

**COMPARING PRIMARY SOURCES**

## On Educating the People

The reform movements of the early 1800s broadened the goal of individual self-improvement through education to the concept of national improvement through a free public education system. Not all agreed, however, that the result was worth the cost in increased taxes. Read the passages below that express different viewpoints on the controversy. Then complete the activity that follows.

**AGAINST FREE PUBLIC EDUCATION**

*Anonymous letter to the North Carolina state legislature, November 1829*

Gentlemen, it appears to me that schools are sufficiently plenty, and that the people have no desire they should be increased. Those now in operation are not all filled, and it is very doubtful if they are productive of much real benefit. Would it not redound as much to the advantage of young persons, and to the honor of the state, if they should pass their days in the cotton patch, or at the plow, or in the cornfield, instead of being mewed up in a schoolhouse where they are earning nothing?

Such an ado as is made in these times about education surely was never heard of before. Gentlemen, I hope you do not conceive it at all necessary that *everybody* should be able to read, write, and cipher. If one is to keep a store or a school, or to be a lawyer or physician, such branches may, *perhaps*, be taught him; though I do not look upon them as by any means indispensable. But if he is to be a plain farmer, or a mechanic, they are of no manner of use, but rather a detriment. There need no arguments to make clear so self-evident a proposition.

Should schools be established by law in all parts of the state, as at the North, our taxes must be considerably increased, possibly to the amount of one percent and sixpence on a poll [person]; and I will ask any prudent, sane, saving man if he desires his taxes to be higher?

**FOR FREE PUBLIC EDUCATION**

*From a report of a workingmen's committee in Philadelphia, March 1830*

The original element of despotism is a monopoly of talent, which consigns the multitude to comparative ignorance, and secures the balance of knowledge on the side of the rich and the rulers. . . .

In a republic, the people constitute the government. . . . They frame the laws and create the institutions that promote their happiness or produce their destruction. If they be wise and intelligent, no laws but what are just and equal will receive their . . . [votes]. If they be ignorant and capricious, they will be deceived by mistaken or designing rulers into the support of laws that are unequal and unjust.

It appears, therefore, to the committee that there can be no real liberty without a wide diffusion of real intelligence; that the members of a republic should all be alike instructed in the nature and character of their equal rights and duties, as human beings and as citizens; and that education, instead of being limited as in our public poor [charity] schools, to a simple acquaintance with words and ciphers, should tend, as far as possible, to the production of a just disposition, virtuous habits, and a rational self-governing character.