that "different tax, credit, and price-support policies . . . a generation earlier" might have retarded the concentration of farm ownership evident today (pp. 220-21). He repeatedly laments that "farmers did not possess that most basic right in business of being able to set the price of their product to cover costs and also leave something for labor and return on investment" (p. 236). He never recognizes that generations of marginal businessmen in all lines of endeavor have been driven out of the competitive market for want of the same "basic right."

Mary W. M. Hargreaves


According to Lee Soltow and Edward Stevens, the common school was a potent force in reducing illiteracy and promoting social mobility in nineteenth-century America. Together with newspaper editors and a wide range of publishers, whose livelihood presupposed a literate citizenry, educators prepared youth for a world increasingly dominated by print. Even though Horace Mann and other reformers exaggerated the economic benefits of becoming literate, illiteracy soon became a socioeconomic handicap. By 1870 illiterates could still rise economically, but "the chances of greater upward mobility were better for the literate person" (p. 194); hence, schooling was neither irrelevant nor inconsequential.

In tracing the rise of literacy and common schooling, the authors synthesize a diverse body of secondary literature and present a considerable amount of original research. Few historians will quarrel with the argument that religious values stimulated literacy in colonial America, that the founding fathers lauded education for its civic potential, or that common-school reformers shared a world view shaped by evangelical Protestantism. Even some of the sophisticated quantitative analyses in this volume produce predictable conclusions: that wealthier people owned more books than the poor and that population concentration greatly enhanced and nurtured literacy.

One of the most enlightening sections of the book examines how literacy was actually transmitted in the schools. The authors skillfully survey reading, writing, and spelling in the
nineteenth-century school, and they conclude that many children who regularly attended were literate in reading and writing by age nine. As schools became the major agency for the promotion of literacy by midcentury, they therefore assumed greater significance in preparing youth for adult responsibilities. However perilous the practice has been historically, employers increasingly used level of school attendance as a guide to actual academic competence. Schooling gradually became a convenient way to sort children for occupational roles. For those who received less formal education than others—whether because of family responsibilities or other variables related to residence or personal background—the schools must have seemed to be one more impediment to success in America.

By analyzing a diverse array of historical materials—such as estate inventories and census materials—Soltow and Stevens have produced a well-written and closely reasoned volume that will become a standard source in the history of American education. They have successfully highlighted the positive role of schooling in promoting social mobility without overlooking the persistent inequalities that pervaded both school and society.

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