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The history of education in America is filled with struggles for equality among social class, race, and gender as well as with controversy over accountability. The stories of these struggles focus on “who” we educate. These are not the stories that I feel best represent the core foundation of education. For this, we must think about “why” we educate. To better explain, I feel we can refer to the most revolutionary time in American history, that being the American Revolution, itself. The American Revolution sparked changes not only around the globe, but also within the new republic. Among these progressive alterations, the education system was of monumental importance in the preservation of the newfound liberties of this new nation.

At the time of the revolution (late 1700s and early 1800s), formal education was sparsely available, and only for those wealthy enough to pay for it. Others could privately educate their children in their own homes. Girls were taught only what was necessary to run their homes and to begin an education of their (male) children. Daughters of wealthier citizens could sometimes attend a Dame school, or even have a governess in their home. Native American males were offered an education by religious groups who held ulterior motives of converting them. The Quakers also offered education to the African-Americans of the northern free-states. In most parts of the south it was illegal to teach a slave to read or write as the plantation owners knew that an educated slave could be a threat to their way of life (and their pocket books). It was an accepted reality that higher education was for the wealthier sons of free men.

After winning their freedom, it was evident that the pre-revolutionary (and for the most part British) ideas of perennialistic curriculums based on religion and morality were waning as the needs of the new republic were changing. The young country needed future leaders in commerce and policies to build a nation that could progress into the future as a viable competitor in world markets. Thomas Jefferson, writer of the Declaration of Independence, also saw another, more vital, need for educating citizens. He knew that in order to preserve the liberties and freedoms of the people, and to maintain a democratic government, the people must be educated.

In a letter written to James Madison in 1787, Jefferson wrote, “Above all things I hope the education of the common people will be attended to ; convinced that on their good sense we may rely with the most security for the preservation of a due degree of liberty." For this reason, he was a profound advocate of public education.

Jefferson envisioned a national public education system where even the poor could send their children, both male and female. He presented bills in his home state of Virginia suggesting ways to achieve this educational reform. He futilely tried to persuade legislature to fund elementary education for all free children citing that the best way to preserve freedom and democracy and to protect our country from foreign invasion was to educate the people. Though, his social reconstructionism philosophies were not adopted at the time, Jefferson did succeed in paving the way for change in not only the way America educated its people, but also “who” was to be educated. His concept of “why” education is so important has transcended throughout time.

As a nation, we must be held responsible for educating our young. If we do not, “we, the people” as a whole will fail and our democracy that was most valiantly fought for will be in peril. It is important for us to learn and understand the history of education in our country so that we know what ideas worked and why some ideas failed. The many great thinkers in history can serve as a guide to us as we continue to seek the best way to reform education, once again working to preserve our freedoms.

The Greek philosopher and educator, Plato, in his book, *The Republic*, used his famous “allegory of the cave” to “urge men to avoid the shadows of ignorance and view the world with clarity offered by an enlightened perspective.” It is now our responsibility to help the youth of America avoid the ignorance that breeds hatred, instead enlightening them with powers and freedoms of education.

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