William Duane on Education

A Letter to the Kentucky Assembly, 1822

The 1821 attempt of the Kentucky General Assembly to found a common school system was not successful, but in response to its requests for information the Assembly received valuable data concerning the educational programs in other states. One of the most detailed of the answers was written by William Duane, the old politician and editor who had climaxned a stormy career with his editorship of the Aurora. Mr. Duane, as was his way, held strong views on the subject of education.

Early attempts to establish and maintain schools in Kentucky by a system of land grants failed because of poor management and reckless sales. In 1821 the General Assembly established a “Literary fund” consisting of half the profits of the Bank of Kentucky for the support of general education, and appointed a committee to collect information to guide the undertaking.

The committee’s report of the following year revealed that few Kentuckians had bothered to answer the questions posed by a “domestic circular” which asked about existing county schools. But the “foreign circular” was more successful than anyone had dared hope. Jefferson, Madison, John Adams and Robert Y. Hayne were among those who answered the following twenty-two questions.

1. Has any system of common schools been established by law in your state?

2. If so, are they supported by a public fund, by taxation, or by a charge upon parents and guardians, whose children and wards are sent to school?

1 See Barksdale Hamlett, History of Education in Kentucky (Bulletin of Kentucky Department of Education, VII, No. 4, July, 1914), 3-4.

2 Acts of the General Assembly of Kentucky, 1821, Chapter CCLXXXIV, Section 1, 351-352.

3 Ibid., Section 3, 352.

4 The more important letters are to be found in the Journal of the Senate of the Commonwealth of Kentucky for 1822, 189-219, and in the House Journal of the same year, 252-283.

5 Journal of the Senate, 191-192.
3. Are your counties or townships divided into school districts, with one school in each, or otherwise?

4. What officers are employed in carrying into effect your system of schools, how are they appointed, what are their several duties and what their compensation?

5. Are your teachers employed by the month, or at a certain price for each scholar?

6. What is the average price given per month or per scholar?

7. In what manner is the teacher boarded?

8. Is any particular qualification required in teachers?

9. Can they be removed, and by what authority?

10. Are females ever employed as teachers?

11. If so, what is the difference in cost between male and female teachers?

12. How many months in the year, and at what seasons are your schools kept?

13. How many children usually attend one school?

14. To what kind of superintendence are they subjected?

15. Are they free to all children or only the children of the poor?

16. Are they attended by children of every class of the community?

17. What portion of the children in your community receive the rudiments of education at these schools?

18. What is the probable average expense per month or per year, of educating a child at one of your common schools?

19. What branches of knowledge are taught therein?

20. Of what improvement does your system seem to be susceptible?

21. Do the people of your state appear to be satisfied with the present plan?

22. If you can give a brief detail of the origin and progress of your system, it might afford many useful hints for the guidance of the Commissioners in avoiding those errors which have been discovered in your state only by experience.

Duane's answer was considered important enough by the committee to be presented in full to the Assembly. It not only gives a
picture of the Pennsylvania educational system of that period, but also reveals his own strong views upon the subject.\textsuperscript{6}

PHILADELPHIA, July 12, 1822.

Gentlemen,

The Circular which you were pleased to address to me of date 22nd of June last, did not reach me until this day. My opportunities at the moment do not admit of my going to a particular detail of answer to the several questions propounded therein; but I will attempt to reply in that general way which circumstances at the moment permit, and I will offer you freely my opinions, on a subject which, as a parent, and an observer in a long and varied course of experience, enable me to do—on a subject which has very much engrossed my attention for at least forty years, during which, I have reared with very grateful success, several children of both sexes, who are now, some of them, of mature age and heads of families.

1st Question. There is in Pennsylvania, a general, but very imperfectly executed system for the instruction of the children of poor persons, and there is a particular law which embraces the children of the District of Philadelphia, county and city. The former I cannot from memory describe, and only know generally that it is not effective, owing in a principal measure to its want of vigorous and systematic prosecution, the insufficiency of the means, either to reward competent teachers and thereby secure their zeal, and the accordant want of any definite method by which the progress or the elementary instruction could be suitably inculcated. Another circumstance which probably might be overcome if there was any effective or

\textsuperscript{6} Ibid., 204–211. This letter is printed as Duane wrote it. Duane’s interest in the Kentucky query for information on education is further revealed by the following letter, from the Vaux Collection of The Historical Society of Pennsylvania, which he wrote to Roberts Vaux.

July 13, 1822

\textbf{Dr Sir}

I am much in want of some of the published reports on Schools, and any other accessible information on Education in this state, in order to reply to a letter on the subject from Kentucky—I have written my own opinions and experiences already and take the liberty of asking you for any of the published reports or any other information that it may be convenient to give me—having only the same good objects in view to which you have so honorably devoted your time.

Your sincere friend

Wm Duane

Roberts Vaux, Esq.
coherent system, is the reaction of two kinds of pride; that of the opulent who are repugnant to the idea of schools, or education in any thing like a school, that has the denomination or attribute of being for the poor, or as their ideas associate it, with charity. This unfortunate pride extends to the actually poor themselves; by which I mean that class of men, who acquire their subsistence by useful labors in all the arts, agricultural, mechanical and liberal. That a good system would remove this obstacle of pride, is manifest from the solicitude of all classes to educate their children at the Academy of West Point, where education is conducted with a degree of success, the most flattering and honorable to the country. There is one other school on a similar system founded by Capt. Patridge, who formerly superintended the Military Academy. It is established at Norwich, in Vermont, and I speak of it from experience, as equally efficient as that of the Military Academy. I know of no other institution for education in the United States, besides these two, deserving of the name of a liberal institution for education; for I know of no College or other institution, that is not conducted upon a system that appears to me barbarous and adverse to the development of the intellect of the species. I know of no female school but one, and that is confined to a few pupils. It is conducted by a Madame Fitegeot of this city, who is a disciple of Pestalozzi of Switzerland, and teaches in his method, somewhat modified to the prejudices of society.

2nd Question. The public systems in this state are at public expence, but as they are inefficient it is not worthy of your attention.

3rd Question. The schools of a public foundation are in townships, but they are not general, and I believe very few. The schools in this district, have, within three years, been assimilated to the forms of mutual instruction of the celebrated English teacher, Lancaster; a system that has the common defect of all modern systems, that of a method of rote, communicated and confirmed orally; but which confines its impressions to the mere accumulation of words, and appears to leave out of view the only important part of education, that of acquiring and comprehending ideas, or facts. This system, however benevolent the views of the founder, is connected with the most unfortunate of all prejudices—that is cheapness. The mercenary spirit is one of the most fatal of all the causes that injure morals,

7 Marie Duclos Fretageot.
knowledge and education. In a society where the population is cut up into castes and orders, this poverty stricken system, may have its uses, because there, every other, or better, is hopeless. But it is not adapted to unfold human faculties, nor to form or to confirm sound minds. As far as it can render services, probably it does so here; but it is a lamentable evidence of the imperfection or the perversion of the most generous intentions.

4th Question. In the counties, the county commissioners have, I think, the direction or control; and the persons chosen to such offices, are not exactly the description of men, nor do the pecuniary objects for which such stations are sought, tend to promote the purposes of the laws or of public beneficence. In this district, a number of benevolent men volunteer under a special law and give a certain degree of attention to the prosecution of the undertaking. But even here, the want of conformity of sentiments and aptitude of men of different sects, to give predominance to their own peculiar tenets or theories, have a pernicious influence, and then the stipends are such, that it is the extreme of false economy to waste money, where no man who has faculties can obtain even a commonly comfortable subsistence for his labors. Incompetent teachers are therefore taken from necessity; and it would be disingenuous not to declare the consequence. The children are taught to be ignorant, and this must ever be the result of a mercenary penury, where there should not only be the best capacities employed, and rewards adequate to that most important of all branches of social institutions.

5th Question. Teachers are engaged at periodical stipends. In some schools, there are scholars admitted, whose parents pay a monthly or quarterly sum.

6th. The average stipends in different parts of the state, would afford no just criterion, as they conform to the means of subsistence in each particular place.

7th. The Teachers usually support themselves out of their miserable stipends.

8th. Qualifications are not duly attended to, and it would be preposterous to expect adequate talents for the stipends allowed. At a private school in one of the townships adjacent to this city, a very excellent Classical Scholar and able Mathematician, who had been a Captain in our army, attempted to become a teacher. When he
enquired what his allowance was to be, the answer was, what is the lowest sum you can possibly subsist on? The pursuit was necessarily abandoned.

9th. Teachers, wherever I have acquaintance, are removable at the pleasure of the Trustees or Superintending officers.

10th. There are some females employed; but lamentably deficient and few.

11th. No mode of comparison can be found between males and females.

12th. Schools are kept throughout the year, with, in some instances, a vacation at mid summer and Christmas.

13th. The numbers of pupils vary.

14th. The superintendence is as lax as the variety of minds, characters and incitements of the teachers.

15th. The public schools are free to all who choose to send their children.

16th. They are not attended by every class.

17th. There is no mode of ascertaining the proportion of numbers, within my reach.

18th. Nor can I ascertain the average expense, but it is sufficiently small to defeat all the purposes of an useful or rudimental education.

19th. The instruction at those schools, varies. Reading the New Testament, or Murray's Reader, or some elementary books, very imperfectly, is the utmost that I have observed.

20th. The existing system, (if no system can be so called,) admits of a total abrogation, and requires it. The subject of education is treated of in many excellent works, but there appears to be no regard paid to them in practice, though in discourse they are themes of admiration by the very persons who utterly disregard them.

21st. This question involves a remarkable dilemma. If passiveness were to be the rule of judgment, as to the satisfaction of the people, I believe there is not in the universe, a people, who, (by that criterion,) are better satisfied with the present plan, or absence of all plan. But if individuals are asked, the measure of intelligence of the individual, will regulate the answer. No intelligent and upright man can approve of the present state of education; a great proportion of the population appear to be insensible or indifferent; and among the opulent, the improvement of the understanding and the heart, enters
very little into the consideration. "My son, Make money," is the order of the day. But this is only a necessary effect of the social state, in which money is the substitute and the criterion of every virtue, to which human rights, human liberty, social virtue, and public character are all sacrificed. There is nothing sacred or revered which is not sacrificed to money. When the government and the laws, and the habits of thinking, are thus radically vitiated, it is not to be expected that any other effect can be produced.

22nd. For the reasons first stated, I cannot answer this question with sufficient precision at this time. If an opportunity presents itself to make a suitable enquiry, I shall communicate what I may learn; but this I must say, that you can acquire no knowledge from the public institutions for education in this state, but such as are to be avoided.

I have, in a rapid way, offered such sentiments and remarks as my judgment enabled me, on the several questions. I shall, in compliance with your introductory address, offer some "suggestions," such as in my humble judgment would lead to the object so intimately connected with the happiness and prosperity of our common country, and I pray you to take what I say in that spirit of sincerity and frankness which ought to be inseparable from so momentous a subject. I do not resort to compliments, nor withhold the expression of my free and honest opinions from a ceremonious delicacy; for, on interests so sacred, hypocrisy would be the worst of all insolence.

In my own opinion, the prevailing systems of education are all wrong, from the first to the last stage. Education begins where it should terminate, and youth, instead of being led to the development of their faculties, by the use of their senses, are made to acquire a great quantity of words, expressing the ideas of other men, instead of comprehending their own faculties, or becoming acquainted with the words they are taught, or the ideas that the words should convey. There is only one system of Education in existence fit for a country that is free, or for a people to whom intellectual knowledge is essential, in an age where knowledge is power and ignorance is weakness. And perhaps you may be surprised to learn, that there is only one man in this country, and that one man in Kentucky, who is powerfully qualified to teach and to enable others to teach it. But such is the fact, and I shall not hesitate to name him to you, and to give
you my ideas of his system; as I know it and saw it, I can warrant the perfection of its practice. There is living near Frankfort, a German of the name of Joseph Neef. He was a coadjutor of Pestalozzi, in Switzerland. He was offered every rich temptations to go to Russia; he preferred coming to the United States, and he was mistaken. He is the most disinterested man I ever saw, and most capable. No science is to him difficult or strange, because his method is such that he can analyze them all. In short, his system is expressed by the word *analytic*; for as all knowledge consists of the comprehension of facts, and the ideas of which that knowledge is composed, he is a teacher of facts. To afford a very imperfect idea of his system, I will just invite your attention to one branch of it. He makes his pupil his equal, and the knowledge of sensible objects, forms the topics of discourse and investigation. There are two primary ideas that belong to all our early perceptions. We see *forms* of things, trees, houses, hills, rivers, animals; and we perceive they have shapes or forms; but that the diversity of things have a diversity of forms and that like things have similarity of forms; and as there must be some principle both to express and to define the discrimination, that principle is to be sought. It is the first law of sensible things, which all perceive, though they do not distinctly distinguish how, until the idea is revealed by analysis. How do you describe the difference between an oak and a horse or a house? It is by its form! But how is that form composed? By lines; by the outline of each form. The lines drawn to represent a tree, is first the outline, or the line which circumscribes its outer bound, as it is erect in space. Draw this outline accurately, and whoever has seen a tree, recognises in the outline the resemblance, and the idea of a tree. So of a horse or a house; and so of all other sensible objects. Every visible thing has a form, and that is described by lines. This fact explains the motto which Plato placed on the entrance of the Academy, "let no man enter here who is ignorant of Geometry," for in fact Geometry is the science of forms; and the knowledge which should be first acquired, is that first and most universally felt. Hence Mr. Neef would teach his pupil the study and the practice of forms; he would teach him Geometry before he taught him to read or to write. But in teaching him to draw forms, he would also teach him to draw letters, and to apply the power of letters to articulate sounds.
As next to forms, the first inchoate idea we perceive is individuality, number, or multitude; as we see one parent in our mother, another in our father, so the succession of number accumulates, and requires terms to class quantities or equal or unequal numbers. So that as all things have forms, so all things are of number, either one or more in a class; there is one or more trees, horses, houses; and number expresses as naturally this classification, as forms did that of sensible objects; and these two principles are the keys of science. Particular forms and quantities compose the detail; then come in the varieties of colors to fill the outline; then the sense of feeling is brought to comprehend other properties besides form, number, colour; objects are hard or soft, as a rock or as water. Then another sense determines a property of taste; and hearing and smelling complete the chain of sensation, and the brief principles of all human knowledge and ideas, because there are no ideas apart from these sensations. All ideas belong to them directly, or are referable to them by analogy. This is a very imperfect sketch of the fundamental principles of an accurate education, and by which more knowledge of any science or all the sciences may be obtained between the age of six and fourteen years, than is, or can be obtained in any college to the 20th year. I speak knowingly in what I say, and if Kentucky be resolved to establish education as it should be, and to possess the ablest and wisest men, the men of truest science, and the most correct and comprehensive knowledge, it is in their power; and at an expense so trivial compared with the extravagance of their Colleges of Freshmen, Sophomores, and all the trumpery of the remains of Aristotelian Schools, that posterity would hold them in perpetual gratefulness, and they would give a signal and proud example of wisdom, which would live after them.

As I have said so much on this system, and am persuaded that my suggestions will be received with the same ingenuousness that they are given, I will respectfully suggest, that an experiment be made, and I shall not hesitate to say how I think it may be accomplished.

Mr. Neef lives, as I understand, upon a small farm near Frankfort. If any of the members of your committee have boys of any age between six and ten years old, or if these are not to be had, let ten or twenty boys of poor persons be selected, of good health, and appropriate such a sum for their education as would be paid for boys
at any common college or academy; invite Mr. Neef to take charge of those boys, and to train them up in his system of mental and moral exercises, and there is not a more moral or virtuous man in existence. This school might be made the basis of others; or, if the boys be the children of poor parents, the children may be bred up to be the future teachers of the same method, and distributed throughout your State.

These suggestions merit your deepest care. Recollect, they proceed from a man who had no interest to serve or subserve, but that of human happiness. I have used this mode of education, as long as it was in my power, with my own children; and I have made it a particular study, on account of its excellence. This system is not new in its conception. The Greeks taught their children geometry and arithmetic, before every thing else. Locke and Condillac have given the outline; but it was Pestalozzi, of Switzerland, who realized it in modern times; and it is now spreading silently over Germany, and has been introduced into France, Spain, Russia and England. There are, and were, of the schools, in England and in Ireland, eleven. I am possessed of several of the elementary books, translated into English, (from the German,) published in Dublin, and have 20 volumes in German, published in those countries. But Mr. Neef requires no book; nor does any one who acquires his method.

I am persuaded, that in presenting to your attention this system, I am offering to you an opportunity to do honor to your State, your country and human nature; and if I should be so fortunate as to prevail upon you to weigh it seriously, and carry it into practice, I am sure to be remembered in your lasting esteem; and the esteem of good men, is to me precious.

I am, gentlemen, with respect,

Your obedient servant,

Wm. DUANE

Wm. T. BARRY, ESQ.

and the Committee on Education

New York University

Lowell H. Harrison