be sure, there are critical problems in public schools, such as violence and high dropout rates. In some ways we do not have one public school system, but two or three different systems, depending on the income and race and ethnicity of the students. There aren't simple answers to such problems, but if we neglect the past, finding solutions will be even harder.

SCHOOL doesn't gloss over the array of practical problems we face today. But it insists that we need to discover and build on the values that can unite us, however diverse the society. This task is not just for educational leaders like Thomas Jefferson or Horace Mann or John Dewey; it's for all citizens. **SCHOOL** resonates with wonderful examples of the ways ordinary people can make a big difference in education.

Q: What would be some examples of that?

The film features women who went west to teach on the prairie, Latino brothers who fought tracking in Los Angeles, a young woman who was determined to play varsity sports in a school in which only boys competed, an African-American father in Boston in the late 1840s who fought to have his daughter admitted to a white school, and teachers who devised new ways of teaching the hosts of immigrants in their classrooms. Activists turned up everywhere. So did steady school trustees who provided wood for the pot-bellied stove in the one room school and advice for the young rural teacher.

SCHOOL doesn't just focus on problems. That's one of its virtues: It recaptures the whole range of experiences that have made going to school so pivotal in Americans' lives for over a century. Sarah Patton and Sarah Mondale did a remarkable job of discovering images, films, music, and key people to interview.

The viewer gains a rounded view of the educational past, not one pre-selected to glorify or denigrate. Whether they interview participants in events or historians interpreting the past, it becomes abundantly clear that the past is forever in the process of being constructed, not some one truth inscribed in stone. But there are some common themes running through the history of public education that make it meaningful to speak of a tradition in common.

Q: Do you think that the idea of a “common school” makes sense today? Or, put another way, would Jefferson and Mann be puzzled by the debate over schools today?

Our ideological forefathers, like Jefferson and Mann, had no doubt in their minds that the foremost purpose of education was producing good citizens, people of moral character ready and willing to do their civic duty.

Some people today think that the notion of a common school is naive and old-fashioned. Some regard schooling as a consumer good to be bought in an open marketplace, not a common good pursued in publicly-controlled schools. Others think the society is too diverse to share common values. Some point out that attempts to find common standards in history only led to a free-for-all debate in the U.S. Senate.

I think, though, that common schools and shared values are not dead. American public schools, as ***SCHOOL*** makes plain, were — and are a great social and political invention.