

# Educating the American Citizen: Changes in Schools as Assimilators of Immigrants

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## KEY TAKEAWAYS

K-12 schools have historically been among the most important institutions for assimilation of immigrants—American values were taught along with the three Rs.

Over the past decades, the institutions that train educators have adopted dramatically different views, often rejecting assimilation and American values completely.

Private schools and school choice, with input from parents, offer a much-needed alternative to the ideological capture of public schools by an anti-American elite.

**T**he continued success of the American political system, as well as that of civil society, depends on ensuring that the rate of immigration does not exceed the ability of American institutions to assimilate immigrants into American culture and tradition. For their part, K-12 schools have historically been among the most important institutions for effective assimilation of immigrants.

In the “common school” era of the mid-19th century, a fragmented system of academies gave way to widespread public schooling. In his 1848 annual report of the Massachusetts board of education, Horace Mann, the “father of American public education,”<sup>1</sup> lauded the promise of public schools to become “the most effective and benignant of all the forces of civilization.”<sup>2</sup> Indeed, as economist Milton Friedman explained, the arguments in favor of public education at the time “were all pitched in terms of the public

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interest” and centered on cultural goals.<sup>3</sup> As Gonzaga University’s Mark Edward DeForrest writes:

The common schools were the public schools of their day, and had a large role in assimilating and educating the offspring of immigrants then moving into the United States from Europe. The schools did not simply educate students in the basics of the English language or the Three Rs. Rather, the schools were actively involved in promoting the values and beliefs that were considered part and parcel of the American Experience.<sup>4</sup>

But over the past several decades, school administrators and teachers, and the institutions that train them, have adopted dramatically different views about the role of schools in assimilating immigrants.

To test whether attitudes have changed about the assimilating mission of schools, the authors of this *Backgrounders* conducted a systematic examination of how immigration and assimilation have been addressed in articles in the *Peabody Journal of Education* over the past century. Founded in 1924, the *Peabody Journal* is the second-oldest journal in the field and remains one of its most influential.<sup>5</sup> The Peabody School of Education at Vanderbilt University that publishes the journal has long been a top-ranked education school.<sup>6</sup> Any change in how authors in the *Peabody Journal* think about immigration and assimilation over time would be a reliable indicator of changes in the views of educators and those who train them.

The analysis of trends in how immigration and assimilation are treated in *Peabody Journal* articles reveals a sharp change in attitudes among educators. Over the past century there has been a significant decline in articles viewing American values and political institutions in a positive way; a drop in seeing immigration as a challenge to address through assimilation; a rise in viewing differences between immigrants’ values and existing American values, language, and culture as a benefit to be embraced; and an increase in the belief that schools should accommodate immigrant students’ culture, traditions, and language.

In short, those who run America’s schools have increasingly lost faith in the very idea of America—its history, culture, and political system—and have abandoned the mission of assimilating immigrants into it. Too often, they instead teach immigrants to *repudiate* American history and culture. This abandonment of the assimilating function of schools, combined with the sizeable inflow of immigrants, raises concerns about the continuation of America as a project. To be certain, assimilation in the late 19th and

early 20th centuries was a whole-of-society effort, not the sole domain of schools. Every aspect of America was geared toward assimilating immigrants; it was the mission of the courts, churches, and civil society. But schools were the fulcrum, and if the assimilating mission of schools is not restored, and the rate of immigration not curtailed, the American experiment will face increasingly severe challenges.

## Background

Appreciation for the American political system and its underlying values requires cultivation. No one is born understanding the meaning and importance of separation of powers, federalism, and individual rights. Respecting freedom of speech and worship does not come naturally to humans. People have to learn these things. While human beings naturally desire liberty for themselves, that desire does not necessarily extend to protecting the liberty of others, especially when the choices that others make with their freedom are inconsistent with one's own preferences.

Proof of the claim that liberty and democracy require cultivation is that they are not the historical norm. The vast majority of current governments around the world do not select leaders democratically. In the past it was even rarer. The American political system and its values are exceptional. And the institutional mechanisms it has adopted to protect freedom, such as separation of powers, federalism, and an independent judiciary enforcing constitutional protections, are uncommon even among countries that have sought to embrace liberty.

Further proof of the need to assimilate people into the values and norms of the American political system can be found in the inability to export that political system. Numerous countries, including several in Latin America and the Philippines, have adopted constitutions that strongly resemble the American one and yet have failed to produce flourishing democracies with strong protections for individual liberty.<sup>7</sup> As Alexis de Tocqueville observed, the success of the American political system requires more than a cleverly designed government.<sup>8</sup> It requires a society that has embraced a set of values and norms that allow that cleverly designed government to thrive. As John Adams said, "Our Constitution was made only for a moral and religious People. It is wholly inadequate to the government of any other."<sup>9</sup>

Large-scale immigration to the United States without effective assimilation is roughly comparable to the export of the American political system to other countries. If Venezuela was unable to produce democracy and liberty

after adopting a constitution similar to that of the United States, it is unclear how Venezuelans arriving in the U.S. without assimilation would be any more successful.

## Research Method

Given the *Peabody Journal of Education's* importance and influence, any trends observed in how articles in that journal address the issues of immigration and assimilation are likely to reflect how education school faculty, and the teachers and administrators they train, think about these issues. A key word search on the journal's website for the words "immigration" and "assimilation" yields 204 articles between 1924 and 2018.

Each of those 204 articles was randomly assigned to one of five reviewers to code the content. Almost one-third of the articles were randomly assigned to a second reviewer to test whether articles were coded consistently by different reviewers.

After reading the articles, reviewers entered scores to rate the articles on four dimensions:

1. This article views American values and political institutions in a positive way.
2. This article views immigration as a challenge to be addressed through assimilation.
3. This article views the ways in which immigrants differ from existing American values, language, and culture as a benefit to be embraced.
4. This article suggests schools should respect and/or accommodate a student's culture, traditions, and language.

The scale for scoring each of these items was from one to five, with one representing "strongly disagree" and five representing "strongly agree."

In the 66 instances in which there were two reviewers, the average of the two scores was used. The correlation between the scores given by different reviewers on these four items averaged 0.63, suggesting that coders were reasonably consistent in how they rated the articles.

In addition to these ratings by human reviewers, the authors of this *Backgrounders* also analyzed the articles using the artificial intelligence (AI) program Copilot. The AI software was given the same four prompts

and the same ratings rubric as the human reviewers. Results were calculated separately for the human and AI scores, with both approaches yielding very similar findings. The consistency of results across the human and AI analyses strengthens confidence that the trends observed are accurate and unbiased.

The trend across time for each of the four items was calculated using an ordinary least squares regression with time as the only variable. Essentially, this method estimates a straight line that best fits the recorded data.

## Results

The patterns that emerge from these analyses are very clear. Over time, the articles in the *Peabody Journal of Education* view American values and political institutions less favorably; become less likely to view immigration as a challenge to be addressed by assimilation; become more likely to view the values, languages, and cultures of immigrants as differences to American culture to be embraced; and are more likely to advocate American accommodation of those differences.

For ease of interpretation, one can dichotomize the scores from the five-point scale to classify each article as agreeing or disagreeing with each of the four items. Based on the regression estimate of the linear trend of the scores entered by human reviewers, 75 percent of articles in 1924 viewed American values and political institutions in a positive way. By 2018 that rate had dropped to 34 percent. Across nearly a century, the likelihood that articles would view American values and political institutions positively dropped by half. (See Chart 1.)

In 1924, 76 percent of articles viewed immigration as a challenge to address through assimilation. By 2018, only 21 percent of articles agreed that immigration was a challenge to address through assimilation.

In 1924, only 33 percent of articles viewed the ways in which immigrants differ from existing American values, language, and culture as a benefit to be embraced. By 2018 that had risen to 79 percent.

The rate at which articles favored the view that schools should respect or accommodate a student's culture, traditions, and language also rose dramatically, from 30 percent in 1924 to 84 percent in 2018. While all students should obviously be treated with respect, it should be just as obvious that the host country should not change its culture and traditions to accommodate immigrants.

The results using AI are very similar, as shown in Chart 1.

CHART 1

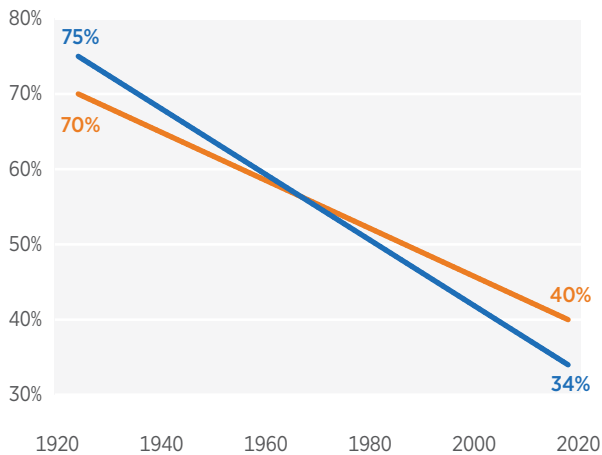
## Changing Views of American Values, Immigration, Assimilation

Review of published articles: — Human — A.I.

### American Values and Political Institutions

Statement: “This article views American values and political institutions in a positive way.”

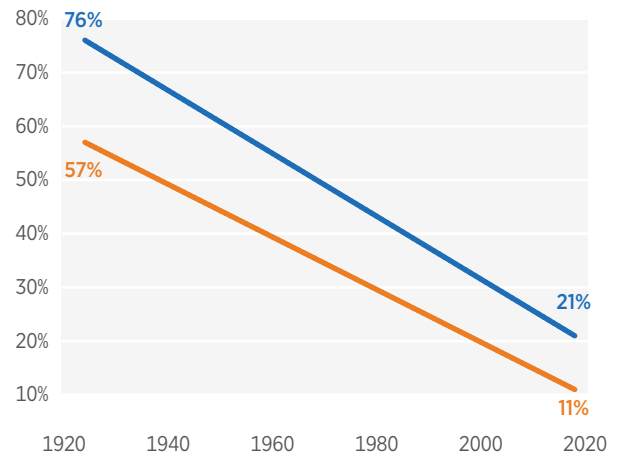
ESTIMATED PERCENTAGE



### Immigration and Assimilation

Statement: “This article views immigration as a challenge to be addressed through assimilation.”

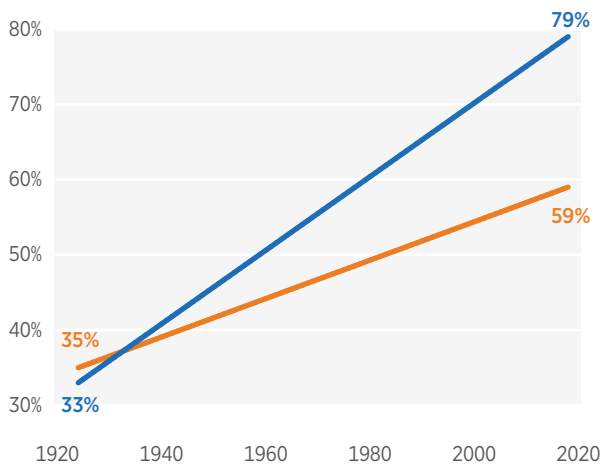
ESTIMATED PERCENTAGE



### Immigrants

Statement: “This article views the ways in which immigrants differ from existing American values, language, and culture as a benefit to be embraced.”

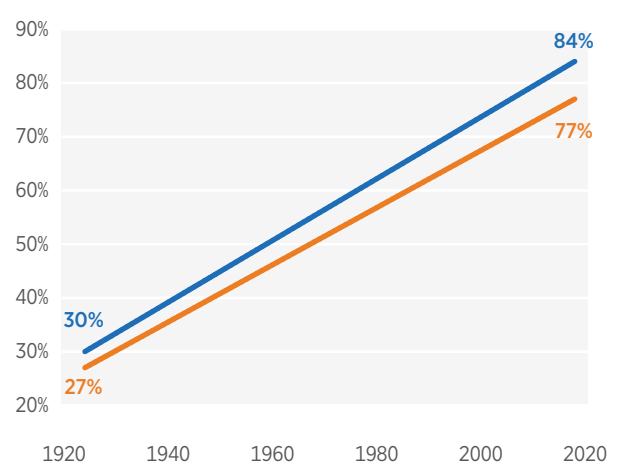
ESTIMATED PERCENTAGE



### Accommodation of Immigrants

Statement: “This article suggests schools should respect and/or accommodate a student’s culture, traditions, and language.”

ESTIMATED PERCENTAGE



**SOURCE:** Authors' analysis of 204 articles published in the *Peabody Journal of Education* between 1924 and 2018, with corresponding analysis conducted by artificial intelligence program Copilot. For more information, see the Research Method.

## Examples

Since it is difficult to grasp the changes these numbers represent in the abstract, it is helpful to illustrate with examples. The priorities, language, and tone of articles in the *Peabody Journal of Education* changed dramatically with respect to the issues of immigration and assimilation over the past century.

In 1927, a brief review of a book on social work praised the author for how she “discusses present-day social problems,” including “the assimilation of the immigrant population.”<sup>10</sup> Another book review in 1928 described the purpose of schools, saying: “In so far as the schools can further the ideal of right living, involving the powers of freedom, unity, and faith, by appropriate concrete forms, they will do their share in raising the whole level of the nation’s life.”<sup>11</sup> A 1936 article describes the functions of state departments of education, including the mission to form an “English first campaign,” “develop a plan for training teachers and Americanization workers,” and to “furnish motion pictures for Americanization.”<sup>12</sup>

This pro-American and pro-assimilationist perspective continues into the post-war period. As late as 1960 an article described the role of a social studies teacher in this way:

The secondary school social studies teacher also has a peculiar opportunity to serve his nation and mankind by instilling in the citizens of the future a high sense of civic values and ideals, a knowledge of the social structure of the world, and the ability to discern, interpret, and evaluate the nature of the problems that will face our country and which they will be called upon to solve. To thus aid in the fulfillment of the dream of a better nation and a better world is certainly a very worthy and patriotic purpose to which to devote one’s life and efforts.<sup>13</sup>

By the 1980s, articles in the *Peabody Journal* approached these issues very differently. A 1989 article expressed alarm that “[s]chools continue to utilize policies that...reinforce social and cultural reproduction,”<sup>14</sup> claiming that such policies “support a segregated class structure.” Rather than reproducing American values and political norms, this article called for a sustained effort to end “ethnocentric discrimination” that “will not be completed until the school organization becomes inclusive and educators find ways to incorporate minorities and their culture.”<sup>15</sup>

A 1993 article explicitly remarked on the changing attitude with respect to immigration:

[T]here is an emerging consensus that the view of immigrants has been too limited, focusing principally on their “success” as defined by the mainstream culture in terms of the immigrants’ ability to participate in the social, cultural, linguistic, and economic life of the host country (Suarez-Orozco, 1991). From the immigrants’ perspective, “success” can be defined more broadly as the ability to return home, to purchase land and other benefits that ensure upward mobility at home or at a minimum to continue to support family members left behind and gain status in relationship to other immigrants in the host country.<sup>16</sup>

The successful education of the immigrant student was no longer focused on getting the immigrant to help the “host country” to thrive by assimilating into its values and norms. Now it was the role of education to help the immigrant to achieve his or her own goals, including the “ability to return home” (which is apparently not the United States), enjoy “upward mobility,” or simply to “gain status” relative to other unassimilated immigrants.<sup>17</sup>

In 1994, an article suggested that the process of assimilation should be replaced with the cultivation of numerous and distinct identities: “We see evidence of hope for evolving cultural identities as alternatives to assimilation.”<sup>18</sup>

A 1995 article warned that attempting to assimilate immigrant students may be harmful to them:

While most young children experience a cultural difference when transitioning from home to school, the impact for the culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) population is significant. Because young children are still forming their own cultural behaviors and concepts, attempting to acquire a new and different set may be particularly stressful.<sup>19</sup>

**By the new millennium, the multicultural purpose of education had fully replaced the assimilationist view. According to a 2003 article:**

Well into the 20th century, social cohesion was understood to be the outcome of assimilating peoples of diverse religions, ethnicities, and social groups into a nation with a common language and values. That has changed. A new understanding of social cohesion—taking shape recently—fosters accommodation, not simply assimilation. It often requires compromise and redefinition of the “typical citizen” from many sides, including by the majority as well as minority population.<sup>20</sup>



This embrace of the new purpose of education with respect to immigration was accompanied by disgust with the earlier assimilationist approach. And with that revulsion toward past assimilation came hostility toward the American political system, as expressed in this 2010 article:

Yet, the story of immigration as told in our textbooks, reinforced by the media, and seared into our commonsense understanding of what it means to be an “American” rarely examines the exclusions, deportations, exploitation, protests, and labor of immigrants who have toiled in harsh conditions to provide cheap goods and commodities to American consumers. It is these stories that speak to the racialization of immigration and its connection to economic and labor issues that need to be told in our classrooms because it provokes discussion on the limits and potential of our democracy.<sup>21</sup>

## Educators Versus Parents

If the views expressed in *Peabody Journal of Education* articles have changed markedly over time, there is good reason to believe that this trend has manifested itself in K–12 schools as well. But is it possible that the trend observed in the articles also reflects broader changes in attitudes among the American people? Perhaps society has changed, and schools bear no particular blame for the shift in attitudes.

While it is difficult to find consistently worded poll questions measuring patriotism over a very long period of time, the evidence suggests that Americans have not lost faith in their political values and institutions commensurate with the changes observed in *Peabody Journal* articles.

In a 1981 Gallup survey, 78 percent of Americans described themselves as very proud to be American, which was the most positive response option.<sup>22</sup> In 2024 Gallup reports that 67 percent of Americans say they are extremely or very proud to be American.<sup>23</sup> That enthusiasm for America has slipped a little, but nowhere near as much as the drop from 75 percent to 34 percent of articles viewing American values and political institutions favorably in the *Peabody Journal*.

In a 1983 *New York Times* survey, 52 percent of Americans described themselves as “very patriotic.”<sup>24</sup> That result held steady into the 1990s and then spiked to 72 percent after 9/11, before declining to 40 percent recently.<sup>25</sup> Again, there has been an erosion in patriotic sentiment, perhaps because the changed attitudes in schools are having some effect on the broader population. But the decline in enthusiasm for America is much greater among the public education establishment than among the general public. Schools are

driving moderate declines in patriotism, not merely reflecting the changed sentiment of the American people.

A 2011 American Enterprise Institute report examined dozens of polling questions asked over four decades and concluded: “Overt displays of patriotism have lessened since September 11th. But patriotic sentiment is still strong. In a May 2011 CBS poll, 61 percent described themselves as extremely proud to be an American and 25 percent very proud. Only 1 percent said they were only a little or not at all proud.”<sup>26</sup>

Parents especially still want schools to convey a positive vision of America. In a recent poll of parents, 60 percent agreed that “[i]t is important that my child’s school works to instill patriotism in its students.” Only 28 percent of parents disagreed with this statement.<sup>27</sup> Clearly, parents and the American public have not abandoned the idea that American values and political institutions are desirable and that immigrants should be assimilated into those values. Education elites do not share this view.

## Empowering Parents with School Choice

Schools are increasingly abandoning their mission as assimilators of immigrants because education elites no longer believe in that mission. But parents and the American public still do. The best way to strengthen schools as assimilating institutions is to shift power from education elites toward parents. If parents have access to school choice, allowing them to find public or private options that best fit their values, those schools will better reflect the preferences of parents rather than the education establishment that trains teachers and administrators.

It may seem ironic to suggest that private education controlled by parents (including immigrants) is more likely to promote American civic values than public schools operated by the government. But, as M. Danish Shakeel and his co-authors have demonstrated in their systematic review of research on this issue, private schools perform significantly better on promoting civic outcomes.<sup>28</sup> After reviewing 531 civic outcomes in 57 studies, they find that “[p]rivate school attendance is significantly correlated with higher levels of political tolerance,” as well as “political participation,” “civic engagement,” “civic knowledge/skills,” “political knowledge,” and “social capital.”<sup>29</sup>

As public schools become increasingly captured by an education elite opposed to the view that American values and political institutions are desirable and that immigrants should be assimilated to them, private schools that are directly accountable to parents offer an alternative to this ideological capture. The growing number of classical schools is also an

antidote. Parents, including immigrants, are increasingly searching out classical K–12 schools that offer a classical liberal arts education that “aims to form adults capable of understanding, exercising, and protecting their American rights and responsibilities.”<sup>30</sup> States should maximize the ability of these classical schools to take root and expand by reducing burdensome regulations and allowing public education funding to follow students directly to schools of their choice.<sup>31</sup>

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