

### Democracy's Schools: The Rise of Public Education in America

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## Review

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**Neem, Johann N.** *Democracy's Schools: The Rise of Public Education in America*. Johns Hopkins, \$22.95 ISBN 1421423219

Johann Neem's *Democracy's Schools: The Rise of Public Education in America*, from the excellent How Things Worked series, edited by Robin Einhorn and Richard R. John, is a love letter to America's public education system. Neem begins with a personal recounting of his own experience as an immigrant attending California public schools. He credits the public school system for preparing him for success and Americanizing his family. The author writes "the schools were for all Americans, and the schools helped make us Americans." (ix) It is a powerful preface and Neem continues the theme throughout the book, explaining the importance of the American public school system in creating citizens prepared for the challenges of democracy. As Neem explains "they are democracy's schools. As such, they reflect all the tensions and contradictions one might expect of democratic institutions. And by democratizing access to the kind of liberal education that was once reserved for the few, the common schools prepare all young people to take part in the shared life of democracy." (x)

*Democracy's Schools* traces the development of public education in the United States prior to the Civil War. Throughout his work, Neem traces two distinct narratives. He follows the work of school reformers such as Horace Mann as they attempted to improve educational institutions to ensure that they prepared students for citizenship as well as cultivated students' innate "self-culture." The efforts and arguments of school reformers are valuable and yield considerable insight into the state of education in antebellum America. Neem provides a useful synopsis of the reform initiatives and weaves that story in with a chronological recounting of the establishment and support of public schools across the country in the nineteenth century.

More important, Neem's focus on the work of local communities to build their own schools is a welcome addition to our understanding of the history of American education. As the author illustrates, reformers wanted to "reform" schools that were already in existence. Neem traces the development of those schools created by local communities, explaining the importance of social capital, defined as "a measure of citizens' capacity to work together." (62) According to the author, "in towns around the nation, citizens tapped into their local reservoirs of social capital to organize schools for their children. And it worked. By the 1830s, more children were going to more schools than ever before, because ordinary Americans had come together to do it, without much aid from the state or from the likes of Horace Mann. The origins of public education in America, despite what Mann may have thought, lay with ordinary citizens who pooled their labor, time, and resources to organize schools well before Mann arrived on the scene." (62)

*Democracy's Schools* traces the development of public schools, highlighting the local nature of schools across the nation. Local communities banded together to build schools to meet their local needs. The impetus for the first schools came from the communities themselves, who arranged schoolhouses, hired teachers, provided supplies and monetary support. State legislatures often aided local efforts with charters or public funds, "but the action itself took place locally, community by community." (72) As reformers attempted to strengthen these institutions, many local communities resisted the intrusion of education professionals into their neighborhood schools. One way the author reveals this trend is with the rise and fall of state superintendents of education. Many states across the country created such officeholders to oversee the entire school system, but many likewise quickly abolished the office, preferring local control. Neem's narrative displays the vital importance of local initiative and support to any successful school venture. His story traces a similar development in states across the country and echoes other recent scholarship on antebellum education.

In addition to the profound importance of local control, Neem offers his reader a glimpse into the colorful lives of teachers and students, addresses the feminization of the teaching profession, the print war between education reformers and school teachers over the use of discipline in the classroom, and closes with the disparate efforts of Catholics to have separate public schools and the struggle of African Americans for integrated public schools prior to the Civil War.

Neem's ability to pull such large amount of historical content into one concise narrative that offers a national picture is impressive. His prose is engaging and his story is exciting. Its brevity ensures that even readers not particularly interested in education history will find it worth their time. The story presented in *Democracy's Schools* gives us a synthesis of recent scholarship studying regional and state developments and updates older works that traced the emergence of public education in the United States.

The author, Johann N. Neem, is a Professor of History at Western Washington University and a Senior Fellow at the University of Virginia's Institute for Advanced Studies in Culture. His first book was published by Harvard University Press in 2008 entitled *Creating a Nation of Joiners: Democracy and Civil Society in Early National Massachusetts*. Neem is an active participant in the modern debate over higher education reform and an important proponent for liberal arts education.

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