

# Standardizing and Declining: The Fall of the One-Room Schoolhouse

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## Abstract:

The idea of the Midwestern one-room schoolhouse is cloaked in nostalgic national memory that paints an image of simplistic rural life. However, in the early twentieth century, this simplistic county school was not the reality; changes in national education in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries demanded more regulations in schools that directly opposed much of what made up the ideal of the one-room schoolhouse. This research explores the standardization of education the United States, addressing topics such as curriculum reform, sanitation, consolidation, and local resistance, to reveal how all of these factors contributed to the steady decline of the one room schoolhouse. Rather than isolating these factors, this paper argues that connections between requirements at both the state and national levels, actions and inaction conducted by the local Midwestern populations, as well as the impact of Progressive Era ideas transformed rural American education. Furthermore, this research encourages the growing development of this relatively new topic within educational history by discussing prominent contributions to the field and insisting on how significant the work of exploring political and social ramification of the standardization phenomena is to the history of the one-room schoolhouse.

**Key words:** Education, Rural America, Progressive Era, One Room Schoolhouse, Consolidated Schools, Historical Memory

In the nineteenth century Midwestern United States, the one-room schoolhouse was the main way that rural students were educated. The Midwest, reaching from Ohio to the Dakotas and as far south as Missouri, was an agrarian society largely based on a

farming economy with pockets of mining and lumber-based towns. People had expanded out into the Midwest in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries to acquire land and create settlements. One-room schools, or country schools as they

were called, had cropped up throughout the Midwest by the thousands by the mid-nineteenth century as a response to the growing need for free public education for a large population of farm children. The white and agrarian society that made up much of the Midwest in the post-Civil War period prided itself on local democracy; moving towards free education aligned with the ideals of the general public. This desire for local democracy began to cause conflict as education reform moved forward in the early twentieth century.<sup>1</sup>

The idea of the Midwestern one-room school is cloaked in nostalgic national memory that paints an image of simplistic rural life. However, in the early twentieth century, this peaceful rural schoolhouse was not the reality; shifts in the national educational landscape resulted in a demand for more regulations in schools that went against the ideal of the one-room schoolhouse. The national and state governments ushered in modern styles of schooling and these changes began to enter rural schools despite adamant resistance from the local populace. Issues with curriculum, sanitation, and consolidation all came to a head in the 1900s and put immense pressure on country schools. This paper explores the standardization of education the United States through the lens of the one-room schoolhouse during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, as well as a study of the myths that still surround the one-room schoolhouse. Research into standardization during the era

and reactions from rural communities reveals that the central point of conflict was local resistance to national and state education reform and requirements. In an effort to preserve local autonomy, opportunities of more regulation were contested and this heated struggle led to the decline and collapse of one-room schoolhouses in the twentieth century.

The one-room schoolhouse is a topic of historiographical study is relatively new, as many of the schools did not begin to close or become absorbed into larger schools until the late-1920s. Thus, there is still much research still being done regarding the connections between rural schools and the broader political and social climate in the early twentieth century. Scholars who have broken ground in this branch of education history have found a plethora of primary source documents rich in detail for study and analysis. Memoirs from teachers and students, pamphlets and instructional manuals from school boards, and reports on state and national standards for education provide both personal and professional accounts of the transitions that impacted the institution of the one-room schoolhouse. However, these varied sources have rarely been combined to create a fuller picture of all the aspects that impacted the rural schools. This paper examines these diverse primary source documents to explore how different requirements, policies, and local desires all influenced the downfall of one-room schoolhouses. The research and analysis that follows asserts that the history

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<sup>1</sup> April M. Beisaw, and Jane Eva Baxter, "America's One-Room Schools: Sites of Regional Authority and Symbols of Local Autonomy, after 1850."

of cultural memory,<sup>2</sup> along with political and social histories, is essential to understanding the process of standardization and the fall of the one-room schoolhouse.

By the turn of the twentieth century states and school boards had begun to take issue with the level of education and the curriculum being taught to students in one-room schoolhouses. Even in the most rudimentary of one-room schools in the Midwest during the nineteenth century the basic courses of arithmetic, writing, reading, and spelling were taught to pupils of every level. However, other branches of learning, such as US history and geography would be interspersed depending on the abilities of the individual instructors because teachers were scarce in many locations and could be hired with varying degrees of knowledge.<sup>3</sup> Students often arrived to the classroom with their own textbooks, from which they would read and recite. The teacher would use this recitation and subsequent memorization as their main pedagogical practice. The teachers themselves, in many cases, had learned this way and it was the method that they felt comfortable using to instruct their students.<sup>4</sup> This made teaching even more inconsistent among the thousands of one-room schools

throughout the Midwest. Additionally, as states began to issue state-ordered curriculum in the 1900s, infusions of the Bible or any connection to religion within the classroom became strongly discouraged. This began to cause trouble within rural communities because religious instruction had been common practice in many nineteenth century schoolhouses since most rural societies were Protestant. States contended that the presence of religion in the country school was interfering with actually conveying course material. Teachers integrating religion into the classroom took time away from the actual information the students were to learn in school, and religion was experienced by the majority of the students outside of the classroom as well, so they did not need it to be reinforced in school. Many school boards supported the decision of their state to prevent this from happening and began to enforce the legalities of keeping the church and state separate within their schools.<sup>5</sup>

Issues with curriculum and funding in country schools achieved national significance in the early twentieth century. Increased modernization and Progressive Era<sup>6</sup> movements during the early 1900s had

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<sup>2</sup> The history of memory refers to the study of cultural memory, rather than the study of the human memory itself, it addresses how shared memories and heritage can be central to existing within a community. Being tied to cultural memories can shape the way that history is told, thus making memory studies a crucial aspect of researching the recent past.

<sup>3</sup> Mary D. Bradford, *Autobiographical and Historical Reminiscences of Education in Wisconsin, Through Progressive Service from Rural School Teaching to City Superintendent* (Evanston, WI: The Antes Press, 1932), 122-123.

<sup>4</sup> Herbert M. Kliebard, *Changing Course: American Curriculum Reform in the 20th Century* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2002), 10-11.

<sup>5</sup> D. M. Blair, A. A. Graham, W. Henry Perrin, and W. Le Baron, *The History of Coles County, Illinois...* (Chicago: W. Le Baron, Jr., & Co., 1879), 129.

<sup>6</sup> The Progressive Era was a social and political movement within the United States of America that encouraged widespread activism and reform in many areas; this period occurred from the 1890s to the 1920s. In regard to education, reform included better classrooms, improved books, and equal levels of learning for all students across the country.

encouraged the movement of people from the rural countryside into the cities, reducing the percentage of the population involved in agricultural production. This decrease of people involved in agriculture in the Midwest was a cause for concern for the United States government because production of food for the population was an essential aspect of continuing the growth of larger cities and keeping pace with industrial production. The 1909 report from the Country Life Commission, in partnership with President Theodore Roosevelt, stated that a lack of proper education in schools was to blame for people leaving the countryside and noted that expanding the US Bureau of Education would provide a solution. The Commission proposed that greater significance of education nationally would allow the government to better accommodate country schools and remedy their educational shortcomings, thus improving agricultural regions of the US through educational reform.<sup>7</sup> Taking this lead from the national government, Midwestern state governments also began to insist to their school districts that they were not instructing their students properly, implying that the failure of one-room schools to better educate students was contributing to the collapse of agricultural America.

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<sup>7</sup> United States Country Life Commission, and L. H. Bailey, *Report of the Country Life Commission* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1909), 14-16.

<sup>8</sup> Urias J. Hoffman, and Walter Stewart Booth, *The One Room and Consolidated Country Schools of Illinois*, 5th ed. (Springfield: Department of Public Instruction, State of Illinois, 1916), 10-11.

It was both irregular distribution of curriculum and a discernible lack of student proficiency in basic skills that caused Midwestern states to develop state-wide courses of study for schools to implement. States believed that rural schools taught students basic education but provided them with little ability to make this knowledge applicable in the real world. In response, state Boards of Education began to standardize a level of education that set the bar much higher for country schools but provided little financial assistance for school districts to reach these goals. The Illinois State Course of Study, implemented in 1915, provided an organizational layout for one-room schoolhouses to ensure that the students were learning material conducive to their level in school and in accordance with the state guidelines.<sup>8</sup> These state-wide courses of study became common throughout the US, especially in the Midwest, and were largely targeted at reforming the practices of one-room schoolhouses.<sup>9</sup> One of the key goals of the state courses of study was to bring a more personal interaction between students, teachers, and the course material so that students could enter the real world with social skills, academic knowledge, and ability to apply that knowledge to a career and lead the life of a good American citizen. It was the understanding of government

<sup>9</sup> For examples of state courses of study see, Kansas State Board of Education, *Manual for the Normal Course In Kansas High Schools. 1910-1911* (Topeka: State Printing Office, 1910); State Normal School: Third District, Cape Girardeau, Missouri, *Course for Teachers In the Rural Schools* (Cape Girardeau: Missouri State Normal School, 1910); and Henry W. Holmes, "Educational Progress in 1908," *The School Review* 17, no. 5 (1909), 289-329.

officials and Midwestern state school boards that students within one-room schools were not being properly prepared for their future, whether it was to run their family farm or move into the cities.<sup>10</sup> Despite these convictions, the reports by both the national government and the individual school boards did not lay out concrete plans to fund changes within country schools outside of local taxation, which was already being used to fund the schools and was not sufficient enough to make further improvements.

Though many teachers in Midwestern rural schools in the late nineteenth century had limited training, Normal Schools had been established elsewhere in the US in the early nineteenth century. Normal Schools were schools designed specifically for high school graduates to be trained to become teachers in a way that followed national and/or state requirements. Beginning in the 1820s these schools set the highest standards, or “norms,” for education practices in the US. However, even these Normal Schools had problems that were continuously being addressed, such as getting the future teachers to stay in school long enough to meet standards, a lack of financial support for poor students who wanted to attend the Normal Schools, and often an insufficient number of instructors to educate the future teachers.<sup>11</sup> These issues prevalent in Normal Schools made it especially difficult to get extend teacher training to instructors in rural

schools. Some sought out this higher education while others were able to secure teaching positions without it. This contributed to the irregularity of curriculum being taught across one-room schools in the Midwest. Before the rise of the common school, or public schools, there was little need for formally educated teachers, but as trained teachers became standard in consolidated schools in larger areas, political pressure grew to require all teachers to be properly educated and learned in standardized practices.<sup>12</sup> Despite the push, there was a distinct lack of funding to actually achieve this goal, and the growth of Normal Schools out into more rural areas was very slow through the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

In addition to the various changes in curriculum requirements and insistence from the government that schools were not instructing their students properly, there were many new requirements implemented in regard to the construction and design of one-room schools. The schoolhouses, often painted white or red, were small and typically featured one main classroom, a basement, and one or two cloak closets. Many of the thousands of rural schools that dotted the Midwest were built quickly by the local communities so they could educate their students as people moved into the region in the mid-1800s. Due to the resources of those doing the construction, many of the buildings had a barn-like, rustic

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<sup>10</sup> US Country Life Commission and Bailey, *Report of the Country Life Commission*, 54-55.

<sup>11</sup> Henry Barnard, *Normal Schools, and other Institutions, Agencies, and Means Designed for the Professional Education of Teachers* (Hartford, CT: Tiffany and Company, 1851), 8.

<sup>12</sup> Garrett Gowen and Ezekiel Kimball, “Normal Schools Revisited: A Theoretical Reinterpretation of the Historiography of Normal Schools,” *Journal of Critical Scholarship on Higher Education and Student Affairs*, 3, no. 1, (2017), 135.

structure and were extremely plain in appearance.<sup>13</sup> By the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, districts were calling for more comfortable and attractive arrangements for students to learn in. School officials including superintendents contended that both the exteriors and interiors of the country schools needed to be included for students to be able to learn adequately.<sup>14</sup> A large part of educational reform in the Midwestern countryside was ensuring that the schools' outward appearance matched the new higher quality of education the states sought to establish.

Throughout the historiography surrounding the one-room schoolhouse, virtually all sources agree that loss of local control was a major issue in the debates over standardization and consolidation in one-room schoolhouse. Many Midwestern communities took great pride in providing their own free, tax-funded public education for farm students when previously parents had to individually pay for teachers. Rural historian Jerold Apps noted in his book on history and memory of one-room schools that Wisconsin was one of the first states outside of New England to establish free public schooling.<sup>15</sup> Wisconsin settlers in the nineteenth century saw providing free education as an asset to the community both because it encouraged more families to move into the region and it demonstrated the power of local populations to care for their youth on their own terms. Other Midwestern states quickly followed Wisconsin's

example and began establishing free education in the 1800s. In his own reflections on "real rural communities," Johnathan Zimmerman highlighted that rural Americans connected their determination to control their one-room schools to ideas of self-rule and personal liberty.<sup>16</sup> Losing this sense of control being in the hands of the people by allowing the government's regulations into their country schools and accepting consolidation was unacceptable to rural communities, since they believed that their students were receiving the proper education for their futures without the intrusion of government standards.

Throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, cleanliness and sanitation were also a major concern during the era of school reform. One-room schoolhouses were often worn-down wooden structures with ventilation issues and often were left sitting untaken care of when school was not in session unless it was being used for other community events. Teachers and students beginning a new school year would have to enter schools that had not been tended to since the school year had ended the months prior, often covered in dust and unsuitable to learn in. Mary D. Bradford, a teacher in Wisconsin in the late 1800s, wrote of the state she found her one-room classroom on her first day of teaching. She detailed how chewing tobacco, ashes, dust, and mud caked the floors and desks, preventing her from starting school until she and the students cleaned the entire building

<sup>13</sup> Johnathan Zimmerman, *Small Wonder: The Little Red Schoolhouse in History and Memory* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009), 22.

<sup>14</sup> Hoffman and Booth, *The One Room and Consolidated Country Schools of Illinois*, 4.

<sup>15</sup> Jerold W. Apps, *One-Room Country Schools: History and Recollections* (Madison, WI: Wisconsin Historical Society Press, 2015), 18-19.

<sup>16</sup> Zimmerman, *Small Wonder*, 59.

using meager supplies. Bradford explained that this experience was not uncommon, the students were not surprised at the state of their classroom and other teachers in different schools found themselves in similar situations yearly.<sup>17</sup> It was expected that students and teachers in this situation would have to clean up the classroom themselves before being able to begin their school year.

In response to these dismal conditions facing teachers and students each school year, state standards began to include maintenance and cleanliness guidelines for one-room schools. Creating a hygienic environment free of the dust and grime typically associated with rural education became increasingly important to school districts who wanted their schools to meet state requirements for “standard” or “superior” schools.<sup>18</sup> This intense focus on hygiene and cleanliness within rural schools was encompassed within the larger narrative of the rising importance of sanitation throughout the US in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.<sup>19</sup> However, the state providing these guidelines to their school districts, as with the aforementioned educational improvements, did not lay out how schools were to get the funding to implement these changes. Local taxation funded the schools in their current states, but the majority of Midwestern country schools

did not have a margin of income sufficient for implementing all of the reforms without financial assistance or building on a tightened budget.<sup>20</sup>

The one-room schoolhouses, struggling to keep up with the pressures put on them by the state and school boards, began to decrease in number as school districts began to consolidate. As people moved away from agrarian societies in the Midwest into cities, such as Chicago, the number of students attending country schools began to steadily decrease. Continuing to fund schools with so few students became impractical and state and local governments got involved in reducing the number of active one-room schools. Many Midwestern states began to offer financial incentives to districts for closing one-room schools and building larger schools, in some cases states offered over a thousand dollars for the construction of consolidated school buildings. This was a great contrast to the lack of funding available before when rural communities were seeking to improve their schoolhouses, but the state money was only available if new schools were built following exact national specifications. The school districts responded well to these financial offers and one-room schools began to close by the thousands in favor of opening up larger schools in more well-populated

<sup>17</sup> Bradford, *Autobiographical and Historical Reminiscences of Education in Wisconsin*, 132-133.

<sup>18</sup> Beisaw and Baxter, "America's One-Room Schools," *International Journal of Historical Archaeology*, 816-818.

<sup>19</sup> For more information on early twentieth century sanitation and the increased importance of hygiene in the US see, Howard A. Streeter, "Rural Sanitation," *American Journal of Public Health*, 6, no.

2 (1916), 156-159; Martin V. Melosi, *The Sanitary City: Urban Infrastructure in America from Colonial Times to the Present* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000); Allison E. Aiello, et al., "Hidden Heroes of the Health Revolution: Sanitation and Personal Hygiene," *American Journal of Infection Control*, 36, no. 10. (2008), 128-151.

<sup>20</sup> Hoffman and Booth, *The One Room and Consolidated Country Schools of Illinois*, 31.

communities.<sup>21</sup> This rapid move towards consolidation took place over the course of just a decade and pushed rural students into larger more centralized schools that were compliant with state codes and standards. Consolidated schools presented a new type of structured education - more similar to contemporary schooling - to students previously acclimated to country-style schooling. Regardless of how challenging this transition over such a brief period of time may have been for the students, those in power believed that providing all children with standardized education in centralized schools was a move towards an egalitarian future.<sup>22</sup>

Those residing in the pastoral areas believed that their rural schools provided education in a structured and equal format, allowing all children to access education for free and providing a single classroom to do so, but the learning varied widely between schools. Officials believed that a true move towards egalitarianism required that all white children, rural and urban, be provided with a structured and regular curriculum. However, during this crucial period of standardization and improvement the question of race was largely ignored. There were far fewer black students residing in the rural Midwest than there were in the South in the early 1900s and black students rarely attended Midwestern one-room schoolhouses.<sup>23</sup> Though race was an explicit

factor in education in the South, and especially in consolidated and standard schools following the Plessy v. Ferguson<sup>24</sup> decision, it was not considered in regard to the “egalitarianism” reform for one-room schools in the Midwest.

Similar to the dilapidated schools that rural Midwestern children were attending, many black students in the South attended their own version of run-down one-room schoolhouses. These one-room schools were not included in the nation-wide push for reform because of the omnipresent racism and the that continued beyond the Plessy v. Ferguson decision, the idea of having separate but equal accommodations allowed for continued legal racial segregation and allowed for this mantra of racism to continue being institutionalized. Additionally, black Americans were pushing to move their children into consolidated schools as an aspect of their constant battle for inequality, seeking to have their children moved out of their poorly funded and improperly run school and into the regulated schools that promised a better future for students, in contrast to rural white America who wanted to keep their children in small schools to preserve their freedom. Black Americans in the South did not want to preserve their one-room schoolhouse in the way that white Americans in the Midwest did because those schools represented

accommodations were of equality quality, giving way to the phrase “separate but equal;” this decision allowed for continued racial segregation in public education and supported the idea that black people were inferior to white people and therefore did not deserve to be educated in the same space.

<sup>21</sup> Aps, *One-Room Country Schools*, 64-65.

<sup>22</sup> Zimmerman, *Small Wonder*, 48.

<sup>23</sup> Zimmerman, *Small Wonder*, 49.

<sup>24</sup> Plessy v. Ferguson, 163 U.S. 537 (1896) was a landmark US Supreme Court decision that determined that racial segregation in public facilities was constitutional so long as the separate

constant oppression and the forces that were keeping their communities restricted.

Those involved in education, not just those in the political realm, also supported the consolidation efforts that crumbled the institution of the one-room school. The president of the Northern Illinois State Normal School touted the superiority of consolidated schools by stating that moving away from isolated one-room schools was the most advanced step possible in the “evolution of American education.”<sup>25</sup>

Educators also highlighted that moving to a consolidated school would help rural students become more acquainted with new societal realities and be better equipped to apply their learning to their future. The Progressive Era opened the United States up to widespread new technologies in transportation and communication that dramatically changed the makeup of society and allowed a more “modernist” perspective to take over, which was a complete reversal of the traditional values that most rural children grew up with.<sup>26</sup> Despite the rural population’s dedication to local autonomy, keeping one-room schoolhouses running rapidly became extremely difficult as districts began to support consolidated schools more and local funding and taxation was unable to compete. As a result, by the late 1930s most one-room schoolhouses were no longer in use and the children were attending larger consolidated schools within their district.<sup>27</sup> This sent ripples through the

small communities, as well as resulted in a massive change for the students who were accustomed to walking to school and learning within their more intimate neighborhood group; they now were often transported by the district and had to interact with far more of their peers on a daily basis, coupled with learning in a less isolated setting.

The forces of progressive influences and rural conservative opposition in the early twentieth century United States caused local one-room schoolhouses to become sites of heightened tension between local populations and state authority throughout the Midwest. The various reforms within schoolhouses that eventually led to the collapse of the one-room schoolhouse were integral parts of the wider “progressive education” movement that sought to improve America’s education system nationwide during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.<sup>28</sup> Though there were certainly those in favor of educational reform among rural communities, including educators, most of the United States rural population was conservative and demonstrated resistance to government intervention in rural education. Rural communities took pride in their country schools because they had been created by and for the people within the community when it was originally established. Preserving this sense of local autonomy included resisting the intrusion of the

<sup>25</sup> Hoffman and Booth, *The One Room and Consolidated Country Schools of Illinois*, 53-54.

<sup>26</sup> David Reynolds, *There Goes the Neighborhood: Rural School Consolidation at the Grass Roots in Early Twentieth-Century Iowa* (Iowa City, University of Iowa Press, 1999), 3.

<sup>27</sup> Leidulf Mydland, “The Legacy of One-Room Schoolhouses: A Comparative Study of the American Midwest and Norway,” *European Journal of American Studies* [Online] 6, no. 1 (2011).

<sup>28</sup> Kliebard, *Changing Course*, 3.

government by pushing back against reform.<sup>29</sup> Additionally, many local populations believed that their farm children were meant to always remain agrarian, and that academic knowledge was not a significant factor in the children's future. The lack of local support for implementing government reforms made it even more difficult for the struggling schoolhouses to succeed in meeting all of the standardization requirements.<sup>30</sup> To each individual community with its own county school, of which there were thousands in the Midwestern US alone, their school and way of educating their children served as a heritage point because it was so entwined with their shared history.<sup>31</sup>

Each school was unique to its local community, and standardization threatened this individuality because it would regulate schools to function exactly the same without including the specialized accommodations that the populace had already established. School districts and committees that implemented decisions regarding standardization and consolidation encountered determined pushback from rural citizens. Jerold Apps explored this era of tension and fiery arguments between

education committees and local populations, focusing on how rural people rebelled by fighting back at town meetings and expressing their fears about consolidation. Apps openly acknowledged that because of the fighting, many communities never came to official decisions on the fate of their one-room schools and instead watched as their schools fell to the pressure of regulations that they could not keep up with.<sup>32</sup> Staunch resistance to government regulations by the parents of the rural Midwest continued to persist despite their schools failing under the weight of modernizing education.

Even as early as the 1870s, before the largest pushes for reform, educators at the state level were acknowledging the various problems with the one-room schools. In the annual report from the Department of Instruction for the state of Michigan, the idea of centralization was proposed as a solution because the state needed to “take just as much of their control out of the hands of the people as is possible... the people do not know the needs of the schools.”<sup>33</sup> Though this did not come to fruition until years later, the early recognition of the need to consolidate and take the power away from the local

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<sup>29</sup> Beisaw and Baxter, "America's One-Room Schools," *International Journal of Historical Archaeology*, 819.

<sup>30</sup> Mydland, "The Legacy of One-Room Schoolhouses," *European Journal of American Studies* [Online].

<sup>31</sup> For perspectives from within schoolhouses see, Harold Fought, *The American Rural School: Its Characteristics, Its Future, and Its Problems* (New York, MacMillan, 1910); Susan Blystone, "Old school: Reflections of one-room schoolhouse teachers," *ISU News* [Online] (2014); Robert Leight and Alice Rinehart, *Country School Memories: An*

*Oral History of One-Room Schooling* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1999); Lorraine Jorgensen-Zimney, *Memories of One-Room Schools* (Bloomington, IN: AuthorHouse, 2014); and A. E. Gray, "First-Year Teacher," in *Good Old Days Remembers the Little Country Schoolhouse*, ed. Ken and Janice Tate (Berne, IN: House of White Birches, 1999).

<sup>32</sup> Apps, *One-Room Country Schools*, 189.

<sup>33</sup> Cornelius A. Gower, *Forty-Third Annual Report of the Department of Public Instruction of the State of Michigan with Accompanying Documents for the Year 1879* (Lansing, MI: Department of Public Instruction, 1879), xxiii.

population points to the constant struggle between the two groups on how to manage rural education. Those at the state level believed that the communities would never improve on their own because they were educated in the poor country schools and therefore could not develop the knowledge to make them any better. Those within the communities contended that they knew everything they needed to know to function in their agrarian society and they should have the majority of the control in their children's education.<sup>34</sup> With all of this conflict and the pervasive political divides over the value and fate of the one-room schoolhouse, it calls into question why people of the modern-day Midwest hold such idyllic memories of this time period, seemingly erasing the struggles that communities faced in dealing with the tiny classrooms.

Many historians, anthropologists, and even archeologists have studied the impact of the one-room schoolhouse in white American memory, and many have highlighted how the imperfections were far outshined by the charms of the imagined one-room school. Despite the struggle over reforming, standardizing, and consolidating the country schools, these issues were pushed to the background of American memory in favor of believing in a peaceful rural existence. Even in the most basic of facts, the collective memory of rural life is mistaken, the majority of country schools did not fit into the ideal of the "little red

schoolhouse" that is so pervasive throughout American lore of the rural Midwest. The schools themselves were actually often painted white, or remained their natural wood color depending on the amount of funding the school had and, as previously mentioned, the schools were dirty and uncomfortable for learning, which is why the government worked so hard to reform them.<sup>35</sup> These shortcomings of country schools almost cease to exist in modern memory because nostalgia for a simpler imagined past creates a shared community memory that allows people an escape from their chaotic present. According to an archeological and anthropological study conducted by April M. Baxter and Jane E. Beisaw, local communities in contemporary Midwestern America still celebrate their one-room schools because they represent a past that uniquely belongs to the community, even though they are not still functioning as schoolhouses. This tie to the "traditional values" and identity of a community allows modern day citizens to look back on the days of the country school with fondness while simultaneously ignoring the realities of why they failed.<sup>36</sup>

Education has always served as a symbol of power and strength in America; education of children in the United States has been supported and encouraged by the government for centuries. Historian Herbert M. Kliebard argued in his book, *Changing Course: American Curriculum Reform in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century*, that the unwavering faith that

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<sup>34</sup> Wayne E. Fuller, *The Old Country School: The Story of Rural Education in the Middle West* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 115-116.

<sup>35</sup> Zimmerman, *Small Wonder*, 171.

<sup>36</sup> Beisaw and Baxter, "America's One-Room Schools," *International Journal of Historical Archaeology*, 807.

Americans have in the power of education contributed to both the push for educational reform, the resistance against it, and the modern tendency to idealize the country school. Kliebard stated that as social attitudes changed in the US those living in progressive areas looked to education to address the problems they faced, while those in rural communities recognized that the forward momentum of education would result in the collapse of their small institutions.<sup>37</sup> Rural people struggled to accept change so readily because it would require changing their well-established beliefs and break down their local systems of self-rule. According to Wayne E. Fuller, closing a country school felt like a direct attack to rural communities as it would effectively “destroy an institution,” that served as a glue for small rural villages.

In his text on American education, William Reese explores how the United States has used educational reform over the centuries to improve society, explaining that this reliance on improving schools was not a phenomenon exclusively linked to the twentieth century. Rather, he states that the changes in curriculum and desire to improve all aspects of schooling has its roots in the American desire of constantly seeking improvement; the historical pattern of understanding is that bringing about better education would improve the country as a whole.<sup>38</sup> The United States in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century was largely geared towards creating and

encouraging unity and homogeneity with its reforms. Following the Civil War, the country began to use reform on many levels to guide the country back into stability and internal strength. In the realm of education, this meant ensuring that the youth of American was being taught the proper ways to be an American citizen and getting top-notch education. The amount of pride held by rural communities in their one-room schools was seen as “too much pride” by the Midwestern states because it resisted standardization and moving towards modernity.<sup>39</sup> In the name of moving the American educational landscape into modernity, progressives began to call for new ways of thinking about the classroom and about the students themselves to address what they saw as pertinent issues within schools beyond just funding or local independence. The move towards large, consolidated schools, putting all children under the instruction of educators who have all been trained in the same way, and removing the individuality of rural schools would lead to a brighter future for the students by falling in line with the “modern.”<sup>40</sup>

Those who lived in smaller rural communities were actively trying to preserve their traditional and democratic ways of life in the early twentieth century, and standardization and consolidation sought to seize this power from them.<sup>41</sup> In many ways, modern memory of the country schools reflects this struggle because people

<sup>37</sup> Kliebard, *Changing Course*, 85.

<sup>38</sup> William Reese, *America's Public Schools: From the Common School to "No Child Left Behind"* (Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press, 1999), 3-5.

<sup>39</sup> David Reynolds, *There Goes the Neighborhood*, 61-62.

<sup>40</sup> Reese, *America's Public Schools*, 295.

<sup>41</sup> Fuller, *The Old Country School*, 234-235.

simply remember the positive aspects of the one-room schools, truly preserving the idea of rural education as a light of democracy, without the need for alteration or the threat of failure. Nostalgia helps people escape from chaotic modernity. In looking back at the past choosing to ignore the realities of poor education and need for reform as reasons for the collapse of the one-room schoolhouse people preserve the idea that there was a time that education was as simplistic as the idealized version of rural life.<sup>42</sup>

In the Midwest, looking upon an old run-down schoolhouse stirs up longing for times long past and desire to return to an era that many assume to have been less hectic. Despite insistence on both the national and state levels that these schools be changed and improved in the early twentieth century, national memory has held close the idealized version of the one-room school that provides a safe haven of nostalgia to remember a time of local autonomy. This imagined “little red schoolhouse” was not a reality because the educational landscape of the United States in the late nineteenth century began to shift along with progressive era ideology, seeking to condense and regulate the schooling of rural students. The sheer force of standardization being forced upon the rural communities of Midwestern American actually created tension between local

communities and government entities and resulted in the eventual collapse of the one-room schools, rather than improving them as many requirements originally set out to do. Alterations to curriculum, sanitation, school structure and the numerous other issues standardization attempted to address were met with steadfast resistance from rural populations who thought they were protecting their local autonomy but actually brought harm upon their communities by refusing to modernize. These struggles have been largely ignored in favor of preserving the idyllic Midwest with the one-room school as a focal point, but further research has continued to reveal the true tensions of the early twentieth century trapped within the walls of the rural schools. This area of study is constantly growing since it began so recently there is much to be explored, the earliest work by a scholar discussed in the historiography of this paper being from 1982,<sup>43</sup> and there are always new elements to the history of one room schoolhouses and educational reform being studied. Intertwining the study of national memory with primary source research on the realities of one-room schoolhouses, as well as continuing to explore the political and social ramifications of rapid standardization, are crucial to continue developing this branch of educational history.

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<sup>42</sup> For more on the historiography of one room schoolhouses, American public education, and memory see, Myrna Grove, *The Legacy of One-Room Schools* (Morgantown, PA: Masthof Press, 2000); Fred Davis, *Yearning for Yesterday: A Sociology of Nostalgia* (New York, Free Press, 1979); John Bodnar, *Remaking America: Public Memory, Commemoration, and Patriotism in the Twentieth*

*Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992); David B. Tyack, *The One Best System: A History of American Urban Education* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1974); and Robert Nisbet, *History of the Idea of Progress* (New York: Basic Books, 1980).

<sup>43</sup> Wayne E. Fuller, *The Old Country School: The Story of Rural Education in the Middle West* (1982).

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