

## Book Review

# American Education: A History, 5<sup>th</sup> edition

Wayne J. Urban and Jennings L. Wagoner  
New York: Routledge, 2013

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Now in its fifth edition, *American Education: A History* has become a staple of history of education syllabi with previous editions having been published in 1996, 2004, 2008, and 2011. Wayne J. Urban and Jennings L. Wagoner's popular course book traces the development of American education from the period prior to European colonization through President Obama's first term. Despite that, early in the text, Urban and Wagoner cite historian Bernard Bailyn, who asserts, "The history of education should consider not only schools and 'formal pedagogy,' but the entire process by which a culture transmits itself across the generations" (p. 16). However, *American Education* primarily focuses on the formal and traditional vein of primary and secondary education. The authors closely adhere to rather standard examples of schooling but this volume includes sections on educational praxis that are not traditionally grouped with them, including Native American and slave practices and pedagogies, vocational apprenticeships in the colonies, and the contributions of youth groups like the Girl Scouts of the United States of America and Young Men's Christian Association.

*American Education* delves into the prevailing societal attitudes that have contoured the directions that schooling in America has taken. It moves from the European-inspired vantage point that led most southern colonists to resist public control of education to the rise of teacher organizations that rose to ameliorate occupational conditions in the postwar years. The authors also introduce the major debates in education and attempt to make sense, for contemporary audiences, the history behind them.

Having partnered to work on the first edition of *American Education* in the 1990s, Urban and Wagoner have had ample time to refine the book's structure and content. The chronological organization of this edition of *American Education* facilitates its use as a teaching tool or study guide with chapters subdividing along major historical periods: the pre-colonial period; the common school era, the progressive era; the Great Depression; the civil rights era; education in the new millennium; and so forth. The carefully selected lithographs, photos, maps, and political cartoons integrate primary source material into topical discussions.

Consistent with previous editions, approximately one-half of the book focuses on issues from the 20th century. Urban and Wagoner identify major historical trends and concepts. This style is sufficiently straightforward and expansive for an undergraduate survey course yet each chapter's further reading list and notes are comprehensive enough to serve as beneficial resources for graduate students and educational researchers. A particular strength of *American Education* is its ability to contextualize topics within broader historical moments but without drawing facile causal relationships. Urban and Wagoner allude to this goal when they assert, "What we do

suggest is that those who seek to understand our educational past must try to comprehend the people who lived in earlier times and places on their terms, not ours” (p. 12). There is a focus throughout on progressivism, a hallmark of American education. “However . . . [the authors] contend that progressive education and the various reactions to it need to be addressed as historical phenomena” (p. x). They go on to suggest “that progressive education is the reigning ideology in professional educational circles today, and further that reactions to progressivism constitute one of the more potent critiques of our professional education” (p. xi).

Urban and Wagoner integrate their diverse research interests and areas of expertise neatly into this broad survey without sacrificing the comprehensiveness and cohesion of the overall narrative. Both men were past presidents of the History of Education Society and had published on an extensive array of topics from teacher unions to race and education to Reagan-era education policy. Chapter 5 provides an extensive survey on education in the South, between 1800 and 1900, called *Class, Caste, and Education in the South*. Wagoner has written extensively on education in the Jeffersonian era and accordingly, the section on Reconstruction is invaluable in that it sets the stage for understanding regional variations between the Southeast and Northeast and inequities between African American and white schools. While this information is of particular use to researchers specializing on Southern topics, Urban and Wagoner never make a case as to why the South is more deserving of such focus. This chapter’s success is perhaps fitting given that Wagoner was a faculty member at the University of Virginia in Charlottesville, Virginia, United States, from 1968 until his death in 2013, and Urban is currently tenured at the University of Alabama in Tuscaloosa, Alabama, United States.

Additionally, some of their strongest work is delivered in the 12th chapter, *From Equality to Excellence: American Education, 1980-2000*. The tone here is less neutral, with Wagoner and Urban decrying the death of the spirit of compromise in educational policy that had made it so strong in the first place. They see compromise replaced with standards and accountability movements. The authors lament the rise in reliance on standardized testing as the principal criterion for measuring successful teaching, in addition to the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, common core standards, and other largely bureaucratic initiatives that obfuscate what they view as more effective measures of assessment. They ponder if public education in the United States will survive at all, with its effectiveness diminished and a paucity of puissant innovations being introduced.

Although it does not quite rise to the level of polemic, the final chapter has been expanded from the fourth edition’s epilogue and the authors openly discuss their ambivalence about the future of public education. Noting that public schools have lost the support of many of those who were once its greatest champions, Urban and Wagoner are dubious about the practicability of the common school model for contemporary society. Wagoner and Urban touch upon gender, especially the feminization of the teaching profession, yet do not give sufficient attention to lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer issues. Particularly noticeable, the brief section on McCarthyism does not cover the purges of gay teachers that occurred in communities in Florida, Oklahoma, and California. Perhaps for consideration in a subsequent edition, the authors could provide the historical frameworks for recent issues that include teacher-credentialing, the common core, charter schools, teacher tenure reform, and early childhood education. Similarly, a future exploration of education in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century could complicate Obama’s presidency with an analysis of the critiques from communities of colour on his educational policies, for instance. Finally, while the historical research and familiarity with the historiography is robust, Urban and Wagoner could have made better use of quantitative data, particularly when refuting

the benefits of standardized testing. Nevertheless, these minor quiddities do not detract from this 5<sup>th</sup> edition of *American Education: A History*. It is a rich and well-crafted overview of schooling over the last four centuries.

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