Back to school

by Robert Westbrook in the August 29, 2001 issue

School: The Story of American Public Education. Produced by Sarah Mondale and Sarah Patton. Public Broadcasting System.

School: The Story of American Public Education. By David Tyack et al. Beacon, 233 pp., $30.00.

On any given school day between September and June nearly a quarter of the population (students, teachers, administrators and support staff) can be found in a public elementary or secondary schoolhouse. Over 47 million children (88 percent of school-age children) are enrolled in over 90,000 public schools, and 90 percent of them are likely to graduate from high school. School expenditures have reached $330 billion. Little wonder that Americans, and American leaders from Thomas Jefferson to George W. Bush, have fiercely debated the ends and means of public education.

School charts the course of these debates and the changing character of American public schools. The four-part documentary will air on PBS September 3-4. *School* employs all the features that Ken Burns and his acolytes have fashioned into predictable conventions of the contemporary historical documentary: slow pans of still photographs, voice-over readings from key documents, quick scenic tours of monuments and relevant landscapes, vintage film clips, period music, oral testimony from living witnesses, and celebrity narration (in this case, that of Meryl Streep). Several leading historians of American education provide expert commentary. A well-illustrated companion book includes brief, interpretive essays by historian David Tyack, Carl Kaestle, Diane Ravitch, James Anderson and Larry Cuban.

By one measure of democracy--inclusiveness--the history of American public education is one of democratic triumph. It is this story that *School* tells particularly well. Prior to the mid-19th century, taxpayer-supported schools were an oddity, and schooling in general was sparse. Even the publicly funded "common schools" that Horace Mann and other resolute reformers established in the mid-19th century were, despite their name, less than universal in their reach. Yet Mann and his successors

set in motion a dynamic that would eventually secure a place in school for every American child. By the turn of the 20th century 95 percent of children between the ages of five and 13 received some schooling. Few went on to high school, but by 1920 high school enrollment had grown dramatically, and by the end of the century it had expanded to near universality.

Of course, widespread access to schooling did not mean widespread access to the same *quality* of schooling, and the past 50 years have witnessed a struggle to overcome racial, ethnic and gender barriers to equal educational opportunity--a struggle marked by remarkable success. School portrays this struggle superbly, devoting nearly all of the third episode to it. The filmmakers offer a salutary treatment of the lesser-known battles against discrimination waged by Mexican-Americans in the Southwest, and afford a full account of the dramatic transformation of African-American education that followed *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1954.

School highlights the political brilliance of the oft-maligned Lyndon Johnson, who engineered the stick-and-carrot combination of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and expanded federal funding for schools that honored its provisions. This powerful combination broke the stalemate over the enforcement of *Brown*. (The strategy was repeated in 1972 in the Title IX attack on gender discrimination in athletics and other school programs.) The film also notes the costs of Brown for black teachers, thousands of whom lost their jobs because of desegregation, and it points out the moral ambiguities of using children as the shock troops in confrontations at the schoolhouse door.

By another measure of democracy--the access to knowledge and skills to which all democratic citizens are entitled and obliged--American public education has been less successful. At bottom, the reason for this is that beginning in the early 20th century, public schools adapted education to the needs not of democracy, but of industrial capitalism. "Administrative progressives" such as Elwood P. Cubberly urged educators to "give up the exceedingly democratic idea that all are equal, and that our society is devoid of classes." A century of reform has produced public schools that, in egalitarian fashion, welcome more and more children into institutions designed to reproduce an *inegalitarian* hierarchy of social classes.

For Mann, common schooling meant a common curriculum for all students, but for Cubberly and those who shaped 20th-century schools, common schooling meant widespread incorporation of children into an efficient sifting mechanism that

employed tools such as IQ tests and curricular "tracks" to enable everyone to find a proper place in a class-divided society.

School addresses class inequality far less forcefully than it does inequality of race, ethnicity and gender (some of the essays in the book are more satisfying in this respect). The documentary bemoans the eclipse of the common school ideal, yet treats us to stories of Mexican-Americans struggling to win a place in elite college preparatory courses in high school--a move that will only give a multicultural hue to class hierarchy. John Dewey gets an obligatory nod for his role in "progressive" education, but his bitter opposition to the schooling along class lines advanced by Cubberly and other progressives goes unmentioned.

Unfortunately both film and book mute the views of Diane Ravitch, an intriguing voice for "egalitarian traditionalism" and author of the recent book *Left Back*. Ravitch laments the abandonment of a common academic curriculum and the erosion of a culture in which workingmen might quote Shakespeare in political debate.

When it turns to the recent past, *School* turns defensive and a bit muddled in its support for public education. In a skeptical account of the impact of "bottom-line" market-driven thinking on schools, the film lumps together reforms such as charter schools, tax-supported vouchers for private schools, private management of public schools, and commercial television in the classroom. It thereby slights important differences in the motives and consequences of such innovations. One can be appalled that a quarter of American schoolchildren are subject in the classroom to advertisements on Channel One and at the same time delighted by the innovations in teaching and learning that some charter schools promise.

Ironically, corporate leaders and their allies in quest of a better-educated workforce have been among the most vocal and energetic in pressing for a return to a rigorous, universal curriculum in traditional academic subjects such as reading and mathematics. Thus the very interests that undermined a common curriculum are now bent on restoring it. While democrats may be encouraged by this development, they need to be wary of what historian Larry Cuban terms the "trend toward vocationalizing all academic subjects." If we measure every school by the single standard of whether or not it teaches our children "what they need to know to compete and win in the global economy," as Bill Clinton proposed (and on this his successor seems in accord), then the common school ideal of education for a

common citizenship may continue to suffer. If technical writing supplants poetry in high school English, as some reformers have enthusiastically advocated, then democrats will continue to worry.

History, I fear, is a subject that will continue to suffer more than most. Although historical learning is essential to responsible citizenship, and although every citizen of a democracy is entitled to the riches of the past, it is not clear how profitable such learning is in the market. But one may at least hope that history as telling as that offered by *School* will find its way into schools.