

Horace Mann on Education and Poverty (1848)

Between the 1820's and the 1850's in the United States, people became more and more aware of the need for public education. The state of Massachusetts, under the direction of Secretary of Education Horace Mann, instituted many changes in public education that later became models for public schools all over the country. Mann saw to it that more money was provided for the school system, that teachers were properly trained and better paid, that better schools were built, and that laws were passed requiring students to attend school.

Horace Mann believed that only through public education could the country progress. As you read the following excerpt from his twelfth annual report to the Massachusetts Board of Education, try to determine why Mann also believed that education was the key to ending poverty.

A State should . . . seek the solution of such problems as these. To what extent can competence [knowledge] displace pauperism [poverty]? How nearly can we free ourselves from the low-minded and the vicious, not by their expatriation [removal] but by their elevation? To what extent can the resources and powers of Nature be converted into human welfare, the peaceful arts of life be advanced and the vast treasures of human talent and genius be developed? How much of suffering, in all its forms, can be relieved? Or, what is better than relief; how much can be prevented? Cannot the classes of crimes be lessened, and the number of criminal in each class be diminished?

. . . The distance between the two extremes of society is lengthening, instead of being abridged. With every generation, fortunes increase on the one hand, and some new privation is added to poverty on the other. We are verging towards those extremes of opulence [wealth] and of penny [poverty], each of which unhumanizes the mind . . .

I suppose it to be the universal sentiment of all those who may mingle any ingredient of benevolence [caring] with their notions on political economy, that vast and overshadowing private fortunes are the greatest dangers to which the happiness of people in a republic can be subjected. Such fortunes would create a feudalism of a new kind.

Now, surely nothing but universal education can counterwork this tendency to the domination of capital and severity of labor . . . If education be equably diffused [equally spread out], it will draw property after it by the strongest of all attractions, for such a thing never did happen, and never can happen, as that an intelligent and practical body of men should be permanently poor. Property and labor in different classes are essentially antagonistic, but property and labor in the same class are essentially fraternal . . .

Education, then, beyond all other devices of human origin, is the great equalizer of the conditions of men, - the balance wheel of the social machinery.

I do not here mean that it so elevates the moral nature as to make men disdain and abhor and oppression of their fellow men. This idea pertains to another of its attributes. But I mean that it gives each man the independence and the means by which he can resist the selfishness of other men. It does better than to disarm the poor of their hostility towards the rich: it prevents being poor. Agrarianism [a movement for the equal distribution of land] is the revenge of poverty against wealth. The wanton destruction of the property of others - the burning of haystacks and corn-ricks, the demolition of machinery because it supercedes [replaces] hand labor, the sprinkling of vitriol [acid] on rich dresses - is only agrarianism run mad. Education prevents both the revenge and the madness. On the other hand, a fellow feeling for one's class or caste is the common instinct of hearts not wholly sunk in selfish regards for person or for family. The spread of education, by enlarging the cultivated class or caste, will open a wider area over which the social feelings will expand, and, if this education should be universal and complete, it would do more than all things else to obliterate [erase] distinctions in society.

But the beneficent [helpful] power of education would not be exhausted, even though it should peaceably abolish all the miseries that spring from co-existence, side by side, of enormous wealth and squalid want. It has a higher function. Beyond the power of diffusing old wealth, it has the prerogative [power] of creating new. It is a thousand times more lucrative [profitable] than fraud, and adds a thousand fold more to a nation's resources than the most successful conquests. Knaves and robbers can obtain only what was before possessed by others. But education creates or develops new treasures, treasures not before possessed or dreamed of by anyone.