

James P. Wickersham on Education and Crime in Nineteenth-Century Pennsylvania

of the idea that public education would reduce crime and other social problems.¹ Promoters of the public school found the concept to be a powerful argument in their efforts to persuade the public and legislatures to support free public universal education. In his Eleventh Annual Report, Horace Mann argued persuasively that education would not only curtail crime, but would alleviate other social evils that he felt were caused by ignorance, such as premature death and various types of moral turpitude.² Henry Barnard, too, had seen education as a tool with which to alleviate viciousness among children and build good moral character. Barnard suggested several methods of attracting students to the school, including withholding the right to vote from those who could not show that they were literate or that they had attended school.³ Orators at the National Education Association meetings in the 1870s

¹ Michael Katz, ed., School Reform Past and Present (Boston, 1971), 6.

² Horace Mann, Eleventh Annual Report of the Massachusetts Board of Education Together with the Eleventh Annual Report of the Secretary of the Board (Boston, 1848), 39-49.

³ Henry Barnard, "Sixth Annual Report of the Superintendent of Common Schools to the General Assembly of Connecticut for 1851," American Journal of Education, XV (1865), 293-310.

spoke of the relationships between education and crime. They generally agreed that education reduced crime, but were not able to support their arguments with empirical data.⁴

James P. Wickersham, Pennsylvania State Superintendent of Schools from 1866-1881 and former principal of Millersville State Normal School, was interested in the relationship between ignorance, both moral and intellectual, and the societal problem of crime. He had noted in his book School Economy that education could lessen crime. It was his opinion that criminals often did not realize the wrong done in committing a crime; therefore, schools should promote virtue and teach right conduct. Another contribution that the schools could make in the reduction of crime would be to educate children and thus help them gain jobs. These educated people would not be poverty stricken and thus not be driven to commit crimes. They would have higher tastes and dignity than the uneducated and would be less drawn toward criminal acts. He admitted, however, that there were educated people who were criminals. That there were criminals among those who were educated pointed up the fact that intellectual education was not enough to deter crime. The schools should also be involved in moral education. The combination of moral and intellectual education would make the school an instrument to deter crime.5

In his addenda to Superintendent Charles Coburn's Annual Report of 1866, Wickersham pointed out that Pennsylvania should take action to inquire into the causes of crime. In addition to this study, the state, he wrote, should also consider what was being done in charitable institutions to reduce crime among the dependent classes in society. He argued that the state's charitable institutions should be more carefully supervised. Quoting the Massachusetts Board of State Charities, he noted that all charitable institutions had certain objectives in common and needed to be coordinated. His plan was for these institutions to be placed under a single department.⁶

In 1868 he was appointed by the Committee on Education of the

⁴ Edgar Wesley, NEA: The First Hundred Years (New York, 1957), 108.

⁵ James P. Wickersham, School Economy (Philadelphia, 1865), 363-364.

⁶ Pennsylvania Superintendent of Common Schools Report 1866 (hereinafter cited as PSCSR), xxiv.

state legislature to visit the state penitentiaries, houses of refuge, poor houses, asylums for the insane, institutions for the blind, deaf and dumb and the feeble minded, hospitals and homes for orphans and destitute children and a number of county jails. Consequently he and two state senators who had also been appointed to the task visited these institutions during the summer of 1868. They ultimately filed a report recommending that a board be appointed to supervise all of the institutions that had been established by the state or were partly or wholly subsidized by state funds. The legislature's Committee on Education accepted the report and acted upon its recommendations by preparing and submitting a bill to the legislature calling for the creation of a state board of charities. The bill became law in 1869.7

The influence of Wickersham on the establishment of a state board of charities to centralize the supervision of these schools did not, however, satisfy his desire to aid the unfortunate. In his 1871 Annual Report he advised the legislature that the work being done by the State Board of Charities needed to be buttressed by his department. He appealed to them to create a Bureau of Special Instruction as a part of the Department of Common Schools. This bureau, if instituted, would be valuable not only in educating the dependent classes, but would provide a great opportunity for educational research on institutionalized persons. The legislature, however, apparently did not agree and no Bureau of Special Instruction was created during Wickersham's term of office.

Reducing crime by lessening ignorance was a part of Wickersham's plan to improve society. He included two pages of statistics in his Annual Report of 1867, which were designed to show the relationship between crime and lack of education. He had found that those who were literate were not often found in jails. The total number of jail occupants was 1,940. Of this number, 434 could not read, 540 were listed as "read a little," 504 could read well, and 123 were classed as "good scholars." The latter classification caused Wickersham to make a special comment noting his opinion as to why these

⁷ James P. Wickersham, A History of Education in Pennsylvania (Lancaster, 1886), 573-574; Pennsylvania, Laws (1869), Act 66, sec. 1.

⁸ PSCSR, 1871, xviii.

⁹ PSCSR, 1867, xxii.

"good scholars" ended up in jail: "Nearly all, nine-tenths it is thought, of those classed as 'good scholars' in the reports, who were found in our jails . . . came there through intemperance." 10

Wickersham said that the reports

Indicate very plainly three things:

- (1) That since the proportion of persons wholly illiterate in Pennsylvania is very small, ignorance is a fruitful source of crime.
- (2) That ability simply to read and write, on the part of the people composing it, does not largely protect society from the commission of crime.
 - (3) That a good education tends, in a marked degree, to prevent crime.11

In spite of the statement in item three above Wickersham showed signs of being visibly shaken as a result of a report by A. J. Ourt, clerk of the Board of Inspectors of the Eastern Penitentiary. Ourt, who had made a study of the Eastern Penitentiary inmates sent the results of his research to Wickersham. They appeared to show that since the inception of the public school system criminals had become increasingly better educated. Wickersham interpreted the report in the following manner:

Reading and writing alone do not make people virtuous. If we consider the relative proportions of those in the present condition of society who can be considered illiterate, as compared with those who can read and write, the argument will still be strong in favor of education as a means of preventing crime.¹³

Ourt's report was divided into two parts. The first section contained statistics for the years 1841 through 1853. Ourt had found in that period that the penitentiary had housed 499 convicts who could both read and write, 154 who could read only, and 164 who were illiterate. The second part of the report was for 1854–1866. During that period, 898 convicts at the Eastern Penitentiary could read and write, 195 could read only, and 221 were illiterate. 14

¹⁰ Ibid., xxiii.

¹¹ Ibid., xxiii-xxiv.

¹² Ibid., xxiv.

¹³ Ibid., xxv.

¹⁴ Ibid., xxiv.

Wickersham had felt, when he heard of Ourt's study, that the changes that had taken place in the common schools as a result of improved school legislation in 1854 would show that education was a positive influence in deterring crime. ¹⁵ A careful analysis of Ourt's statistics, however, made it necessary for Wickersham to point out that there were some questions about the influence of education on crime:

The staggering fact, however, remains to be accounted for that in the thirteen years from 1841 to 1853, only 817 convicts were admitted to the penitentiary, while in the thirteen years, from 1854 to 1866, 1,314 were admitted, an increase of 60.83 percent; the increase in our population being for the same period, 30.61 percent. Can it be our social condition is growing worse?

Can it be that our schools are increasing crime rather than diminishing it?16

The superintendent did not think that these statistics were valid. Ourt's report, he said, showed that the greatest increase in the number of convicts was in 1865 and 1866. This he attributed to the "disbanding of our large armies, and the consequent increase in the number of persons without employment." Making a major switch in his attitude toward Ourt's study now that he had seen its unfortunate results, Wickersham said, "I doubt whether the results to be obtained by comparing the state of education and the amount of crime at different periods, can ever be depended upon as showing the effect of education on crime." 18

Further comments by Wickersham point to other causes of crime. Those that he listed as the most significant were "the price of provisions, the scarcity of labor, and the density of the population," and what he referred to as "subtle psychological conditions which are admitted to have a strange effect upon men's disposition to

¹⁵ Ibid. This act includes many changes in Pennsylvania's education laws. Districting was made definite, local school board powers were increased, the county superintendency was created and teacher certification was to be through examination conducted by the county superintendents. See Pennsylvania, Laws (1854), Act 610, secs. 1-54.

¹⁶ Ibid., xxv.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

commit crimes, but which no one has named, much less accounted for."19

Wickersham suggested that a real test of the influence of education on crime would be to determine both the number of illiterates and the number of those with different amounts of schooling who lived in a given community. Then, he said, statistics should be gathered as to the "tendencies to crime among the several classes." The results would, according to Wickersham, show that education and schools, in fact, prevent crime. 21

One of the major problems that society must face, he declared, was the problem of children growing up without schooling. Citing a report from Philadelphia which showed that 20,534 of 150,000 school-age youngsters were not attending school, he again discussed the relationships between ignorance and crime. These children were part of a group which he felt would end up, if not in jails or penitentiaries, as residents of poor houses or houses of refuge. He believed that these "ignorant and often vicious children" must be placed in schools.²² The reports from penitentiaries, jails, and houses of refuge for 1867 showed that most of the occupants of these institutions were either illiterate or educated only in mechanical skills, and such education only indirectly affected morals.²³ It was his contention that thousands of children in Pennsylvania, either not attending school at all or attending irregularly, would become burdens on society in the future.²⁴

Although still sure that education acted as a positive force in reducing crime, by 1868 he had noticed that "education has a more marked influence upon the character or degree of crime than upon the number of criminals." The uneducated criminal, he said, was far more likely to commit heinous crimes such as manslaughter, murder, and rape. 26

Nothing appears in Wickersham's writings relating to education

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

²² PSCSR, 1868, xlii.

²³ Ibid., xiii. By "mechanical skills," he meant reading and writing.

²⁴ Ibid., xliv.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

and crime in 1869, 1870, or 1871, but in 1872 he returned to the problem. He had found in the report from the Eastern Penitentiary for that year evidence which supported his position. Noting that he regretted that the report did not indicate how many good scholars there were among the convicts and that "mere mechanical elements of knowledge, reading and writing, cannot be expected to have a very marked influence on the tendency to commit crime," he nevertheless commented on two paragraphs of the report. The penitentiary had received 240 prisoners in 1871. Of these, 54 were illiterate, 10 could read only, and 176 could both read and write. The report included the information, however, that many of those recorded as being able to read and write did neither very well and that only 104 of the 240 convicts had ever attended school.²⁸

Another two years passed before Wickersham again published ideas on the relationship between education and crime. This time he quoted a clergyman, the Reverend Dr. Joseph B. Bittinger. Bittinger wrote that although the percentage of convicts in New York state prisons who could not read was only 32 percent, one should compare this with the literacy rate outside the prison walls. He claimed that only 3 percent of the rest of the population of New York could not read.²⁹

Two months later in August 1874, Wickersham spoke out once again on ignorance and crime. The Reverend Bittinger's method of showing the relationship between crime and ignorance had appealed to him and he employed a similar statistical strategy, noting that in 1871 one out of three New Yorkers who were illiterate committed a crime, while only one in twenty-seven of those who could read and write was guilty of a criminal offense.³⁰ He continued with similar statistics from Massachusetts and finished his observations with a recitation of how the influence of education could positively affect children and deter crime:

²⁷ James P. Wickersham, "Education and Crime," Pennsylvania School Journal, XX (1872), 388.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ James P. Wickersham, "Ignorance a Cause of Crime," ibid., XXII (1874), 393.

³⁰ James P. Wickersham, "The Relations of Crime and Ignorance," ibid., XXIII (1874), 51-52.

The influence of education . . . is to cultivate habits of order, punctuality and self-control. A child is withdrawn from idleness by other interests being offered to its mind than those which surround it in the life on the streets. The mere occupying of the time and thoughts of children . . . tends to keep them from crime There is too, running through nearly all school lessons, a recognition, more or less strong, of the great truths of morality Wherever education is diffused abroad, there the ratio of crime to population diminishes, and in all countries the criminal class is mainly fed by the ignorant class.³¹

Wickersham's writings noted thus far have shown his faith in education as a deterrent to crime. Other articles in the *Pennsylvania School Journal* and points made in his *Annual Reports* throw light on how he felt he could best help society lower the crime rate. Not only would he have as many children as possible attend school, he would have them educated morally as well as intellectually.

The first major problem was to increase attendance among the neglected children, as he called them, in Pennsylvania. Those children who attended no school, he estimated, numbered at least 75,000 in 1869. Although there were no definite statistics to support his claim, it was his feeling that many of those not in school were black children or the sons and daughters of foreigners.³² He wished to take direct action to bring them into school. He had complained, while principal of the Millersville Normal School, that parents violated their duties as citizens in keeping children out of school. But he believed the state had no right to interfere.³³ "Laws designed to compel the attendance of children at school are contrary to the spirit of our American institutions; and, if not, such laws are extremely impolitic, owing to the difficulties that must arise in enforcing them."

A reappraisal of his position on the role of the state became evident after he had spent three years as Superintendent of Common Schools. Believing that many children who did not attend school "are sometimes found employed in our manufactories and coal mines, but more frequently leading a kind of vagrant life about villages and

³¹ Ibid., 52.

³² PSCSR, 1869, xxiii.

³³ Wickersham, School Economy, 88-89.

³⁴ Ibid., 89.

cities" and that "many of them, even now, are contracting habits of vice and taking their first lessons in crime," he recommended strong action. The state should place neglected children who had no parents or guardians in homes where they would be cared for with state support. However, those who had parents or guardians were another matter. If they were neglected by those ostensibly responsible for their care, then the parents or guardians should be punished. He reported to the legislators that suitable state action could range from fines and imprisonment to disenfranchisement. He did not mention compulsory school attendance as a necessary function of the state, but it is evident that the magnitude of the problem of neglected children was beginning to alter his attitude toward the role of the state.

In an article in the *Pennsylvania School Journal* in 1870, he called attention once more to the problem of nonattendance. Aiming at the teachers and school administrators, he pointed out that success in developing an educational system and "indeed, that of our system of government depends upon securing the attendance . . . of all children and youth at least long enough for them to acquire the rudiments of knowledge."³⁷

Drawing on information received from Pittsburgh and Philadelphia, he reiterated the point made in the *Annual Report* of 1869: 75,000 children between the ages of six and twelve in Pennsylvania did not attend school. The results accruing from this loss of education, to so many, would be devastating, and he asked:

What is to be done with these neglected children? How are they to be saved to society, to themselves?... How is the ruin they may work to be guarded against? The question concerns the philanthropist and the patriot quite as much as the educator.³⁸

While he was principal at Millersville Normal, Wickersham had authored a bill to establish soldiers' orphan schools, but it was not

³⁵ PSCSR, 1869, xxiv-xxv.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ James P. Wickersham, "Neglected Children," Pennsylvania School Journal, XIX (1870), 125.

³⁸ Ibid.

approved by the legislature.³⁹ However, an act was later passed that allowed the governor broad powers in setting up such schools.⁴⁰ In 1864 Governor Curtin called in Wickersham to advise him, and as a result the schools were established under the principles included in Wickersham's original bill.⁴¹ In 1871 the supervision of the soldiers' orphan schools became the duty of the Department of Common Schools.⁴² Thus Wickersham was finally given authority to take action in the affairs of some of the neglected children about whom he was so concerned. The Department of Common Schools was charged with complete control over the forty institutions where soldiers' orphans were housed and educated.⁴³

Wickersham's interest in these children is set forth in his A History of Education in Pennsylvania, where he devotes an entire chapter to them. 44 He was involved in the continued development of the soldiers' orphan schools until his retirement in 1881, and he was proud of them. The schools, he said, had cared for and educated 10,000 children during his term as superintendent of the common schools. The state had spent, through his office, four million dollars on them and it was his wish that they "may prosper to the end, and then forever like a halo continue to brighten the history of Penn." 45

The soldiers' orphan schools which gave the superintendent such satisfaction, however, were only a small part of the problem of neglected children and their attendance at school. Taking the position that compulsory attendance laws were not the best answer, Wickersham proposed some specific ideas that he felt would alleviate the situation. He asked the law-makers to consider passing a truancy law, a child labor law, including some provision for the education of children employed in mines and manufactories, a law giving the boards of education in large towns and cities the authority to hire

³⁹ Wickersham, A History of Education in Pennsylvania, 588.

⁴⁰ Pennsylvania, Laws (1864), Act 551, sec. 1.

⁴¹ Wickersham, A History of Education in Pennsylvania, 588.

⁴² PSCSR, 1871, xv. See also Pennsylvania, Laws (1871), Act 215, sec. 43.

⁴³ PSCSR, 1871, xvii.

⁴⁴ Wickersham, A History of Education in Pennsylvania, 586-605. A generally favorable review of Wickersham's book appeared in the Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography in 1886 written by Samuel W. Pennypacker.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 604. The use of Penn here instead of Pennsylvania apparently was designed to be poetic.

a school missionary to visit the homes of nonattenders, and a law legalizing the establishment of homes for neglected or friendless children in each Pennsylvania county. Two years later, recognizing that the problems of school attendance and the neglect of certain groups of children would not correct themselves, Wickersham affected a metamorphosis in his thought regarding the methods by which he would encourage the schooling of truant and neglected children. Unable to significantly reduce the number of children who were not being educated without some sort of action on the part of the state he asked the legislators to:

- (1) Pass a general law making it the duty of all parents, guardians and employers to see that all children under their control attend school for a certain number of months in the year, up to a certain age.
- (2) Establish by the combined aid of State, County and private individuals, an institution in every county, or in several counties formed into a district for the purpose, a home for friendless children or an industrial school to be governed in its main features in the same way as such private institutions now are governed.
- (3) Make it the duty of boards of school directors, through competent agents, to see that the law in reference to attendance at school is obeyed; of if not, after proper notice and warning, let them exercise the power of taking the children away from those who neglect them and sending them to the county or district home or school, compelling the parents or others responsible for the neglect, if able, to pay in whole or in part the necessary expense.⁴⁷

Later in the same year he chided the state for its lack of effort on behalf of neglected children. They had, he remarked, made excellent provisions for soldiers' orphans, but still had done essentially nothing for other neglected children. While the state did little, private persons had helped greatly. After listing nine charitable institutions supported by philanthropy and noting their value to society, he labeled these measures as only stop-gap activities. He further observed that:

⁴⁶ PSCSR, 1871, xxvi.

⁴⁷ PSCSR, 1873, xxiv.

⁴⁸ James P. Wickersham, "Our Lost Children Saved," Pennsylvania School Journal, XXII (1873), 34-35.

The strong arm of the state must be used to save our lost children—save the thousands now out of reach of the efforts of the benevolent. What has been done for the soldier's orphans, must be done for all who need such help. Meantime, may God bless all the good men and women who are providing homes for the homeless, and food, raiment and knowledge for those who have them not.⁴⁹

He continued his efforts to spur the legislature to create laws which would decrease the number of neglected children. In the Annual Report of 1874, he used the orphan schools as examples of the good which state largesse could accomplish. The soldiers' orphan schools, he wrote, turn out good citizens and only about 2 percent of the children who leave them at sixteen turn out poorly. On the other hand, "two-thirds of the population of our prisons and houses of refuge is composed of orphans." The success of the soldiers' orphan schools caused him to urge the legislators to set up a system similar to them for all orphans in the state.

As for the other children out of school, he once again noted in the same Annual Report that some form of compulsory attendance law was needed.⁵² A bill for that purpose was brought to a vote in the Assembly in 1874, but was defeated. It had enjoyed unexpectedly strong support among the legislators, but unfortunately not enough for passage.⁵³

He saw further evidence of a more enlightened attitude toward education by the legislators in the changes being wrought by them in Pennsylvania's houses of refuge and prisons: "The state of Pennsylvania has had in operation for many years two institutions designed to receive and if possible reform the vagrant, vicious and incorrigible children who might be sent to them by proper authorities." Previously Pennsylvania had, for the most part, founded penal institutions, not reformatories. The most heartening sign of a changing atmosphere regarding the possibility of reform rather than

⁴⁹ Ibid., 35.

⁵⁰ PSCSR, 1874, xviii.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ James P. Wickersham, "Compulsory Education," *Pennsylvania School Journal*, XXIII (1874), 369.

⁵⁴ James P. Wickersham, "Reformatory Education in Pennsylvania," ibid., XXIV (1875), 141.

punishment for wrongdoers was that the state was now willing to spend the money to tear down antiquated prisons and was beginning to build countryside reformatories for young offenders.⁵⁵

Further progress in 1875 was mentioned in the Annual Report for that year. Benevolent persons and religious denominations in the more populous counties had begun establishing homes for neglected and pauperized children under an act which legalized the payment of county funds for their support. Although those schools would not be state institutions, it was Wickersham's feeling that they did a great amount of good work, and that the act was the "beginning of a most beneficent reform." To

In the same Annual Report, a less optimistic note was struck by Wickersham when he pointed out that although there were child labor laws in Pennsylvania, they were not being enforced. A law had been passed in 1849 forbidding the employment of children under thirteen in textile mills or in paper-bagging factories. The same act provided that children between the ages of thirteen and sixteen could work in the mills or factories for nine months a year if they attended school during the remaining three months. Another child labor act passed in 1870 had made it illegal to employ boys under twelve in mines. Wickersham wrote: "If enforced, these laws would do much to cure a great evil . . . they would leave little to be desired in the way of legislation upon the subject of attendance at school." 59

Since the defeat of the compulsory education bill in 1874, the superintendent of common schools apparently felt that he must continue to fight the attendance battle with whatever weapons were at hand. In addition to his desire that the child labor laws be enforced, he hoped for assistance from teachers in the schools.

Writing in the "Editorial Department" of the *Pennsylvania* School Journal in January of the following year, Wickersham called upon them to join him in bringing the nonattenders into school.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Pennsylvania Superintendent of Public Instruction's Report, 1875, xiv. The Pennsylvania Superintendent of Common Schools became the Superintendent of Public Instruction in 1874. The reports after 1874 are hereinafter cited as PSPIR. See also Pennsylvania, Laws (1874), Act 51, secs. 1 and 2.

⁵⁷ Ibid., xv.

⁵⁸ Ibid. See also Pennsylvania, Laws (1849), Act 415, sec. 4.

⁵⁹ Ibid. See also Pennsylvania, Laws (1870), Act 1, sec. 10.

Admonishing them to visit the homes of such children, to talk to their parents and to make additional visits, if necessary, until every child in their districts was attending school, he placed the burden squarely on the pedagogues: "The teachers of the state can solve, if they will, the troublesome problem of nonattendance at school, and solve it, too, more effectually than all the compulsory laws that ever were placed on the books."60

School directors, too, were asked to join in the work of increasing attendance. School boards were not doing as much as they could, he stressed, in his Annual Report of 1877, and he suggested that they "appoint an agent, a kind of official missionary, as in some New England cities, whose duty it is to seek out the children who do not go to school . . . visit their parents and use all persuasive effort possible to have them attend school." In addition, the boards could establish special schools for neglected children. No enabling legislation would be necessary, he said, and such institutions could be established by the public school districts immediately. Such schools would help alleviate the problems of nonattendance and ignorance. 62

A final attempt to involve the state in the effort to reform the education of neglected children was made in his Annual Report of 1880. Wickersham told the legislators that Pennsylvania needed a law that would place all neglected children in "proper homes or schools, where they can be fed, clothed, instructed, taught to work, trained to good behavior, and placed in families as soon as possible with opportunities to earn a livelihood, and a chance to become good citizens." He had prepared such a bill in 1878 and it had been defeated in the following year. The proposed bill had included sections on the duties of school boards and had made a triennial census of all school children mandatory. The census was to note those not in school. The boards were empowered to arrest truant, vagrant, and neglected children and send them to special homes. These homes were to be established in each county for the children mentioned in the act and all children in poorhouses over the age of

⁶⁰ James P. Wickersham, "Editorial Department," Pennsylvania School Journal, XXIV (1876), 222.

⁶¹ PSPIR, 1877, xv.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ PSPIR, 1880, xx.

three were to be sent to such homes as well. Slightly modified in form, the 1878 bill went to the floor of the Pennsylvania Assembly again in 1880, but again failed to pass. Wickersham left office in 1881 without accomplishing the passage of the bill. However, the portion of his proposed legislation relating to the establishment of county homes for destitute and neglected children was passed in 1883 with the backing of the State Board of Charities. 64

After his retirement from the Department of Public Instruction, he worried about the failure of his aim of bringing the benefits of education to all of the children of the commonwealth. In 1883 he addressed the State Teachers Association on the topic. After reciting the advances that education in Pennsylvania had made since the establishing of public schools, he turned again to the problem of children who did not attend school. He urged the State Teachers Association to take action against this evil. 55 The problem did not disappear, however. In 1886 he estimated in his A History of Education in Pennsylvania that 100,000 children in Pennsylvania were still without the advantages of education and that bringing them into the schools "is still a work of the future."

Although Wickersham's work to reduce crime and build better citizens by bringing education to all children in Pennsylvania had failed, throughout his superintendency he had hoped that those who did attend school would become law-abiding citizens of good character. This, he felt, could be accomplished through moral education. Writing in 1870, he noted that misery, want, vice, crime and corruption abounded in society. These societal problems could be reduced, he believed, through education. Education had dramatic effect on the young: 'It can almost mould them at its will.'68

The teacher's role as a moral educator appeared first in Wickersham's writing in 1865. He stated in *School Economy* that teachers would have their best successes in moral education when they taught

⁶⁴ Wickersham, A History of Education in Pennsylvania, 565. See Pennsylvania, Laws (1883), Act 98, secs. 1-2.

⁶⁵ James P. Wickersham, "The Next Step," Pennsylvania School Journal, XXXII (1883), 119.

⁶⁶ Wickersham, A History of Education in Pennsylvania, 566.

⁶⁷ PSCSR, 1870, xviii. See also Arthur M. Schlesinger, Political and Social Growth of the United States 1852-1933 (New York, 1935), 119-120, 154-155.

⁶⁸ PSCSR, 1870, xxix.

moral lessons incidentally and noted that there are "occasions during the progress of every lesson, when he can call attention to a moral truth or give strength to a moral habit." Moral principles, such as "honor, honesty, temperance, truthfulness, purity, justice, mercy," should be taught, he said; teachers who did not attempt to inculcate these virtues were not doing their jobs well. There was no law on the books, he remarked, that blocked the path of moral teaching in the schools. The higher law of God sanctioned moral education.

Wickersham believed the Bible to be the basis for civilization and in his Annual Report of 1870 he expressed the belief that pupils profited from Bible-reading. The Bible read without comment would assure that "children learn, at least, from this practice, that the Bible is a Sacred Book, and to respect it as such. They learn more, for no one can doubt that its lessons are seeds that constantly fall upon the good ground of young hearts open to receive them."⁷²

As firm as his stand was on the value of the Bible in public schools, he nevertheless did not wish to see the reading of the Bible become a disruptive issue. There was no law in Pennsylvania in 1870 that required the Bible to be read. While Wickersham was pleased that there was no such law, the Bible, he had found, was being read in most schools anyway, and many local school boards required it to be read. He did not feel that this violated the rights of those who opposed such exercises. If the parents of a school child preferred not to have the Bible read to their offspring the youngster could simply be excused from the reading. Through such action, "school officers secure the reading of God's Word, preserve the rights of conscience, and treat their fellow-men as they would like to be treated by them."

Wickersham did not believe that simply reading the Bible in schools was a form of sectarian religious instruction. Neither did he accede to the charge that the schools were Godless. However, he emphasized that the public schools were secular, and that their moral teachings must be supplemented by both the family and the

⁶⁹ Wickersham, School Economy, 180.

⁷⁰ PSCSR, 1870, xxvii.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Ibid., xxviii.

church. The schools, he wrote, were those "of a Christian people, the best expression of their maturing civilization; and their highest aim is to improve the condition of society by surrounding the young with moral influences, and instilling into their minds such moral principles as will make good men and good women."⁷⁴

Ouestionable as his concepts concerning the place of the Bible in moral instruction and the bases of American and world civilization may have been, he was nearer the mark when he wrote in 1872 that "the stability of our Republic depends upon the intelligence and morality of her people."75 Reasoning from a position opposite to that of later commentators, 76 Wickersham argued that corruption in high places, which he considered to be criminal, was the direct result of a low state of morals among the people. At the local level, a community with low morals cannot help but exercise their ballots in favor of officials who are, like themselves, low in their moral standards because "as the people so will be the government."77 In order to counteract this lack of morality among the people at large, and thereby improve the government at all levels, Wickersham emphasized the "necessity of a free school system open to all on whom will devolve the responsibility of citizenship."78 Such schools could stem the tide of moral degeneracy, but in 1872 they were not yet able to do so. It would be necessary to affect a revision of priorities in the schools before moral regeneration would take place. The change most needed, in Wickersham's opinion, was to stop aggrandizing intellectual education and recognize the importance of moral education. He maintained:

The head is cultivated, but the heart is neglected, the weeds spring up in the place of good fruit. The ship is furnished with an engine and launched

⁷⁴ Thid.

⁷⁵ James P. Wickersham, "Moral Training: Its Necessity in Free Schools," *Pennsylvania School Journal*, XXI (1872), 115.

⁷⁶ Others have since interpreted moral decay as having spread downward and outward from the national government and the giant corporations of the period. See Schlesinger, *Political and Social Growth of the United States*, 1852–1933, 154–155, and Samuel E. Morison and Henry S. Commager, *The Growth of the American Republic* (New York, 1962), II, 71–72.

⁷⁷ Wickersham, "Moral Training; Its Necessity," 115.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

upon a boisterous ocean without a rudder. It is a fatal error to train intellectually only and not morally.⁷⁹

Further, he explained that if he found it necessary to choose between moral education and intellectual education, he would choose the former without compunction. Nevertheless there were, he wrote, questions as to how such instruction should be imparted. Was reading the Bible sufficient? If not, what could be substituted for it? Principles of conduct that were not based on Christianity had not saved the civilizations of Greece or Rome. Unable to arrive at satisfactory answers to his own questions, he turned once more to "instruction by example" as the only sound response to the dilemma.⁸⁰

For two years this enigma lay dormant, before Wickersham emerged with a definite proposal for moral education in his *Annual Report* of 1874. Commenting that the greatest defect in the schools was a lack of effective instruction in morals, he said:

Besides the good example of the teacher and the incidental teachings of the school room, there ought to be recited by the pupils regular moral lessons. Such lessons may be given on the family and the moral relations of its members, father, mother, brother, sister, servant; on the school and the moral relations of directors, teachers, pupils, on society, and the moral relations growing out of it; on the State and its citizens; on the duties to ourselves, to our fellow men, to nature, and to God. All this matter if presented to children in simple form and in lessons fully illustrated, would accomplish a good that cannot be measured.⁸¹

Many people, he observed, believed that the schools should not be involved in moral training, which would be best performed at home. But Wickersham answered that numerous children were homeless or had negligent parents and that moral training could not be left to chance since "nothing less than a SYMMETRICAL development of all man's good powers can be the aim of a true education."82

Wickersham admitted that moral instruction presented certain

⁷⁹ Ibid., 116.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ PSCSR, 1874, xxiv.

⁸² James P. Wickersham, "Moral Training in Public Schools," Pennsylvania School Journal, XXIII (1874), 123.

difficulties, such as involvement in religious questions or possible violation of the nonsectarianism of the public schools. Also, he felt, that moral instruction frequently led to moralizing which "never yet improved a child or man." Nevertheless he supported its place in the schools. The problems involved, according to him, were merely a challenge to the active mind.84

Topics that could be covered in the formal recitations on moral instruction would include lying, stealing, cheating, misrepresentation, meanness, vanity, self-conceit, and sensualism. He maintained that there could be no well-founded objection to instruction in these areas and that the schools must be involved in such work because other than the churches "no institutions can be compared with the schools as to their influence on the character of the people."85

In the following year, 1875, an article appeared in the *Pennsylvania School Journal* in which Wickersham impugned the customary procedures employed in moral instruction, although he did not list alternative approaches. Such methods as the presentation of "I. Homilies by textbook and lecture; 2. Good advice; 3. Scolding; 4. Punishment" were, he wrote, everywhere failures. 86 He charged that "This is what might be called immoral education; and the best example of this repressive system is in our penitentiaries, where men are taken in knaves, punished, flogged, and turned out malignant villains to prey on society."

Having presented his ideas on how morals should be taught and the weaknesses of the current methods used, Wickersham proceeded to caution the legislators, school directors, and teachers about the danger in confusing moral education with religious education. Although he was a firm exponent of moral instruction, he directed that the schools must take care to be nonsectarian. He would have no textbooks used in the public schools which could be objected to by any "reasonable man. Catholic and Protestant, Rationalist, and Jew, all, must be treated exactly alike."88 There must be no pros-

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ *Ibid*.

⁸⁵ Thid

⁸⁶ James P. Wickersham, "How We Teach Morals," Pennsylvania School Journal, XXIV (1875), 21.

⁸⁷ Tbid.

⁸⁸ PSPIR, 1875, xxvii.

elytising in the schools. Even though, he believed the Bible to be the cornerstone of Western civilization and in spite of the fact that he would "like to have a copy of the Bible upon the desk of every teacher in the sight of all the children in the land," he would, rather than violate religious liberty, take the necessary steps to remove the Bibles from the schools. 90

Wickersham was by this time also speaking out unabashedly concerning the general moral state of affairs in the United States. That the crimes of corruption irritated him greatly was made manifest in his *Annual Report* of 1875:

The besetting sin of the times seems to be unfaithfulness to public trusts. Defalcations are common among trusted agents, cashiers and treasurers. Great corporations are ruined by dishonest officers. The people are swindled by "rings" formed for corrupt purposes. Human vampires stand ready to suck the blood of every promising enterprise. Monstrous fraud lies hid in many a fair looking government contract. Mountains of debt are heaped up on States, cities, counties and even townships, to fill the pockets of thieves. Offices, influence, votes are bought as a common commodity. The ballot box and the jury box are both defiled by hired mercenaries. Patriots hang their heads and honest men grow sick at heart with everyday's recital of wrong and outrage. There must be a change, or universal distrust will settle down like a pall upon the people, and the threatening disease of corruption be suffered to sap the nation's life.91

After this recital of the moral degeneration of America, he called upon the legislators and citizens of Pennsylvania to consider the necessity of moral education alongside intellectual education in the schools.⁹² In the following year, a list of similar charges against the corrupt appeared in the *Pennsylvania School Journal*. Stating that the influence of parents and churches was not sufficient to stem the tide of corruption and crime, Wickersham designated the teacher as the reformer of society. The teacher would accomplish this feat through example. The sincere, principled teacher would impress

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Ibid., xxviii.

⁹¹ Ibid., xxxi.

⁹² Ibid.

moral truths upon his students.⁹³ For Wickersham, this method of affecting societal reformation would work, albeit slowly.

The process which I have here set forth as a means of national correction may be objected to on the ground that it is slow; but it is the only one. For myself I say, frankly, that I have no faith in sudden conversions, least of all in national ones.⁹⁴

That the schools and teachers were not able to reform American morals quickly was evident by 1878 when Wickersham found it necessary to defend the schools and show why they had not achieved this miracle. Admitting that they still emphasized intellectual as opposed to moral education, he was unwilling that they be forced to accept the blame for the current state of American society. Noting that the schools were in session only about one-half of the time each year and that the development of a moral person takes time, he distributed the culpability for the degeneration of society by identifying others on whom the blame should also be placed: "If the public school must plead guilty to any part of this charge, the guilt must be shared alike with the home, the Church, the Sabbath School, the press, the Government, and society itself." 96

Criminal acts in Pennsylvania, including the crimes of corruption in business and government, did not abate during Wickersham's superintendency. After noting that statistics released by the prisons showed that most prisoners had at one time or another attended public schools, he explained this seeming blot on their record by pointing out:

Of all the children now in attendance at school twenty five times as many attend public schools as attend all kinds of private schools combined. Besides, it appears that the average age at which the convicts left school was fourteen years, and that the average time between entering and leaving was about five years . . . Most of them can read and write, and perhaps cipher a little; but, they are . . . far from being the kind of scholars turned out of our public schools after a regular attendance of five years. 97

⁹³ James P. Wickersham, "Morals and Manners," Pennsylvania School Journal, XXIV (1876), 408.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ PSPIR, 1878, vi.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ PSPIR, 1880, xiv-xv.

He did not, however, defend the public school curriculum and its influence on character. Here in his final report as superintendent of Pennsylvania's schools, he stated flatly that he did not believe the elementary education obtained in the public schools "will go very far towards protecting society from crime, or keeping men out of the penitentiary. A child can learn to read, write, and cipher almost mechanically. In such teaching no moral power is necessarily called into play, and the moral life may remain untouched." The common school, he noted, was capable of influencing the moral tenor of society, but only when it is realized that the higher goal of the schools is to form good character. In the final report, in his recommendations to the legislature, Wickersham stressed that the need for moral education was among the most pressing requirements for an improved public school system. 100

Still calling for an increase in moral education and for school missionaries to the children out of school, and attempting to shame the legislature for its penuriousness regarding the neglected children, 101 Wickersham left office in the following year. He had, without question, publicized what he felt were the best methods to lower the crime rate and institute a moral reformation of society: aid for neglected children and improvement of moral education in the classroom. There is no doubt that Wickersham had aided the soldiers' orphans and that the passage of enabling legislation had led to the opening of more houses of refuge in the several counties. The good done through his activities in these areas is impossible to assess, but it is obvious that it brought an education to many children who otherwise would have had none.

The campaign for increased moral education in the schools led to no change in the basic curriculum. Neither moral education nor character education became a mandated part of the common school curriculum.

⁹⁸ Ibid., xv.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., xiii.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., xvii. Also in 1881 Wickersham delivered the Report of the Committee on Education and Crime at the Department of Superintendence meeting of the National Education Association. This report shows that his influence was strong in its preparation; the statistics included in it are those gathered at Pennsylvania's Eastern Penitentiary.

There is no evidence that crime or corruption was reduced between 1866 and 1880. There is evidence however, that Wickersham thought that good would ultimately triumph as a result of improved education. His writings give evidence of his faith in education as a method of moral reform. That society was not reformed in no way detracts from Wickersham's naive faith in the good works he believed the schools could perform. In fact, the idea that education can somehow decrease crime is still with us. In 1970, Ramsey Clark pointed out that most crimes are committed by the young. 102 Clark argued that Head Start programs and massive efforts by the schools generally would help in "releasing energies, creating opportunities and preventing crime."103 By 1979, evidence indicated that the schools were not reducing crime any more than they were in Wickersham's time. 104 Furthermore, crime within the schools was increasing. Between 1970 and 1974, school assault and battery cases increased 58 percent, school robberies by 117 percent, sex offenses by 62 percent, and drug problems by 81 percent. 105 According to Clark, the problem is a complex one and involves problems in housing, employment, and social justice as well as education. 106 Lawrence Kohlberg believes that the schools can help and has proposed a method of moral education for them. 107 And so the problem has not been solved, even though some still feel, as Wickersham did, that education is at least a partial answer.

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¹⁰² Ramsey Clark, Crime in America (New York, 1970), 240-241.

¹⁰³ Ibid., 124-244.

¹⁰⁴ The statistics for the ten-year period 1968–1978 show that crime in the United States continues to increase. See U. S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census Statistical Abstract of the United States: 1979 (Washington, 1979), Section 6, 173–179.

¹⁰⁵ Joseph L. Grealy, "Criminal Activity in the Schools: What Is Being Done About It?" National Association of Secondary School Principals Bulletin, LVIII (1974), 73-77.

¹⁰⁶ Clark, Crime in America, 244-260.

¹⁰⁷ For a general overview of Kohlberg's ideas and methods and a bibliography see, Sara Sanborn, "Means and Ends: Moral Development and Moral Education," *Harvard Graduate School of Education Bulletin*, XV (1971), 12-16.