Progress Report

Dana Goldstein surveys the history of American public education and offers suggestions for its reform.

By CLAUDIA WALLIS

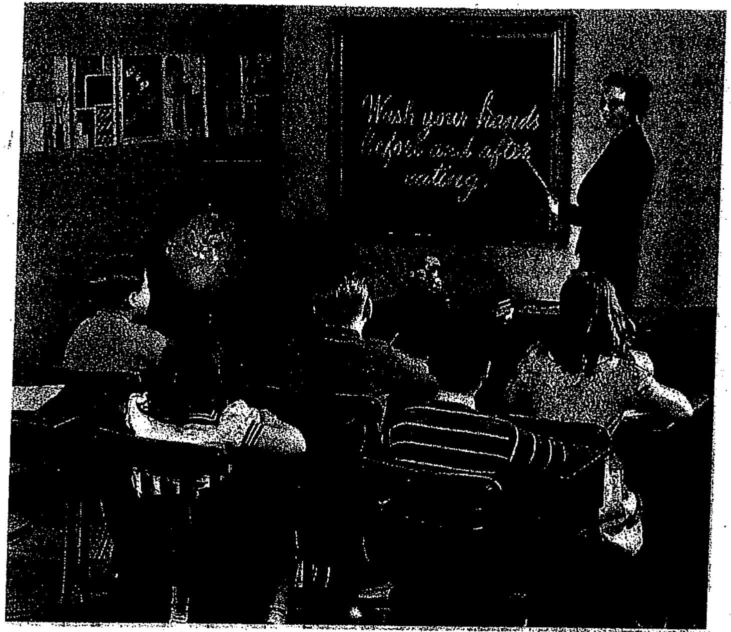
AMERICA LOVES TO dream an impossible dream when it comes to education. We see our public schools as the bedrock of the equal-opportunity society we wish to be, the land where a poor boy in a log cabin — or a bungalow in Honolulu — can grow up to be president. And teachers are the angel-magicians who make it all happen.

But throughout the history of American public education, this dream has bumped up against some harsh realities. Teachers are, by and large, poorly trained and ill equipped to flatten social, racial and economic barriers. Their pay is pathetic (a median of $54,000 in 2012, versus $70,000 for a dental hygienist). So too are the conditions in which they often work. Notions about what constitutes good instruction have always been shockingly vague, and ideas about what to teach and how to measure learning are subject to politics and passing fads.

THE TEACHER WARS
A History of America's
Most Embattled Profession
By Dana Goldstein
Illustrated. 349 pp. Doubleday. $26.95.

In "The Teacher Wars," her lively account of the history of teaching, Dana Goldstein traces the numerous trends that have shaped "the most controversial profession in America." Along the way, she demonstrates that almost every idea for reforming education over the past 25 years has been tried before — and failed to make a meaningful difference. Long before Wendy Kopp dreamed up Teach for America to place Ivy Leaguers in public schools, we had the Teacher Corps. Before that, Catharine Beecher — "America's first media darling school reformer" — was recruiting proper East Coast spinsters to go west to teach the unlettered children of pioneers. Decades before we had digital databases to measure teacher performance, administrators in New York, Tennessee, Michigan and elsewhere were devising merit-pay systems based on similar ideas. And 35 years before the Gates Foundation became the 2,000-pound gorilla in American education, the Ford Foundation was throwing its weight around the classroom chasing a similar goal of closing the achievement gap between rich and poor.

Goldstein, a writer for publications like Slate and The Atlantic, begins her personality-driven chronicle in the 1820s and '30s, when the country was first establishing universal public education in the form of "common schools." She introduces two key figures, both disenchanted with religion, who viewed public education as the path to a kind of secular salvation. Beecher, the sister of Harriet Beecher Stowe, did much to turn teaching from a profession that was 90 percent male in 1800 into one dominated by women. At a time when schoolmasters were often derided as intemperate, rod-wielding tyrants (think Ichabod Crane), Beecher argued that the job was better suited to gentle, pious, unmarried women, who could be paid a pittance since they had no families to support. Horace Mann, the Massachusetts legislator who became the country's first state secretary of education, was the idealistic proponent of establishing Prussian-style "normal schools" to train these virtuous, low-cost school marms.



A 1940s lesson in hygiene.

The mediocrity of teacher prep was baked in almost from the start. Most normal schools were undistinguished. Many eventually transitioned into state teachers colleges, requiring a high school diploma but retaining a legacy of low standards. "In many ways," Goldstein writes, "we are still living with the teacher training system the common schools movement created."

The low-level training reflected an ambivalence about the purpose of the job: Was teaching a moral calling like missionary work, or a job for well-prepared professionals? And it reflected an ambivalence about whether ordinary people actually needed a liberal academic education, as opposed to acquiring rudimentary literacy and a healthy respect for authority.

These conflicts emerge in chapters about teaching in black schools in the post-Civil War South where, by 1915, state spending for a black student was one-third of that for a white student, and at inner-city schools later in the 20th century, where low expectations and revolving-door faculty stunted learning. She brings nuance to the famous dispute between Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. Du Bois over whether it was more important for black teachers to prepare the masses of newly emancipated children for work or to cultivate what Du Bois called "the talented tenth" for college.

One of the incidental pleasures of this book is discovering how many historic figures better known for other achievements logged time in the front of a classroom. These include Susan B. Anthony, Henry David Thoreau, Herman Melville and Lyndon B. Johnson. Historians will doubtless quibble with Goldstein's broad-brush characterizations of major movements and personalities, but most readers will appreciate her way with the quick biographical anecdote.

As we enter the modern era, Goldstein weaves in her own reporting to good effect, offering eyewitness accounts of the impact and many unintended consequences of federal forays into education, beginning with the landmark 1983 report "A Nation at Risk" and continuing with this century's ambitious reform programs: No Child Left Behind from 2001 and Race to the Top from 2009. As the modern accountability movement takes hold, she documents the explosion of standardized testing and the ever more intensive efforts to measure and rate teacher performance. We witness, for example, the sad spectacle of Sabina Trombetta, a highly regarded art teacher in Colorado Springs, having to ask her first graders to sit for seven written tests during the 2010-11 school year, instead of using that time to paint or draw.

By 2011, Goldstein reports, it was becoming clear that we could not elevate the overall quality of American education just by piling on the tests, holding teachers responsible for student scores and then rewarding the good and firing the bad. "Underperforming teachers," she writes, "were not hiding some sort of amazing skill set they failed to use either because they were too lazy or were disgruntled about low pay." Nor do efforts to import supposedly higher-caliber people via alternative routes to teaching, like Teach for America, have the heft to make a difference in a profession that adds as many as 200,000 new hires a year. John Dewey was right in 1895, Goldstein observes, when he said, "Education is, and forever will be, in the hands of ordinary men and women."

In a 12-page epilogue, Goldstein offers a number of sensible recommendations for shoring up those ordinary men and women and improving American schools. These include returning standardized tests to their proper, lower-stakes role: helping teachers determine what their students do and don't know and where to aim their lessons. Similarly, she suggests using "value-added" calculations — how much an individual teacher raises test scores — to target help to those who are struggling and career opportunities to those at the top. Goldstein does not directly challenge tenure, but she does call for an end to such "outdated union protections" as requiring the last teacher hired to be the first fired during layoffs.

Like Amanda Ripley's "The Smartest Kids in the World" and Elizabeth Green's "Building a Better Teacher" (reviewed on Page 23), "The Teacher Wars" suggests that to improve our schools, we have to help teachers do their job the way higher-achieving nations do: by providing better preservice instruction, offering newcomers more support from well-trained mentors and opening up the "black box" classroom so teachers can observe one another without fear and share ideas. Stressing accountability, with no ideas for improving teaching, Goldstein says, is "like the hope that buying a scale will result in losing weight." Such books may be sounding the closing bell on an era when the big ideas in school reform came from economists and solutions were sought in spreadsheets of test data. □

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