

William J. Reese. *Testing Wars in the Public Schools: A Forgotten History*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2013. 298pp.

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The history of American education is an unfortunately insular subfield. Many education historians—a significant percentage of whom work in colleges of education rather than history departments—have more personal and professional interest in policy and pedagogy than in American history. Thus, they often confine their subject to a specific domain, restricting their analysis in ways that reflect academic disciplinary boundaries more than their subjects' worlds. Likewise, possibly because of this historiographical insularity, other historians have tended not to spend sustained attention on education, despite its potential returns. Some recent work, including that of Margaret Nash and Jonathan Zimmerman, has begun to bridge this gap. William Reese's latest book, *Testing Wars in the Public Schools*, effectively lays another plank in that bridge, demonstrating its subject's importance while suggesting and leaving much room for further construction.

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Beginning in the early nineteenth century, American schools began to move away from traditional forms of examination, such as public exhibitions and recitals, to more ‘objective’ means—namely, standardised written tests. *Testing Wars* tracks this transition, situating Massachusetts’s testing reforms of 1845 as the tipping point of this pedagogical revolution, giving birth to the modern school system. In the earlier era of ‘festivals of learning,’ a familiar aspect of late-eighteenth-century America’s ‘oral culture,’ pupils received passing or failing grades based on their recitations and responses at ‘often well attended and enormously popular’ exhibitions (19–20). Though these events held a special place in American public life, their validity was increasingly called into question, and by the 1830s Horace Mann as his fellow reformers targeted a lack of ‘objectivity,’ exemplified by the exhibitions.

What, though, could replace the regnant system? How could learning and examination (proof of learning) be fairer, more objective, and, in a word, ‘scientific’? The answer, Mann and his cohort insisted, would be found in written tests. This alternative would indicate students’ mastery of the material, not simply their ability to memorise it. Their proposals were the fodder for fiery debates, intensified by Massachusetts’s students predictably failing their first round of written tests, and coming to a head in the summer of 1845. About half of *Testing Wars* dwells on the 1845 showdown, the fierce arguments, personal attacks, various results, and, eventually, the mitigated triumph of written testing. Despite widespread opposition, including fears about the adverse physical effects (even death) caused by ‘over-study,’ by ‘the 1870s and 1880s,’ Reese writes, ‘competitive testing proliferated in America’s urban school systems, changing them in fundamental ways’ (187). Though they never have been without their detractors, tests became (and remain) the new normal.

Reese writes in punchy, swift prose, and the 233 pages of text are engaging throughout. A strong cast of characters carry the narrative along. The reader learns, for instance, of the close relationship between Mann and Samuel Gridley Howe (the two honeymooned together in Europe, wives in tow) and the dislike Frederick Emerson had for the two. Undergraduate students likely will enjoy the book, and instructors will be able to supply them with some further information Reese left out. Narrative, not analysis, drives the *Testing Wars*. Thus, the book's historical details are robust, but it is at times deficient in theoretical apparatus or larger analytical insights. For instance, Reese notes that Mann and his co-reformers had interest in phrenology and statistics, but the connection Reese draws is that both intellectual movements were European imports and would 'overturn traditional ways of understanding education and schooling' (57). He argues that phrenology 'offered an alternative to orthodox Christian metaphysics' (54), but does not make it clear why his subjects sought such an alternative. Engagement with some scholarship on nineteenth-century epistemologies or broader work on antebellum reform movements would have added some valuable contextualisation and a more nuanced argument.

Nonetheless, *Testing Wars in the Public Schools* is a useful addition to the historiography of education in the United States. Reese has written a tight historical narrative with a persuasive argument. He begins with a simple historical question—when and why did 'our national obsession with testing' originate (4)? — and offers a convincing historical answer. Because of the details of Reese's story, the conclusion never seems foreordained. This is a welcome achievement, since it would be easy to naturalise a teleological march of history toward science, measurability, federalisation, and, in turn, standardised tests. These trends deserve attention, of course, but that analysis always should be informed by the contingent histories and personal

stories that drove them. Thus, *Testing Wars* provides that solid ground from which historians—and not just those formally involved in the history of education—can do further work.