

A child's birth should not dictate their destiny

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At the beginning of the 19th century, there was no organized education system in America. If you were wealthy, you could attend private academies and study overseas in prestigious institutions. But the common man had no options, just a life of labor.

Horace Mann became the Secretary of the newly created Massachusetts Board of Education in 1837. His philosophy of "education should be a universal right, not a luxury" had won him the position. He went to work visiting every school in the state. The result was the creation of the "Common School" later to become the public school system. This broad system was built on six principles: Universal Access, Public Funding, Religious Neutrality, Professional educators, Free to the student, and the ideal of civic duty so students felt the pull to serve their communities.

Implementing change required a massive overhaul of an existing hodge podge system. Schools of the day featured one teacher in a classroom of students from ages 5 to 18. Segmenting students by grade level required hiring teachers, building schools, creating a curriculum and standardizing tests to measure the progress of students.

Mann pursued perfection in the school system his entire life, accepting that the work of educating a country was never done. He believed that education is "the great equalizer of the conditions of men the balance-wheel of the social machinery." His entire life's work was dedicated to the idea that a child's birth shouldn't dictate their destiny.

Note

As we look about us today, seeing the disparities in our communities, we should be hard at work finding the right kinds of opportunities that create future problem solvers as well as those who will apply their skills to creating stronger, more productive neighborhoods.

One example was Booker T. Washington, who benefited from the education system established by Mann and then later went on to found Alabama's Tuskegee University at the age of 25. It was the Tuskegee Airmen from Booker T. Washington's University who became some of the most daring pilots in World War II, saving hundreds of lives and serving as models for future generations of learners and citizens.

So the next time you pass a school and see kids enjoying a break from their studies, think of Mann, the pioneer of universal education. He made it possible for every child to attend school and pursue their dreams, finding inspiration in the books and classrooms designed to help them grow.