

America's Forgotten Classroom — Part 5

The Family That READS Together, GROWS Together!

(“The Old Deluder Satan Act”: How a 1647 Education Law Could Help the American Reading Crisis)

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America Has A Reading Crisis—But It's Worse Than You Think

Something happened on **October 8, 2026**, just as I was preparing this fifth installment of *America's Forgotten Classroom*, that could scarcely have provided a better doorway into a law written nearly four centuries ago. Amplify released its newest beginning-of-year literacy data for kindergarten through second-grade students and reported that only **48 percent of K–2 students were on track to learn to read**, while **35 percent were considered at risk for not learning to read successfully**. Those percentages were unchanged from the previous school year, and although the

share considered on track has improved from the lowest post-pandemic period, the company concluded that early-reading progress has stalled below pre-pandemic levels. (Amplify, [“Early Literacy Progress Stalls: New Amplify Data Shows K–2 Reading Scores Unchanged From Last Year”](#), October 8, 2026.)

The numbers do not stand alone. In September, the U.S. Department of Education described America's condition as a **“literacy emergency,”** citing historically weak national reading performance and particularly troubling results among older students. Meanwhile, the independent National Assessment Governing Board reported in June that **nine-year-olds** had made encouraging progress in reading compared with 2022, while **thirteen-year-olds** remained essentially stagnant. The longer-term cultural trend is also sobering: only **14 percent of thirteen-year-olds reported reading for fun almost every day**, dramatically below the levels reported by earlier generations. (National Assessment Governing Board, [“NAEP Long-Term Trend Assessments Show Different Trends for 9- and 13-Year-Olds”](#), June 10, 2026; U.S. Department of Education, [“Building Strong Readers: How the Trump Administration Is Supercharging Evidence-Based Literacy to Combat Reading Crisis”](#), September 9, 2026.)

But the reading problem does not end when children leave school. Recent national data suggest that a substantial portion of American adults either read very little or do not read books at all. In 2026, the Pew Research Center reported that **25 percent of U.S. adults had read no books during the previous twelve months**, while another **38 percent had read only one to five**; only a relatively small share reported reading more than twenty books. Pew also found that **64 percent of adults had read a print book in 2025**, down from 72 percent in 2011, even as e-books and audiobooks provided additional ways of consuming books. (Pew Research Center, [“Americans Still Opt for Print Books Over Digital or Audio Versions; Few Are in Book Clubs”](#), April 9, 2026.)

A separate federal survey paints the long-term decline from another angle. The National Endowment for the Arts reported that in **2022 only 48.5 percent of American adults had read at least one print or electronic book during the previous year**, a decline of more than six percentage points from 2012. The percentage reading novels or short stories also fell substantially during that decade. Different surveys measure reading in somewhat different ways, so their percentages should not be treated as interchangeable; nevertheless, they point toward the same broader concern: for a large portion of Americans, sustained book reading occupies a diminishing place in everyday life. (National Endowment for the Arts, [“New Data Reveal How Adults Participated in the Arts During COVID-19”](#); [“Arts Participation Patterns in 2022”](#).)

The Bible itself provides an especially revealing test case because it remains one of the most widely owned and culturally influential books in America, yet actual engagement with it varies enormously. The **American Bible Society's 2026 *State of the Bible*** found that only **17 percent of Americans were classified as "Scripture Engaged,"** while 28 percent fell into what the researchers call the **"Movable Middle"**—people who are open or curious about the Bible but are not deeply engaged with it. The same survey found that **half of Americans say they have read at least half of the Bible,** while only **17 percent report having read it in its entirety** and 10 percent say they have read none of it. Another national survey from Barna found that **42 percent of U.S. adults said they read the Bible weekly in 2025,** meaning that even amid a recent rebound, most Americans still do not report a weekly Bible-reading habit. The contrast is important for this investigation: a book can remain extraordinarily influential, widely available, frequently discussed, quoted in politics and culture, and present in millions of homes while large numbers of people spend relatively little sustained time actually reading it for themselves. (American Bible Society, ["16th Annual State of the Bible Report: Reading Dips but Openness to Scripture Surges"](#), April 9, 2026; Barna Group, ["How Millennials and Gen Z Are Driving a Bible Reading Comeback"](#), November 6, 2025.)

Those statistics do **not** mean Americans have stopped consuming information. If anything, the opposite is true. We are surrounded by more words, headlines, posts, messages, videos, notifications, summaries, generated answers, and digital content than any generation before us. The deeper question is whether constant exposure to fragments of information is replacing the patience required to read **books, sustained arguments, primary historical documents, and the Bible for ourselves.** A society can therefore possess unprecedented access to written information while simultaneously losing some of the habits required for deep reading.

One clarification is important: **reading quantity and reading quality are not the same thing.** A person may spend hours each day scanning texts, posts, headlines, captions, emails, and social-media posts while rarely practicing the sustained attention required to follow a difficult argument from beginning to end. Deep reading asks more of the mind: concentration, memory, comparison, inference, patience, and the willingness to remain with an idea long enough to understand it before reacting to it. That distinction matters for this investigation because the crisis may not be only that Americans read too little; it may also be that much of what we now call "reading" trains us to skim rather than to understand.

At almost exactly the same moment, America is fighting another education battle involving what may at first appear to be an entirely different subject: **the Bible and the classroom.** Four states now require versions of the Ten Commandments to be displayed in public-school classrooms, Tennessee authorizes such displays, and more

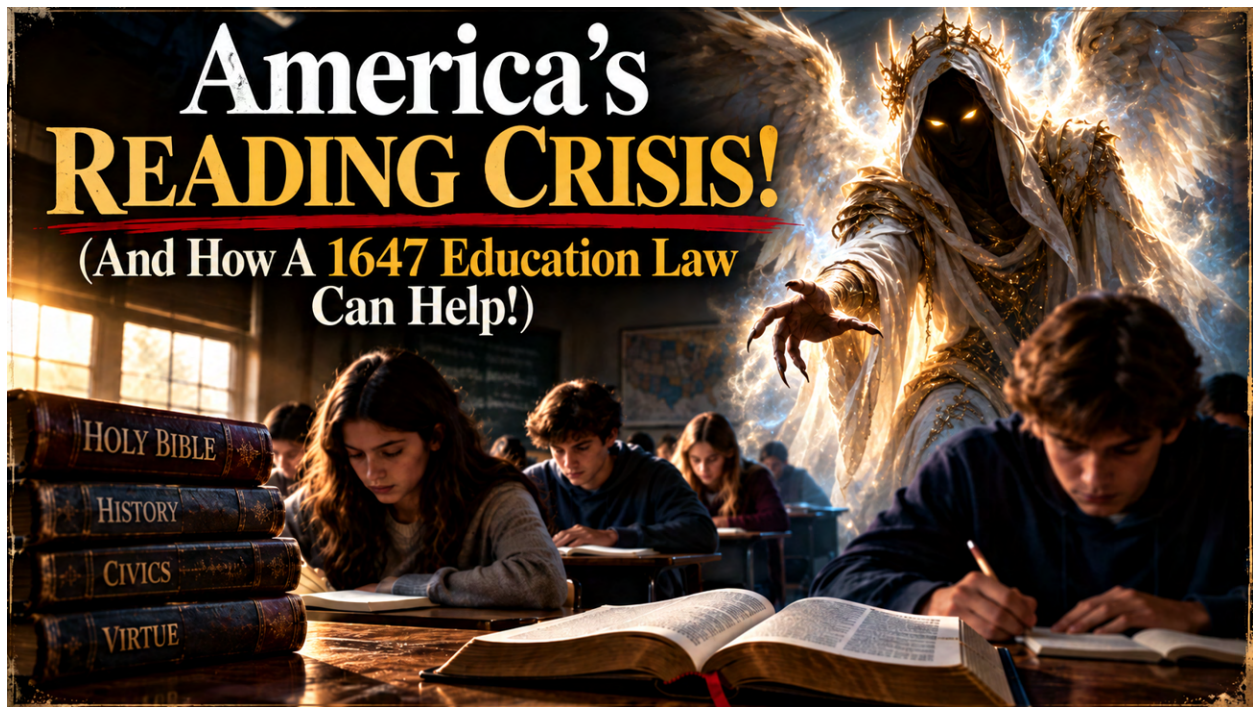
than twenty states have considered related measures. The resulting litigation asks difficult constitutional questions about whether such displays represent historical acknowledgment or government-sponsored religious instruction. (Mark Walsh, [“Ten Commandments in Classrooms: ‘Passive Display’ or Part of the Curriculum?”](#), *Education Week*, October 2, 2026.)

Those controversies should not be carelessly collapsed into one another. Reading proficiency and Establishment Clause litigation are different matters. Yet beneath them lies an older question Americans have been asking since long before there was a United States: **What is education actually for?**

Is reading primarily a practical skill required for employment and economic advancement? Is it the foundation of citizenship? Is education merely the acquisition of information, or does it also involve moral formation, religious understanding, conscience, wisdom, and the ability to recognize deception? And who bears the first responsibility for teaching a child—the family, the church, the community, the school, the state, or some combination of them?

For the Christian, those questions cannot ultimately be separated from a biblical understanding of the human person. The Bible does not portray children as morally neutral information processors who merely need to accumulate facts. Human beings are created in the image of God, capable of reason, moral judgment, worship, obedience, rebellion, wisdom, and folly. Education therefore inevitably forms not merely what a child knows but how that child learns to understand truth, authority, God, neighbor, duty, freedom, and himself. The biblical admonition to **“train up a child in the way he should go”** assumes that formation is unavoidable and that those entrusted with children bear responsibility for the direction of that formation. ([Proverbs 22:6](#).)

Those questions sound remarkably contemporary, but Massachusetts lawmakers were wrestling with versions of them **379 years ago**. In **1647**, the leaders of the Massachusetts Bay Colony enacted one of the foundational education statutes in early American history. They did not introduce it with a discussion of economic competitiveness, standardized testing, workforce preparation, or school rankings. Instead, they began with an enemy, a Bible, and a warning about deception, identifying that enemy by name as **“that old deluder, Satan.”** That strange sentence opens the door to one of America's most revealing forgotten classrooms.



Why Is Satan in America's Forgotten Classroom?

At first glance, the title of this Classroom may sound almost jarring. What could **Satan** possibly have to do with the history of education in America? Why would a serious investigation of literacy, schools, families, and civic formation begin with language that sounds more at home in a sermon than in an education statute?

That reaction is precisely why this forgotten law matters. The word “**Satan**” is not something being inserted into the story by a modern Christian writer trying to make early American education sound more religious than it really was. It appears in the language of the **1647 Massachusetts education law itself**. The lawmakers explicitly described Satan as the “old deluder” whose purpose was to keep people from knowledge of the Scriptures, and they connected that danger directly to the need for literacy, learned languages, schools, and the preservation of education. (Massachusetts Commonwealth, [“Old Deluder Satan Law of 1647”](#).)

That immediately tells us something important about the distance between their educational worldview and ours. Modern Americans tend to think about schools in terms of reading scores, mathematics, graduation rates, college preparation, workforce readiness, technology, and economic competitiveness. The Massachusetts Puritans certainly cared about practical learning, but they also believed education existed within a larger moral and spiritual universe. Human beings could know truth, misunderstand truth, reject truth, or be deliberately deceived, and the ability to read

the Bible and evaluate teaching was therefore part of what protected both individuals and communities.

From a Christian perspective, that concern is not merely a historical curiosity. The Bible consistently treats deception as a genuine spiritual danger. Jesus warned that false teachers would come in deceptive forms; Paul repeatedly cautioned churches against being carried away by false doctrine; John commanded believers to “**test the spirits**” rather than accepting every spiritual claim uncritically. ([Matthew 7:15](#); [Ephesians 4:14](#); [1 John 4:1](#).) The biblical worldview assumes both that truth exists and that human beings can be led away from it.

This does not mean we must adopt every feature of seventeenth-century Puritan society, nor does it mean that every educational problem should be explained as direct satanic activity. The Massachusetts Bay Colony had serious limitations, including restrictions on religious dissent that later American generations would rightly reject. Our task is not to reproduce their political system but to understand their educational reasoning accurately and then ask whether some of the deeper biblical assumptions behind it still deserve our attention.

Once we do that, the strange title begins to make sense. The Old Deluder law was built upon the conviction that **ignorance creates vulnerability**. If ordinary people could not read important texts for themselves, they became more dependent upon whoever claimed authority to interpret those texts. If a generation neglected learning, knowledge could disappear when its teachers and ministers died. In the Puritan mind, therefore, literacy was not simply preparation for employment; it was one defense against deception.

The statute also reveals that the Puritans did not view deception as something defeated by sincerity alone. A person could be earnest and still be wrong, devout and still be misled, or confident and still misunderstand what he had been taught. That is why literacy mattered so much to them: it gave ordinary people greater ability to examine claims, compare teachings, and test what they were hearing against the written text itself. In that sense, education was not merely about possessing information; it was about developing enough understanding to resist being intellectually or spiritually manipulated.

That is why Satan belongs in this particular installment of *America's Forgotten Classroom*.

We did not bring him into the classroom. The 1647 lawmakers did.

And the reason they did opens one of the most revealing chapters in the history of American education.



Part I — The Law and the World That Produced It

Investigation — Was There Really an “Old Deluder Satan” Law?

There was, although the familiar phrase “**Old Deluder Satan Act**” is the later descriptive name by which the statute became known rather than a modern-style formal title printed at the top of an enacted bill. The substance, however, is unquestionably genuine. In 1647, the General Court of the Massachusetts Bay Colony enacted an education law whose opening language is so explicitly theological that it can be startling to a twenty-first-century reader.

The law began by declaring that one of the chief projects of “**that old deluder, Satan**” was to keep people from knowledge of the Scriptures. It recalled earlier periods when Scripture had been kept from ordinary people through an “unknown tongue,” and it warned that neglect of learned languages could allow the “true sense and meaning of the Originall” to be obscured by the “false glosses” of deceptive interpreters. The wording reveals that the lawmakers feared more than simple illiteracy. They feared what could happen when people lacked the knowledge

necessary to recognize bad interpretation and spiritual deception. (Massachusetts Commonwealth, [“Old Deluder Satan Law of 1647”](#).)

The statute then moved directly from theological reasoning into educational requirements. Every township that **reached fifty householders** was required to appoint someone to teach children who came to him to read and write. When a community **reached one hundred families or householders**, it was required to establish a grammar school whose master could prepare young people for university study. Towns that failed to maintain the higher-level school for more than a year could be fined. (Massachusetts Commonwealth, [“Old Deluder Satan Law of 1647”](#).)

That combination is what makes the document so important. The lawmakers did not make a religious observation in one paragraph and then wander into an unrelated school policy. The theological concern supplied part of the rationale **for the educational policy itself**. Illiteracy and inadequate learning could leave people susceptible to religious deception, while education could help preserve access to the Bible, knowledge, and sound interpretation.

That connection between literacy and religious understanding has also been emphasized by **Dr. Stephen Prothero (1960–)**, professor of religion at Boston University and author of *Religious Literacy*. Looking back at early American education, Prothero observed that **“basic literacy and religious literacy were yoked”** because one of the principal ways people learned to read was through the Bible and through primers saturated with biblical material. His point helps explain why the 1647 statute moves so naturally, to modern eyes almost startlingly, from Satan and Scripture to teachers and grammar schools: its authors did not regard reading and religious understanding as two unrelated subjects. In their educational world, learning to read gave ordinary people greater access to the texts through which faith, morality, history, and communal identity were transmitted, making literacy itself part of a much broader program of intellectual and spiritual formation. (Dr. Stephen Prothero, [“Religious Literacy: What Every American Should Know”](#), Pew Research Center, December 3, 2007.)

The statute therefore reveals an educational philosophy far broader than merely teaching children enough words to conduct business. Literacy possessed intellectual, civic, and spiritual consequences. In the worldview of Massachusetts Bay, reading belonged to the preservation of learning, the protection of church and commonwealth, and the ability of future generations to encounter important texts for themselves.

That is precisely why this law belongs in *America's Forgotten Classroom*. The thesis of this series has never been that the older classroom was merely filled with more religious language than ours. The deeper argument is that many earlier Americans

understood education as **formation**—the formation of readers, citizens, consciences, families, workers, and souls.



Why Satan Had Anything to Do with Reading

To understand the startling opening of the statute, we have to enter the intellectual and theological world of seventeenth-century New England instead of projecting our modern categories backward onto it. Massachusetts Bay was profoundly shaped by English Puritanism and, behind that movement, by the larger Protestant Reformation. One of the Reformation's most consequential convictions was that ordinary Christians should have meaningful access to the Bible in languages they could understand rather than remaining entirely dependent upon ecclesiastical intermediaries.

That history helps explain the law's reference to an “**unknown tongue.**” The language reflects the Protestant memory of the Bible being inaccessible to many ordinary people and the Reformers' insistence upon vernacular Bible translation, preaching, catechesis, printing, and personal engagement with the biblical text. A Bible could be translated and printed, however, and still accomplish little if the people receiving it could not read.

That connection between Protestant faith and literacy is strongly affirmed by **Dr. E. Jennifer Monaghan (1933–)**, historian of literacy and professor emerita of English

at Brooklyn College, whose major study *Learning to Read and Write in Colonial America* remains one of the most important scholarly works on the subject. Monaghan explains that, for much of colonial America, **religious motives lay behind reading instruction**, and that among Protestants the ability to read was bound closely to the conviction that ordinary believers should be able to encounter the Bible personally. As she put it, **“Protestants believed that reading the scriptures oneself was a vital path”** to conversion, which helps explain why colonial reading instruction often progressed from elementary tools such as the hornbook and primer ultimately toward the Bible itself. Her research also emphasizes that Congregationalists in New England were among the earliest to build this religious commitment to reading into schools, households, and community expectations. In other words, the Old Deluder law did not arise from an isolated burst of religious rhetoric; it grew out of a much broader Protestant culture in which literacy had become closely connected to personal access to biblical truth, catechesis, religious understanding, and the formation of Christian households. (Dr. E. Jennifer Monaghan, [*Learning to Read and Write in Colonial America*](#), University of Massachusetts Press, 2005; scholarly overview: [“Learning to Read and Write in Colonial America”](#), *Eighteenth-Century Book Reviews Online*.)

The Massachusetts lawmakers carried the concern further. Their statute worried that future generations might neglect the learned languages through which scholars examined the biblical originals, leaving people vulnerable to interpretations that obscured the text's true meaning. Their educational concern therefore included both **access and interpretation**. A person who could not read, compare, investigate, or understand important texts remained more dependent upon whoever claimed authority to explain those texts.

That concern fits comfortably within the historic Protestant understanding of biblical authority. The Reformation doctrine of biblical authority never meant that every interpretation is equally legitimate or that every individual reading is automatically correct. It meant, among other things, that the church, its teachers, and individual believers remain accountable to the Word of God itself. Paul instructed Timothy to handle **“the word of truth”** accurately, which assumes both that the text has a meaning and that it can be mishandled. ([2 Timothy 2:15](#).)

Historical honesty nevertheless requires an important qualification. Massachusetts Puritans were not advocates of modern religious pluralism, unrestricted theological diversity, or contemporary church-state arrangements. The colony possessed a strongly established religious culture, dissenters could face serious penalties, and later Americans would develop substantially broader protections for religious liberty than Massachusetts practiced in the seventeenth century.

Acknowledging those limitations does not diminish the educational significance of the law. It allows us to avoid converting the Puritans into twentieth- or twenty-first-century evangelicals while seeing clearly what they actually believed: religious knowledge, biblical understanding, literacy, and learning were important enough to the welfare of society that civil authorities believed educational neglect could become a public danger. In their worldview, ignorance was not simply an unfortunate academic condition; it could create vulnerability to deception.



Jesus, the Old Deluder, and the Battle Over the Written Word

Long before Massachusetts lawmakers called Satan the “**old deluder**,” the New Testament portrayed the devil as fundamentally connected with deception. Jesus described him as one who “**does not stand in the truth**” and called him “**the father of lies**.” Yet one of the most revealing episodes in the Gospels shows that deception does not always arrive through an obvious falsehood. Sometimes it comes through a true text handled falsely. That distinction reaches directly into the educational argument we have been tracing, because possessing the Bible is not enough if a person does not understand what it means or recognize when its words are being distorted. ([John 8:44](#).)

Immediately after Jesus' baptism, Matthew tells us that He was led into the wilderness, where the devil tempted Him repeatedly. On **three occasions**, Jesus answered the temptation with the same appeal to written revelation: **"It is written."** His responses came from Deuteronomy: human beings do not live by bread alone but by every word proceeding from God; God must not be put to the test; and God alone is to be worshiped and served. Jesus did not answer Satan with speculation, emotion, cultural convention, or raw supernatural power. He answered by correctly knowing and faithfully applying what God had already spoken. ([Matthew 4:1–11](#); [Deuteronomy 8:3](#); [Deuteronomy 6:16](#); [Deuteronomy 6:13](#).)

But then something extraordinary happens that is especially important for this Classroom: **Satan quotes the Bible too.** In the temptation at the Temple, the devil cites Psalm 91, appealing to God's promise that His angels would guard the faithful and bear them up. The quotation contained genuine biblical words, yet Satan attempted to use those words to justify an action contrary to faithful obedience. Jesus answered the quotation with another biblical text—**"You shall not put the Lord your God to the test"**—thereby exposing the distortion. The confrontation therefore was not merely Bible versus no Bible; it was **faithful interpretation versus deceptive interpretation.** ([Matthew 4:5–7](#); [Psalm 91:11–12](#); [Deuteronomy 6:16](#).)

And notice something else that is easy to miss: **Satan is presented here as a remarkably capable reader.** He knows the biblical text well enough to quote it, select a passage suited to his purpose, and deploy it strategically in an attempt to mislead. The problem in Matthew 4 is therefore not illiteracy on Satan's part, but **masterful misuse of what has been read.** The Great Deceiver demonstrates that the ability to read, quote, and even memorize the Bible is not the same thing as rightly understanding or faithfully applying it. He knew the Word of God so well that he could even **distort it when it fit his scheme.** Jesus answered not with a vague appeal to spirituality, but with a fuller and more accurate use of the written Word, exposing the distortion by placing one passage alongside another. ([Matthew 4:5–7](#); [Psalm 91:11–12](#); [Deuteronomy 6:16](#).)

That lesson is startling and deeply relevant to this treatise: **Satan is not only a liar; in this scene he is a master reader, a selective quoter, and a deceptive interpreter.** The Massachusetts lawmakers' later fear of **"false glosses"** now appears in a much older biblical light. Their language belonged to the theological controversies of the seventeenth century, but the underlying danger is visible in the Gospel itself: words can be quoted accurately while their meaning is misapplied. A person may therefore possess biblical literacy in the mechanical sense and still be vulnerable to deception if he cannot compare passages, understand context, recognize misuse, and distinguish what a text actually teaches from what someone wants it to

say. The temptation of Jesus demonstrates why **access to the written Word and discernment in handling it belong together.**

The episode also helps explain why Christians have historically understood biblical knowledge as part of spiritual defense. Paul wrote that our struggle is “**not against flesh and blood**” but against spiritual forces of evil, and in the same passage he identified “**the sword of the Spirit**” as “**the word of God.**” Elsewhere he explained that the weapons of Christian warfare are not merely human instruments but possess divine power for confronting arguments and false ideas, while Hebrews describes the Word of God as “**living and active**” and sharper than a two-edged sword. ([Ephesians 6:12–17](#); [2 Corinthians 10:3–5](#); [Hebrews 4:12](#).)

We should be careful not to turn those passages into the simplistic claim that merely reciting isolated Bible verses automatically defeats every difficulty. Jesus’ own example teaches something richer. He **knew the Word, understood the Word, recognized when the Word was being misused, and applied the Word faithfully.** Satan’s quotation of Psalm 91 shows why biblical literacy cannot stop at memorizing words. Christian education must cultivate the ability to understand those words within the larger truth God has revealed.

This makes the old Massachusetts concern surprisingly contemporary. The seventeenth-century lawmakers feared that people could lose access to the Bible or become dependent upon distorted explanations of it. Jesus’ confrontation with the tempter reveals the deeper spiritual reality beneath that concern: **the deceiver does not always need to remove God's Word; sometimes he only needs to twist it.** A generation that cannot read carefully, compare texts, recognize context, and evaluate interpretation may therefore possess more Bibles than any generation in history and still remain dangerously vulnerable to deception.

And that brings us back to the central educational question behind the Old Deluder law. Reading mattered because truth mattered; interpretation mattered because deception was possible; and biblical literacy mattered because Christians believed God's revealed Word was not merely information but a source of truth, wisdom, correction, and spiritual defense. The Massachusetts Puritans did not invent that conviction in 1647. They inherited it from a biblical worldview in which even **Jesus’ confrontation with the Great Deceiver became, in part, a battle over the meaning and faithful use of the written Word.**

Once that biblical foundation is understood, the Massachusetts laws become easier to read on their own terms. The Puritans did not suddenly wake up in 1647 and decide that education should have a spiritual purpose; they had already been building that conviction into the responsibilities of families and communities. In fact, **five years**

before the famous Old Deluder statute, Massachusetts had enacted another educational law that placed the first burden of instruction not upon a centralized school system, but upon the household itself. That earlier law shows that the concern about literacy, catechesis, discipline, useful work, and the preservation of knowledge was already taking institutional form before Satan was ever named in the 1647 statute.



The Forgotten Law That Came Five Years Earlier

The celebrated 1647 statute becomes even more interesting when we discover that Massachusetts had already legislated extensively about education **five years earlier**. The Old Deluder law did not suddenly invent colonial concern for children's learning. Instead, it developed an educational structure in which the household already occupied a central position.

In **1642**, Massachusetts required local officials to watch over the education of children and apprentices. The surviving text is revealing because its primary concern was not initially building a centralized government school system. Instead, it placed substantial educational responsibility upon **parents and masters of households**.

The law instructed town officials to ensure that families did not permit what it called so much “barbarism” that children and apprentices remained unable to read the English language or understand the colony's principal laws. It went still further,

requiring masters of families at least once each week to **catechize their children and servants in the principles of religion**. If the adults were unable to provide that instruction personally, they were expected to obtain an appropriate orthodox catechism so that the children could learn its teachings and answer questions about what they had been taught. ([“The Laws and Liberties of Massachusetts”](#), education provisions of 1642.)

The same law expected children to be prepared for productive adult life. Parents and masters were instructed to bring them up in lawful occupations or, where appropriate, provide enough learning to prepare them for higher employment. Colonial authorities even retained power to intervene in serious cases when they believed a household persistently neglected its educational responsibilities. ([“The Laws and Liberties of Massachusetts”](#), education provisions of 1642.)

There are elements of that arrangement modern Americans would rightly regard as highly intrusive, but the historical structure is extremely important. Early Massachusetts education did not begin with the assumption that government should replace the family. The opposite is closer to the truth: authorities initially expected households to carry substantial responsibility, while community supervision and eventually formal schooling increasingly supplemented what happened at home.

That distinction reinforces one of the central themes running through this entire *Forgotten Classroom* series. The older classroom was never merely a room containing desks and a professional teacher. The home was a classroom, the church was a classroom, apprenticeship was a classroom, books were classrooms, sermons were classrooms, laws were classrooms, and formal schools increasingly joined them. Education was woven throughout the culture rather than isolated within one institution.

One additional feature of the 1642 law deserves notice: it treated **ignorance itself as a civic problem**, not merely a private family deficiency. A child who could not read English or understand the colony's laws was viewed as less prepared to participate responsibly in the life of the community. That helps explain why Massachusetts linked household instruction with public oversight so early: literacy was already being understood as part of the equipment of citizenship, long before the Revolutionary generation would make that connection even more explicit.

From a biblical standpoint, the primacy of the home should not surprise us. Long before Massachusetts, Moses instructed God's people that His words were to be taught diligently to children during the ordinary rhythms of family life—while sitting at home, traveling along the way, lying down, and rising up. ([Deuteronomy 6:6–7](#).) The Christian family therefore does not become responsible for the child's moral and

spiritual formation because government grants that responsibility; the Bible already places that obligation upon parents.



Part II — Building a Culture of Learning

From Household to Schoolhouse

When the General Court acted again in 1647, it created a more systematic town responsibility for education. Communities reaching **fifty householders** were required to appoint someone capable of teaching children to read and write. The law also addressed the practical problem of paying the teacher, allowing compensation to come from parents or masters, the inhabitants generally, or some locally determined combination of the two. (Massachusetts Commonwealth, [“Old Deluder Satan Law of 1647”](#).)

This is one reason we should be cautious about describing the system as though the modern public school suddenly appeared fully formed in 1647. The financial structure remained local and flexible, and the statute did not require every child to report each morning to the same tax-supported institution. Rather, it required communities to ensure that educational provision existed.

When a town reached **one hundred families or householders**, however, the requirement became substantially more demanding. The town had to maintain a **grammar school**, and the master had to possess enough learning to prepare students so that they might be “fitted for the Universitie.” Neglecting that requirement for more than a year exposed the town to an annual five-pound penalty payable toward another school until it complied. (Massachusetts Commonwealth, [“Old Deluder Satan Law of 1647”](#).)

An educational ladder was therefore emerging. At one level stood basic reading and writing; above that stood advanced classical schooling; beyond that lay university education. The purpose was not simply to help a child become minimally functional but to maintain an intellectual pipeline through which learning could survive and develop. That aspiration becomes clearer when we look at what Massachusetts had already begun building before the famous law was enacted.



Boston Built a School Before It Built a Nation

In **1635**, twelve years before the Old Deluder statute, Puritan settlers established what became the Boston Latin School. The National Park Service identifies its original location as the site of the **first public school in the American colonies**, and the institution would later educate figures whose names became inseparable from the

American founding, including Benjamin Franklin, Samuel Adams, and John Hancock. (Historical Source: National Park Service, [“First Public School Site”](#).)

The chronology matters. Massachusetts settlers were organizing advanced schooling while their colonial society was still remarkably young. They were not waiting until roads, commerce, housing, government, churches, and every other institution had been perfected before considering education. Schools were part of the architecture they believed a functioning society required.

The emphasis upon Latin was not merely an exercise in academic prestige. **Foster Watson (1860–1929)**, the English historian of education whose work examined the grammar-school tradition inherited by New England, explained that Puritan schools did not study the classical languages simply for their own sake; rather, Latin, Greek, and Hebrew were valued because they equipped students for the **“intensive study of the Scriptures”** and for what he called *pietas literata*—learned piety. That connection was especially important for boys preparing for Harvard and, ultimately, the ministry. Latin remained the principal language of higher learning, while Greek provided access to the New Testament in its original language and Hebrew opened the Old Testament more directly; Harvard's own early requirements expected students to arrive already proficient in Latin and to continue serious study in Greek and other biblical languages. In that sense, Boston Latin was not simply teaching boys to admire Cicero and Virgil. It was preparing a learned class capable of reading theology, entering college, and eventually engaging the Bible and the wider intellectual tradition at a level unavailable to those without classical training. (Foster Watson, [The Old Grammar Schools](#); Colonial Society of Massachusetts, [“The Teaching of Latin and Greek at the Boston Latin School in 1712”](#).)

Boston Latin was not the equivalent of a universal modern elementary school. It provided advanced classical schooling, educational access was unequal, and the opportunities available to boys, girls, servants, the poor, Native Americans, and people of African descent were far from identical. Boston's later educational history would include long and painful struggles by Black families seeking equal access to schooling. (National Park Service, [“The Black Struggle for Equal Education in Boston, 1787 to 1976”](#).)

Those qualifications belong in our investigation because there is no need to create a mythical colonial classroom in order to appreciate the historical significance of the real one. Massachusetts had not solved every educational problem; nevertheless, its settlers demonstrated an unusually strong concern for institutional learning almost from the beginning. Only one year after Boston Latin was established, that concern produced something even more ambitious.



Why Would a Struggling Colony Establish Harvard in 1636?

Imagine Massachusetts Bay in **1636**. The colony was still young. Settlers were clearing land, constructing homes, securing food, creating civil institutions, building churches, establishing trade, and learning how to survive New England winters. Yet the Massachusetts General Court appropriated **£400 toward the establishment of a college—an institution that became Harvard**.

Harvard itself preserves an early explanation of the founders' intentions. After recalling how the settlers had built homes, provided for their livelihoods, established places of worship, and organized civil government, the account explained that one of their next desires was to “**advance learning and perpetuate it to posterity.**” They specifically feared leaving an “**illiterate ministry**” to the churches after the present generation of educated ministers had died. (Harvard Divinity School, [“History and Mission.”](#))

Harvard's Christian purpose was not incidental to its founding but embedded in the institution's earliest structure. The **Charter of 1650**, drafted under Harvard's first president, the Rev. **Henry Dunster (1609–1659)**, described gifts to the college as being given through the “good hand of God” for the advancement of learning and for

the education of youth in “**knowledge and godliness.**” Harvard Divinity School itself says that the study of theology and preparation for religious leadership can be traced to the beginning of the College and that the founders' concern was specifically to perpetuate a learned ministry rather than leave New England's churches without educated clergy. Historian **Samuel Eliot Morison (1887–1976)**, one of Harvard's most important institutional historians, likewise treated the College's early development as inseparable from the Puritan project of creating an educated ministry and preserving a learned Christian commonwealth. (Harvard University Archives, [“Harvard Charter of 1650”](#); Harvard Divinity School, [“History and Mission”](#); Samuel Eliot Morison, [Harvard University Archives, “Harvard Seals, 1650–1926”](#).) [Harvard Library Guides](#)

The College's earliest symbols reinforce the same point. Harvard's **1650 seal** carried the Latin motto “**In Christi Gloriam**” — “**For the glory of Christ**” around a shield displaying three open books, while a later seventeenth-century seal used “**Christo et Ecclesiae**” — “**For Christ and the Church.**” Harvard's archives note that these Christian mottoes belonged to the College's official seals and that **Samuel Eliot Morison** traced both *Veritas* and *Christo et Ecclesiae* to the writings of English Protestant theologian **William Ames (1576–1633)**. The modern Yard gates, by contrast, were largely erected beginning in the late nineteenth century and prominently display the later *Veritas* shield, so they should not be mistaken for seventeenth-century founding evidence. The more historically revealing symbols are the College's own early seals: **truth, open books, Christ, church, and learning were literally built into Harvard's institutional identity.**(Harvard University Archives, [“Seals of 1650, 1843, and 1885”](#); Harvard University Archives, [“Harvard Seals, 1650–1926”](#); Harvard Gazette, [“The History of Harvard Gates”](#).)

That statement provides one of the keys to understanding the Old Deluder law eleven years later because the concern was fundamentally generational. Much of the learning possessed by the first Massachusetts settlers had arrived from England with men who had already received education elsewhere. But what would happen when those people died? Who would train the next ministers, teachers, magistrates, and scholars? Who would preserve languages, theology, classical learning, law, history, and intellectual habits?

Boston Latin School in 1635, Harvard in 1636, the family education provisions in 1642, and the town-school requirement of 1647 therefore belong within a recognizable pattern. The colony was gradually constructing an educational pipeline that stretched from the household through elementary learning and grammar schooling toward higher education. The same society that feared an illiterate child also feared an illiterate ministry, and both concerns reflected the same underlying conviction that knowledge had to be deliberately transmitted or it could disappear.



“That Learning May Not Be Buried in the Graves of Our Fore-Fathers”

The famous opening reference to Satan attracts most of the attention whenever the 1647 law is discussed, but another sentence may reveal even more about the educational philosophy behind it. The lawmakers declared that they acted so **“that Learning may not be buried in the graves of our fore-fathers in Church and Commonwealth.”** (Massachusetts Commonwealth, [“Old Deluder Satan Law of 1647”](#).)

It is an extraordinary description of the fragility of civilization. The Massachusetts legislators understood that knowledge does not automatically survive merely because one generation possesses it. When knowledgeable people die without adequately teaching those who follow them, their books may remain while much of their understanding disappears.

A library can contain thousands of volumes, but those volumes accomplish little for people who cannot or will not read them. A Bible can remain on a family shelf while descendants gradually lose any meaningful knowledge of what it contains. Constitutional documents can be perfectly preserved beneath glass while citizens forget the historical arguments and moral assumptions that gave those documents

meaning. History itself can survive in archives while an entire culture becomes historically illiterate.

That is why education is fundamentally generational. It allows those who are living to learn from people they will never meet and permits one generation to begin where an earlier generation finished rather than reconstructing civilization from the beginning. The Massachusetts settlers understood this well enough to express the danger in the imagery of a grave: their teachers and ministers would die, and the central question was whether their learning would die with them.

That generational purpose is strongly affirmed by **Dr. Jurgen Herbst (1928–2013)**, a Harvard-trained historian of American education, longtime professor at the University of Wisconsin–Madison, former president of the History of Education Society, and author of ***The Once and Future School***, who examined the early New England grammar schools and colleges as institutions created to carry a culture forward. Herbst observed that Massachusetts leaders moved with remarkable urgency to establish Latin schools and Harvard even while the colony itself was still struggling for survival, because they believed education was necessary to prepare a succeeding generation of ministers, magistrates, and other leaders. In his analysis, the school and college became instruments through which the colony could transmit its **“reformed way of life”** and ground future leadership in Christian, classical, and humanist learning; the object was not simply to produce literate individuals, but to ensure that the beliefs, knowledge, and intellectual disciplines of one generation did not disappear when its educated leaders died. Seen in that light, the haunting phrase about learning being “buried in the graves of our fore-fathers” was more than poetic language. It expressed a real institutional problem the Puritans were trying to solve: **how can a community preserve its faith, learning, leadership, and intellectual inheritance after the generation that carried those things across the Atlantic is gone?** (Dr. Jurgen Herbst, [*The Once and Future School: Three Hundred and Fifty Years of American Secondary Education*](#), Routledge, 1996.)

Harvard's founders had expressed almost precisely the same fear when they wrote of advancing learning to posterity before their present ministers should “lie in the dust.” The connection between those two statements reveals how deeply the problem of **generational transmission** shaped New England educational thinking. (Historical Source: Harvard Divinity School, [“History and Mission”](#).)

The Bible treats this generational responsibility with equal seriousness. Psalm 78 describes God's people teaching His works to their children so that a generation yet unborn would know them and would in turn teach their own children. ([Psalm 78:4–7](#).) Biblical memory is never merely nostalgic; it is stewardship across generations.



Investigation — Was This Really America’s “First Public-School Law”?

This is one of those places where careful historical language strengthens our argument considerably. The Old Deluder statute is frequently described as **America's first public-school law**, and there is a legitimate reason it occupies such a prominent place in educational history. Nevertheless, Boston Latin School already existed, Massachusetts had legislated about family education in 1642, and schooling took numerous household, church, private, and communal forms before 1647.

Nor did the Old Deluder law establish a modern statewide public-school bureaucracy. Teachers could be supported through parents, masters, community funds, or local combinations of those sources, and the law spoke of children who would “resort” to the teacher rather than imposing the familiar structure of modern daily school attendance. (Massachusetts Commonwealth, [“Old Deluder Satan Law of 1647”](#).)

What happened in 1647 was nevertheless historically significant. Massachusetts established a **population-based legal obligation upon towns to provide education**, including advanced grammar schooling when the community became sufficiently large. Local government could no longer treat educational provision as a matter of complete indifference.

A more accurate description, therefore, is also more defensible: the Old Deluder law was **one of the foundational public-education statutes in American history and one of the earliest major legal mandates requiring towns to provide schooling according to population.**



Part III — From the Puritan Classroom to the Revolutionary Generation

The Educational Idea Did Not Die in 1647

One important question remains before we move into the deeper meaning of this educational philosophy: **Did the Old Deluder worldview simply belong to a brief Puritan moment, or did its influence continue into the generation that eventually fought the American Revolution and built the new republic?**

The evidence shows substantial continuity, even though eighteenth-century Massachusetts was not identical to seventeenth-century Massachusetts. Institutions changed, intellectual influences broadened, Enlightenment ideas increasingly entered colonial life, and religious commitments were not uniform. Yet the older conviction that education, virtue, religion, civic responsibility, and liberty belonged together did not simply disappear.

One obvious example is the **New England Primer**, which emerged after the Old Deluder law but became enormously influential during the eighteenth century. The Smithsonian describes it as one of the most important early American reading primers, combining literacy instruction with biblical, moral, devotional, and catechetical material. In other words, generations much closer to the American Revolution than to the original Puritan migration continued learning to read from material in which literacy, morality, and religion remained intertwined. (Smithsonian National Museum of American History, [“The New-England Primer Improved”](#).)

The institutional structure also endured. Boston Latin continued educating colonial boys who would later become prominent Revolutionaries, including Samuel Adams and John Hancock, while Harvard helped educate generations of clergy, lawyers, civic leaders, and public servants. The educational ladder Massachusetts had been building since the seventeenth century did not vanish when the colonies entered the Revolutionary age.

That continuity is easier to see when education is understood as something larger than formal schooling. **Dr. Bernard Bailyn (1922–2020)**, the Pulitzer Prize–winning Harvard historian and longtime Adams University Professor at Harvard, argued in his landmark *Education in the Forming of American Society* that early American education must be studied through the whole culture that transmitted beliefs, habits, loyalties, and knowledge—including families, churches, apprenticeships, schools, and colleges. Historian **Dr. Gordon S. Wood (1933–)**, himself one of the foremost scholars of the American Revolution, summarized Bailyn’s breakthrough as understanding education as **“the entire process by which a culture transmits itself across the generations.”** That insight helps explain why the educational world of seventeenth-century New England did not simply disappear when the Revolutionary generation arrived. Its theology was modified, its political vocabulary changed, and Enlightenment influences expanded, but many of the institutions and habits through which New England transmitted literacy, moral formation, classical learning, religious understanding, and civic responsibility remained in place to shape the generation that eventually argued about independence and republican government. (Dr. Bernard Bailyn, [Education in the Forming of American Society: Needs and Opportunities for Study](#), originally published 1960; scholarly assessment: Dr. Gordon S. Wood, [“Creating the Revolution”](#), *The New York Review of Books*, February 13, 2003.) [University of North Carolina Press](#)

The important point is not that the founding generation simply repeated seventeenth-century Puritan theology. It did not. By the middle of the eighteenth century, American intellectual life had absorbed wider philosophical, scientific, legal, classical, and Enlightenment influences. Yet many founders emerged from an

educational culture in which classical learning, religion, civic responsibility, moral philosophy, and republican thought were already deeply intertwined.

That continuity becomes unmistakable when we reach **1780**, while the Revolutionary War was still being fought.



The 1780 Massachusetts Constitution Carries the Classroom Forward

The Massachusetts Constitution of **1780**, drafted principally by John Adams and ratified during the Revolutionary era, provides one of the clearest bridges between the educational world of 1647 and the civic philosophy of the founding generation.

Its language is striking.

The Constitution declared that **“wisdom, and knowledge, as well as virtue, diffused generally among the body of the people”** were necessary for the preservation of their **“rights and liberties.”** Because those qualities depended upon spreading educational opportunity throughout society, the document made it the continuing duty of legislatures and magistrates to cherish literature, science, the university at Cambridge, **public schools and grammar schools in the towns**, and institutions promoting agriculture, commerce, trades, manufactures, and other useful knowledge.

It also called for the cultivation of humanity, benevolence, charity, industry, frugality, honesty, sincerity, social affection, and generous sentiments among the people. (Commonwealth of Massachusetts, [“Massachusetts Constitution — Chapter V, Section II: The Encouragement of Literature”](#).)

Read that carefully and the continuity is difficult to miss. In **1647**, Massachusetts worried that learning might die with one generation and therefore required towns to establish schools. In **1780**, Revolutionary Massachusetts declared that wisdom, knowledge, and virtue were necessary to preserve rights and liberties and therefore charged government to continue cherishing schools, grammar schools, higher learning, and public knowledge.

The vocabulary had developed, but the underlying conviction remained recognizable: **a free society requires an educated and morally formed people.**

The same Constitution looked explicitly backward to the establishment of Harvard in **1636**, praising the colony's “wise and pious ancestors” for founding the college and declaring that the encouragement of arts, sciences, and good literature served the honor of God, the advantage of Christian religion, and the benefit of the United States. (Commonwealth of Massachusetts, [“Massachusetts Constitution”](#).)

That provision is especially important for this investigation because it was not written in 1647. It was written in the **Revolutionary era**. More than 140 years after Harvard's founding and more than 130 years after the Old Deluder law, Massachusetts was still publicly remembering the educational institutions of its Puritan ancestors and still connecting learning with virtue, religion, public welfare, rights, and liberty.

One especially important development in 1780 is that Massachusetts did not leave education merely as a matter of custom or local preference. By placing the encouragement of schools, learning, and virtue inside the state constitution itself, the founders elevated education into a continuing obligation of republican government. That constitutional placement matters because it shows that education was being treated not simply as a private benefit enjoyed by individual families, but as part of the infrastructure necessary to sustain a free commonwealth across generations. In other words, by 1780 the educational inheritance of colonial Massachusetts had become woven into the legal architecture of the new state itself.

This does not mean the educational philosophy of 1780 was identical in every respect to that of 1647. It plainly was not. But the historical line is real: **the conviction that education helped sustain both moral order and civil liberty survived into the founding generation.**



From Protecting Biblical Literacy to Protecting Liberty

There is also an important development between the two periods.

The 1647 lawmakers emphasized the danger that ignorance posed to biblical understanding. The Revolutionary generation had inherited that concern for literacy but increasingly connected education with the survival of republican liberty itself.

That development makes sense. A representative republic depends upon citizens capable of reading laws, evaluating arguments, understanding public questions, selecting leaders, recognizing abuses of power, and remembering the principles upon which their government rests. A population that cannot read or reason independently is vulnerable not only to religious deception but also to political manipulation.

Massachusetts therefore moved from an early concern that the “old deluder” might exploit ignorance to a Revolutionary-era declaration that **wisdom, knowledge, and virtue were necessary to preserve rights and liberties**. The two ideas are not identical, but they share a central assumption: freedom depends upon the formation of people capable of understanding truth and governing themselves.

That connection would become one of the enduring themes of American education. The classroom was never only about preparing a person to earn wages. It was also

about preparing citizens capable of living under liberty without destroying the moral and intellectual conditions that made liberty possible.

This is precisely why the Revolutionary bridge belongs in our Forgotten Classroom. The Old Deluder law was not an isolated curiosity that vanished into the seventeenth century. Its concern for literacy, learning, moral formation, family responsibility, schools, and higher education became part of an educational tradition that continued into the generation that declared independence and built new institutions of republican government.



The Northwest Ordinance Takes the Classroom Beyond Massachusetts

The educational philosophy we have been tracing did not remain confined to Massachusetts. By the time the new nation began organizing the western territory beyond the original states, Congress incorporated remarkably similar assumptions into one of the most consequential laws of the Confederation period.

The **Northwest Ordinance of 1787**, enacted by the Confederation Congress on July 13 while delegates in Philadelphia were drafting the Constitution, established a governmental framework for the Northwest Territory, provided a process through

which new states could eventually enter the Union, guaranteed significant civil rights, and prohibited slavery in the territory. Within its famous Article III appeared a sentence that belongs unmistakably within this Forgotten Classroom: **“Religion, morality, and knowledge, being necessary to good government and the happiness of mankind, schools and the means of education shall forever be encouraged.”** (National Archives, [“Northwest Ordinance \(1787\)”](#).)

That sentence joined together subjects modern Americans often treat separately: **religion, morality, knowledge, good government, human happiness, and education**. The Ordinance did not say merely that schools were useful for producing an employable population. It identified religion, morality, and knowledge as conditions connected to good government and human flourishing and then declared that schools and education should therefore be encouraged.

This does not mean the Northwest Ordinance simply reproduced the Puritan theology of Massachusetts Bay. The nation had changed enormously during the intervening 140 years, and the men shaping the founding generation represented differing denominations, theological commitments, philosophical influences, and regional traditions. Yet the continuity in educational reasoning is unmistakable. The Old Deluder law had assumed that ignorance endangered church and commonwealth; the Massachusetts Constitution of 1780 declared wisdom, knowledge, and virtue necessary for preserving rights and liberties; and the Northwest Ordinance now stated that religion, morality, and knowledge were necessary for good government and the happiness of mankind.

The progression deserves attention because it demonstrates that the relationship between education and ordered liberty was not merely an eccentric belief of early Puritan Massachusetts. By the Revolutionary and constitutional era, prominent Americans repeatedly argued that republican government depended upon the knowledge and character of the people themselves. Schools therefore possessed civic importance extending far beyond employment preparation because they participated in forming the citizens upon whom self-government depended.

That broader founding-era connection between education, morality, and religion has been emphasized by **A. James Reichley (1925–2001)**, scholar of American religion and public life and author of *Religion in American Public Life*. Reichley observed that early Americans associated education with moral and religious instruction **“almost as a matter of course.”** That brief phrase captures something easily missed when the Northwest Ordinance is read through modern categories: its authors were not awkwardly combining unrelated subjects when they placed religion, morality, knowledge, good government, and schools in the same sentence. They were expressing a widely held assumption that self-government required more than political

structures on paper; it required a people capable of governing their own conduct, exercising judgment, restraining destructive passions, understanding their duties, and transmitting those habits to the next generation. Schools therefore belonged within a larger system of formation that also included families, churches, local communities, and civic institutions. The Northwest Ordinance did not establish a national church or prescribe a single denomination—indeed, its first article explicitly protected religious liberty—but neither did it imagine that religion and morality were irrelevant to the character required for republican government. Reichley’s observation helps us see Article III in its own historical setting: **education was expected to cultivate knowledge, but knowledge was not expected to stand alone, detached from the moral and religious convictions thought necessary for sustaining a free society.** (A. James Reichley, *Religion in American Public Life*; historical discussion of Reichley’s observation and the Northwest Ordinance: [American Heritage Education Foundation, “Bible Education and the Northwest Ordinance of 1787”](#); Primary Source and Historical Context: Library of Congress, [“Religion and the Congress of the Confederation”](#).)

That insight also helps explain why the Northwest Ordinance encouraged schools as the nation expanded westward. America was not merely surveying land and creating political jurisdictions; it was attempting to reproduce the institutions considered necessary for an ordered society. Education belonged among those institutions because republican liberty required citizens capable of understanding their responsibilities as well as claiming their rights.

Congress had already begun turning that conviction into land policy two years earlier. The **Land Ordinance of 1785** divided western townships into thirty-six sections and reserved **Section 16 in each township for the maintenance of public schools**, effectively setting aside part of the nation’s physical landscape for education before many of those communities even existed. That is a remarkable detail: the founders were not merely saying education was important in speeches or constitutions; they were embedding support for schools into the very survey and settlement of the western territories. The Northwest Ordinance of 1787 therefore did not appear in isolation but built upon an emerging national policy in which education was treated as part of the infrastructure of republican expansion. (Library of Congress, [“An Ordinance for Ascertaining the Mode of Disposing of Lands in the Western Territory”](#); Library of Congress, [“Surveying: The Art of Measuring Land, Part Two”](#).)

The language of Article III therefore provides an extraordinary bridge between America’s older classroom and the founding generation. Nearly a century and a half after Massachusetts feared that learning could be buried with its forefathers, the governing framework for a vast new American territory still insisted that **knowledge**,

morality, religion, and good government belonged in the same conversation—and that schools should therefore be encouraged.



The Founders Continue the Argument

The same conviction appears repeatedly among prominent members of the founding generation, although they expressed it from different theological and philosophical perspectives. They did not all agree about doctrine, denominations, curriculum, church-state arrangements, or the precise relationship between religion and government. Yet across those differences, one theme returns repeatedly: a republic could not expect liberty to survive among a people untouched by knowledge, character, virtue, religion (which meant non-denominational Christianity) and education.

George Washington (1732–1799) reinforced the same larger relationship among knowledge, virtue, religion, and republican government. As we explored much more deeply in Classroom 2, Washington's 1796 Farewell Address described religion and morality as “**indispensable supports**” of political prosperity and warned Americans not to assume that morality could long be maintained after religious principle had been discarded. In the same address, Washington urged Americans to promote institutions for the “**general diffusion of knowledge**,” arguing that as government

gave greater force to public opinion, public opinion itself needed to be enlightened. (George Washington, [“Farewell Address”](#).)

Washington was not writing a curriculum for public schools, and we should not make the document say more than it does. Yet his reasoning belongs squarely within the educational conversation of the founding era. Popular government depends heavily upon the character and judgment of the people, and therefore knowledge, religion, morality, and civic responsibility cannot simply be assumed to appear automatically.

John Adams (1735–1826) provides perhaps the clearest continuity with the Massachusetts story. The Constitution he principally drafted in 1780 declared that **“wisdom, and knowledge, as well as virtue”** were necessary for preserving the people's rights and liberties and therefore required government to cherish public schools, grammar schools, Harvard, literature, science, and the virtues associated with responsible citizenship. Adams did not regard knowledge and character as competitors; he treated both as necessary to republican freedom. (Commonwealth of Massachusetts, [“Massachusetts Constitution”](#).)

Dr. Benjamin Rush (1746–1813), physician, signer of the Declaration of Independence, educational reformer, and one of the founding generation's most outspoken advocates of republican schooling, made the religious connection even more explicit. In his essay *Of the Mode of Education Proper in a Republic*, Rush argued that **“the only foundation for a useful education in a republic is to be laid in Religion.”** His reasoning was direct: without religion he feared there could be no lasting virtue, and without virtue no lasting liberty. Rush explicitly recommended Christianity, argued that its doctrines and moral teachings promoted the welfare of society and government, and envisioned education as a means of forming citizens capable of sustaining republican institutions. (Dr. Benjamin Rush, [“Of the Mode of Education Proper in a Republic”](#).)

Rush's educational argument is especially important because it brings together almost every theme we have been tracing. He connected religion with virtue, virtue with liberty, education with citizenship, and the formation of children with the future of republican government. He even argued that women should receive instruction in principles of liberty and government because of their enormous influence upon children and family life. For Rush, religion, liberty, and learning were not isolated elements of society but forces that could reinforce one another when rightly ordered.

Thomas Jefferson (1743–1826) approached religion and education from a substantially different theological perspective, yet he too regarded public knowledge as indispensable to liberty. In his 1778 *Bill for the More General Diffusion of Knowledge*, Jefferson argued that even well-designed governments could degenerate

when those entrusted with power gradually converted authority into tyranny. His proposed remedy was to **“illuminate, as far as practicable, the minds of the people at large”** and teach them enough history to recognize political ambition in its various forms. (Thomas Jefferson, [“Preamble to a Bill for the More General Diffusion of Knowledge”](#).)

Jefferson's importance here lies partly in the difference between him and figures such as Rush. The argument for education as a guardian of liberty was not confined to one denomination or one theological viewpoint. Jefferson believed citizens needed sufficient education to recognize tyranny, understand history, identify capable leaders, and protect the rights and liberties entrusted to them. His educational philosophy therefore strengthens our historical argument even where his theological convictions differed substantially from those of the Puritans.

James Madison (1751–1836), principal architect of the Constitution and fourth President of the United States, likewise regarded education and religion as important to the health of republican government, though he was more insistent than Washington, Adams, or Rush that religion remain free from governmental coercion. In his *Memorial and Remonstrance*, Madison described religious duty as antecedent to civil society itself, writing that every person must first be considered a **“subject of the Governor of the Universe.”** As president, he recommended national days of prayer and thanksgiving, called religion **“that gift of Heaven for the good of man,”** and argued that when freed from coercive state control it could spread its **“benign influence everywhere.”** The Library of Congress also notes that Madison regularly attended Christian worship services held in the House of Representatives and interprets that practice as symbolic support for religion as a prop of republican government. Madison therefore should not be portrayed as hostile to Christianity; his concern was that faith remain voluntary, protected by conscience, and free from establishment, while still contributing to the moral life of the republic. (Primary Sources: James Madison, [“Memorial and Remonstrance Against Religious Assessments”](#); [“Proclamation—Recommending a Day of Prayer,” July 23, 1813](#); Historical Context: Library of Congress, [“Religion and the Federal Government, Part 2”](#).)

Madison also made the educational side of that argument unmistakable. In 1822 he warned that **“A popular Government, without popular information”** could become a farce or tragedy and added that a people who intended to govern themselves had to arm themselves with the power knowledge gives. His position therefore joined two convictions that are sometimes wrongly separated in modern retellings: **religion should be free from government control, and citizens should be formed in knowledge and moral responsibility if self-government is to endure.** (James Madison, [“James Madison to W. T. Barry, August 4, 1822”](#).)

James Monroe (1758–1831), Madison’s successor as president, likewise spoke about republican government in openly religious as well as civic terms. In his First Annual Message in 1817, Monroe urged Americans to offer “**grateful acknowledgements to that Omnipotent Being**” from whom their blessings came and to pray that God would give the nation “**virtue and strength**” to preserve those blessings and hand them down “**to our latest posterity.**” That language fits the educational theme of this Classroom almost perfectly: liberty was an inheritance to be preserved, but its preservation required virtue, gratitude, and dependence upon God as well as political knowledge. Monroe later emphasized that because the people themselves were sovereign, they had to be fully informed in order to exercise that sovereignty responsibly. His contribution therefore joins **Providence, virtue, informed citizenship, and generational stewardship** rather than separating them. (James Monroe, [“First Annual Message,” December 2, 1817](#); [“Seventh Annual Message,” December 2, 1823.](#))

Dr. Lorraine Smith Pangle, professor of government at the University of Texas at Austin and coauthor of *The Learning of Liberty: The Educational Ideas of the American Founders*, has emphasized that the founders broadly understood republican government to depend upon the “**political wisdom and civic spirit of the people.**” In her analysis, qualities such as prudence, fairness, patriotism, mutual respect, and dedication to public service could not simply be assumed to appear on their own; they had to be cultivated in each generation. That helps explain why figures as different as Washington, Adams, Rush, Jefferson, Madison, and Monroe could disagree sharply on theology and church-state questions while still returning repeatedly to the formative power of education. In their world, education was not merely about transmitting information; it was part of the difficult work of preparing people morally and intellectually for the responsibilities of self-government. (Dr. Lorraine Smith Pangle, [The Learning of Liberty: The Educational Ideas of the American Founders](#); [“Prof. Lorraine Pangle on the Founders, Education, and Civics.”](#))

Taken together, Washington, Adams, Rush, Jefferson, Madison, Monroe, the Massachusetts Constitution, and the Northwest Ordinance demonstrate something larger than agreement on any one educational program. They show that across meaningful theological and philosophical differences, the founding generation repeatedly returned to the relationship among **knowledge, virtue, citizenship, religion, liberty, and self-government.**

The language had developed considerably from the Puritan statute of 1647. The founders were not simply repeating the phrase “old deluder Satan,” nor were they rebuilding Massachusetts Bay. But the deeper educational question remained recognizable: **What kind of people must a free society form if liberty is to survive?**

That is the question linking the Puritan classroom to the Revolutionary classroom.

And it is the question this Forgotten Classroom eventually brings to us.



Part IV — What Kind of Person Was This Classroom Trying to Form?

Education Meant More Than Schooling

Modern educational discussions often separate subjects that seventeenth-century New Englanders tended to hold together. We speak independently of academic education, vocational preparation, civic instruction, moral formation, and religious education, as though each occupies a completely different sphere.

The Massachusetts laws reveal a much more integrated conception. The 1642 provisions joined reading, knowledge of colonial law, religious catechesis, household discipline, useful work, and preparation for higher learning. The 1647 statute then described education as necessary to prevent learning from disappearing in both “**Church and Commonwealth.**”([“The Laws and Liberties of Massachusetts”](#), 1642; Massachusetts Commonwealth, [“Old Deluder Satan Law of 1647”](#).)

Those connections tell us something important about the Puritan understanding of the person. A child belonged simultaneously to a household, a religious community, an economic world, and a civil society. Education therefore possessed familial, spiritual, intellectual, vocational, and civic consequences.

That did not mean every school lesson was a sermon or that practical skills were regarded as unimportant. It meant the culture did not assume a sharp wall between intellectual development and moral formation. Reading mattered partly because of what people could read. Knowledge of law mattered because citizens lived under government. Religious understanding mattered because belief rested upon texts and claims that required interpretation. Work mattered because usefulness and responsibility were regarded as virtues.

Education was therefore oriented toward the formation of a **whole person**, not simply the acquisition of disconnected competencies. This brings us directly back to the thesis of *America's Forgotten Classroom*: at its best, the older educational system was expected to help form readers, workers, citizens, families, consciences, and believers. Whether we agree with every element of Puritan society or not, the scope of that educational vision is impossible to miss.

That broader understanding of education is strongly supported by **Dr. Lawrence A. Cremin (1925–1990)**, Pulitzer Prize-winning historian of American education and longtime president of Teachers College, Columbia University, who emphasized that colonial education operated through an entire network of institutions rather than through schools alone. Cremin argued that the household stood at the center of early education, surrounded by church, community, apprenticeship, and formal schooling, and that these agencies worked together to transmit not merely information but **knowledge, skills, values, beliefs, and social responsibilities** from one generation to the next. In Puritan New England especially, the family was regarded as the basic unit of both church and commonwealth, so educating a child meant preparing that child for participation in several overlapping worlds at once—religious, familial, vocational, intellectual, and civic. That helps explain why the Massachusetts laws can look so unusually comprehensive to modern readers: they were not attempting merely to create better students, but to form people capable of inhabiting an entire moral and social order. (Dr. Lawrence A. Cremin, [*American Education: The Colonial Experience, 1607–1783*](#), Harper & Row, 1970.)

For the Christian theologian, this wider vision rests upon a deeper understanding of the human person. The Bible presents wisdom as moral as well as intellectual, beginning not merely with information but with the **fear of the Lord**. ([Proverbs 1:7](#).) Jesus likewise taught that truth is not merely something to be accumulated but something with liberating power when genuinely known and embraced. ([John 8:31–](#)

[32.](#)) Education severed completely from truth and virtue may increase knowledge while leaving character untouched.



The Bible Was Not Merely Beside the Primer—It Entered the Primer

The relationship between Christianity and early New England literacy becomes even clearer when we look at what children eventually used to learn.

Later in the seventeenth century came one of colonial America's most influential schoolbooks, **The New England Primer**. The Smithsonian's National Museum of American History describes it as the first reading primer specifically designed in the American colonies and notes that its alphabet verses taught moral lessons involving good and evil, many drawn from the King James Bible and Puritan teaching. The Primer also incorporated prayers and a catechism containing questions and answers about Christian faith. (Smithsonian National Museum of American History, [“The New-England Primer Improved”](#).)

That detail helps modern readers understand the educational world that developed around the Old Deluder statute. Children were not necessarily learning reading in one

conceptual compartment and religion in another. Often, the religious material itself became part of the reading material.

The significance lies not merely in demonstrating that religion appeared in early schoolbooks. More importantly, it reveals that literacy itself was embedded within a larger philosophy of knowledge. If the Bible was believed to communicate truth about God, humanity, morality, salvation, and duty, then teaching people to read it was naturally regarded as an educational good.

This is precisely why removing the theological context from accounts of early New England education produces a distorted history. Biblical religion was not simply an extracurricular attachment placed on top of an otherwise modern secular educational philosophy. In important parts of colonial New England, religious conviction helped supply **one of the reasons the educational enterprise existed in the first place.**



The Grammar School Was Far More Than Grammar

Another easily misunderstood feature of the Old Deluder statute is its requirement that larger towns maintain a **grammar school**. Modern readers may naturally imagine a school devoted mainly to English sentence structure, punctuation, spelling, and what Americans today call grammar.

The seventeenth-century meaning was considerably broader. Grammar schools traditionally provided advanced classical education, particularly in Latin, and prepared promising students for further study. The 1647 statute makes that purpose explicit by requiring a master capable of instructing students sufficiently that they might be **“fitted for the Universitie.”**(Primary Source: Massachusetts Commonwealth, [“Old Deluder Satan Law of 1647”](#).)

In Massachusetts in 1647, the obvious institution at the end of that educational path was Harvard. The system therefore possessed both breadth and depth. Communities needed teachers capable of imparting basic reading and writing, while larger towns were expected to preserve advanced learning through grammar schools that could prepare selected students for college.

Dr. Claudia Goldin (1946–), Harvard economic historian, Nobel laureate, and one of the leading scholars of American educational development, has described the Latin grammar schools as **“the oldest institutions in America that educated young men to enter the nation’s colleges.”** She notes that Boston Latin School, founded in 1635, largely prepared boys for Harvard and that these schools represented the earliest American institutions devoted to education beyond the elementary level. That helps clarify what Massachusetts lawmakers meant when they required towns of one hundred families to maintain a grammar school capable of “fitting” students for the university. The grammar school was therefore not simply a place where children learned better English; it was an intellectual bridge between elementary literacy and the advanced classical, theological, and professional learning represented by Harvard. Its existence reveals that the colony was deliberately attempting to preserve a continuing pipeline of educated leaders who could carry learning into the next generation. (Dr. Claudia Goldin, [“The ‘Virtues’ of the Past: Education in the First Hundred Years of the New Republic”](#), Harvard University.)

This also helps illuminate the statute's concern that people not be persuaded away from the **“use of tongues.”** The lawmakers were thinking about a learned culture in which Latin and, at higher levels, Greek and Hebrew remained important for biblical, theological, classical, and scholarly work. Educated ministers were expected to engage ancient texts rather than relying completely upon translations.

The Old Deluder statute therefore aimed at something considerably larger than teaching colonial children their ABCs. Its concern reached from elementary literacy toward the continuing survival of a learned intellectual culture.



Literacy Was Also a Question of Authority

There is another consequence of literacy that deserves more attention than it usually receives: reading alters relationships of authority.

When only a small number of people can read important texts, everyone else becomes disproportionately dependent upon those readers. Someone who cannot read the Bible must rely more heavily upon whoever tells him what the Bible says. A person incapable of reading law depends upon someone else to explain his legal obligations and protections. Someone without access to historical sources is vulnerable to whoever supplies the story of the past.

The Protestant Reformation had demonstrated the disruptive possibilities of changing that arrangement. Vernacular Bible translations and printing allowed far more people to encounter the biblical text directly, although literacy remained unequal and biblical interpretation remained contested.

The Massachusetts Puritans certainly did not advocate complete interpretive individualism. Their society possessed pastors, magistrates, confessions, catechisms, schools, and strong communal expectations. Nevertheless, the expansion of literacy gave ordinary people greater ability to encounter written material rather than depending completely upon intermediaries.

That development had consequences extending far beyond church life. A person able to read the Bible could compare a minister's teaching with the text. A person able to read law could compare an official's claims with the written law. A person able to examine historical documents could compare later interpretations with original records.

Literacy does not automatically make people wise, moral, or free. Literate people can be deceived as easily as anyone when they read carelessly or desire falsehoods. Yet literacy provides tools through which claims of authority can be examined rather than merely received. In that sense, the Old Deluder law belongs not only to the history of schooling but also to the long history of intellectual responsibility.

The Christian model for this kind of examination appears vividly in Acts 17, where the Bereans were commended for receiving instruction seriously while also examining the Bible daily to determine whether what they were hearing was true. ([Acts 17:11.](#)) Biblical faith does not require gullibility. It calls for discernment under the authority of truth.



Who Was Actually Included in This Educational Vision?

A serious Christian investigation of history should be confident enough to tell the whole story rather than transforming the past into a devotional mythology.

Seventeenth-century Massachusetts did not provide identical educational opportunities to everyone. Boys generally enjoyed greater access to advanced classical schooling than girls, Harvard was an institution for males, socioeconomic status mattered enormously, and racial inequality would become a profound feature of American life. Boston's later educational history includes generations of Black families fighting for equal access to schooling, a story documented by the National Park Service alongside the city's celebrated reputation as an early center of education. (Historical Context: National Park Service, [“The Black Struggle for Equal Education in Boston, 1787 to 1976”](#).)

At the same time, the 1642 Massachusetts law did not concern itself solely with elite sons. Its language addressed **children and apprentices**, and its enforcement provisions explicitly distinguished between boys and girls when discussing ages of apprenticeship. Household religious instruction likewise encompassed children and servants. (Primary Source: [“The Laws and Liberties of Massachusetts”](#).)

We therefore need to avoid two opposite distortions. One romanticizes colonial Massachusetts as though every child possessed equal educational opportunity and liberty, while the evidence plainly contradicts that picture. The other notices those inequalities and concludes that the colony's educational commitments were therefore meaningless, which is equally misleading.

The more accurate story is more complicated and more useful. A society containing serious injustices nevertheless developed a powerful conviction that literacy, learning, religious instruction, and the transmission of knowledge mattered to the survival of both church and commonwealth. Later generations would increasingly fight over who should be included in that educational promise, and the ideal of an educated population would eventually become one of the standards by which educational exclusion itself could be challenged.

For Christians, acknowledging those failures does not threaten the faith; it reflects it. The Bible teaches both the dignity of human beings made in God's image and the universality of human sin, which means no society—including a self-consciously Christian one—should be exempt from moral examination. ([Genesis 1:27](#); [Romans 3:23](#).) Historical honesty therefore belongs naturally within a Christian worldview.



Investigation — What Does the Old Deluder Law Not Prove?

Because this statute is so rhetorically powerful, it is especially important not to make it carry claims the evidence cannot support.

The law does not prove that every American colony possessed the same educational system or religious philosophy. It does not demonstrate that every colonist was a devout Christian, that every Massachusetts town faithfully obeyed the statute, or that every child enjoyed equal access to education. It does not prove that seventeenth-century Massachusetts practiced the kind of religious liberty later protected by the American constitutional system.

Nor does it settle modern constitutional disputes about religion in public schools. Massachusetts Bay existed more than a century before the First Amendment, under a substantially different political and ecclesiastical structure. The law also does not prove that literacy originated with Christianity, since human civilizations possessed sophisticated systems of writing and education thousands of years before Massachusetts Bay.

Our actual historical claim is narrower and much stronger. In one highly influential English colony in North America, lawmakers explicitly connected **the Bible, literacy, language, resistance to deceptive interpretation, the preservation of learning,**

family education, church, commonwealth, town schools, grammar schools, and higher education. Those connections were written into law, and we do not need to expand the evidence beyond what it says because what it says is remarkable enough.



Part V — The Old Deluder Enters the Information Age

Would the Puritans Recognize Our Information Crisis?

The technological world of 1647 bears almost no resemblance to ours. The Massachusetts lawmakers knew nothing of smartphones, social media, television, online news, artificial intelligence, search engines, algorithms, deepfakes, digital advertising, viral misinformation, or instantaneous global communication. Yet they understood something we still understand: human beings can be deceived.

The Old Deluder statute specifically worried about deceptive interpretations that could cloud the meaning of a text. Its language arose from seventeenth-century theological controversy, but the underlying intellectual problem has not disappeared. People continue to encounter competing claims, authorities continue to interpret information, and some interpretations are mistaken while others may be deliberately manipulative.

Our problem is no longer primarily the scarcity of information. Increasingly, it may be **abundance without discernment**. A modern student can access more written information in seconds than the entire Massachusetts Bay Colony could have accumulated in years, but access does not guarantee understanding. Search results do not automatically produce wisdom, fluent prose does not guarantee truth, and a confident answer is not necessarily a correct one.

Artificial intelligence makes that distinction even more important. Generative systems can now produce polished essays, realistic images, imitated voices, persuasive arguments, and enormous quantities of information almost instantaneously. They can be extraordinarily useful, but they can also produce errors, fabricated details, or persuasive statements whose reliability a user must still evaluate.

The educational problem therefore extends beyond putting information into children's hands because information is already everywhere. The deeper challenge is teaching them what to do with it, and for the Christian that task must include the cultivation of biblical discernment. The Bible repeatedly warns that not every voice deserves trust and not every apparently wise message is true. Believers are told to “**test everything**” and hold firmly to what is good. ([1 Thessalonians 5:21](#).)



Reading Words Is Not the Same as Reading an Argument

A student can pronounce every word on a page and still misunderstand what the writer means. A teenager can read hundreds of social-media posts without ever considering whether the source is reliable. An adult can consume news every day while reading little outside sources that reinforce what he already believes. A Christian can quote isolated Bible verses while possessing very little understanding of their literary, theological, or historical context.

Mechanical literacy and wisdom are therefore not the same thing, and the Old Deluder lawmakers recognized something like this distinction within their own theological vocabulary. They were not worried only that the Bible might become physically unavailable. They feared its true meaning could be **clouded by deceptive “glosses.”** (Primary Source: Massachusetts Commonwealth, [“Old Deluder Satan Law of 1647”](#).)

Our educational vocabulary is different, but the problem persists whenever students are taught conclusions without being adequately taught how to examine whether a claim is true. A genuinely educated person should gradually learn to ask where information originated, whether evidence supports it, whether important context has been omitted, whether competing explanations have been considered, and whether the person making the claim has represented the source fairly.

Dr. Daniel T. Willingham, cognitive psychologist and professor of psychology at the University of Virginia, has emphasized that genuine reading comprehension involves far more than decoding words on a page. He notes that **“knitting sentences together is a very important part of comprehension,”** and elsewhere argues that students must also be taught more sophisticated forms of analysis, including how to evaluate arguments, interpret sources, and distinguish sound reasoning from misleading claims. In other words, comprehension depends not only upon recognizing words but upon bringing knowledge, inference, judgment, and analytical skill to what is being read. That insight strongly reinforces the distinction at the heart of this section: a reader may be technically fluent yet remain intellectually vulnerable if he has not learned how to examine meaning, context, evidence, and argument. (Dr. Daniel T. Willingham, [“Reading and the Mind: An Interview With Daniel Willingham”](#); [“Can Children Be Taught to Comprehend What They Read?”](#).)

For Christians, this kind of discernment is not foreign to biblical faith. The Bereans in Acts were commended because they listened to Paul's teaching and then **examined the Bible to determine whether what they were hearing was true.** ([Acts 17:11](#).) Their example joins openness to hearing with responsibility to investigate, providing a model that remains remarkably relevant to education in the information age. A mature mind listens, reads, compares, examines, prays for wisdom, and then reaches conclusions.



The Family Was the First Classroom—And It Still Matters

The drama surrounding the phrase “Old Deluder Satan” can easily overshadow another lesson that may have even greater practical importance for parents and grandparents in 2026. The Massachusetts educational structure began with the household.

The 1642 law assumed that parents and masters bore substantial responsibility for educating the children and apprentices in their care. Literacy, religious instruction, knowledge of the colony's laws, discipline, useful work, and preparation for adult responsibility were expected to begin within that environment. Public authorities intervened partly because lawmakers believed some households had failed to fulfill responsibilities they already possessed. (Primary Source: [“The Laws and Liberties of Massachusetts”](#).)

That history provides an important correction for modern Christians. Recovering the forgotten classroom does not mean simply demanding that government schools become responsible for Christian formation. Historically, the schoolhouse was only one participant in a larger educational structure. The Bible was read in homes, parents instructed children, pastors taught congregations, catechisms reinforced doctrine,

tradesmen trained apprentices, communities maintained schools, grammar-school teachers prepared advanced students, and colleges educated future leaders.

No single institution was expected to perform every educational function. That older architecture also resonates with the biblical pattern in Deuteronomy 6:6–7, where God's words are to be impressed upon children amid the ordinary rhythm of family life—at home, along the road, at bedtime, and upon rising. ([Deuteronomy 6:6–7](#).) Biblical formation was never intended to be outsourced completely to religious professionals or educational specialists.

The point applies whether a Christian family uses public school, private school, Christian school, charter school, or homeschool. No educational arrangement eliminates the importance of parental involvement, conversation, example, and instruction. In that respect, the first classroom remains remarkably close to where it was in 1642: it is still the home.



And Now America Is Fighting About the Bible in School Again

This brings us back to the current controversy over Ten Commandments displays in American public-school classrooms. Today's litigation raises serious constitutional

questions that Massachusetts Bay did not face in the same form. Our national Constitution came more than a century later, the First Amendment followed, and American law eventually developed strong protections both for religious exercise and against governmental establishment of religion.

We therefore cannot settle a twenty-first-century constitutional case merely by observing that seventeenth-century Massachusetts taught the Bible. That would be poor constitutional reasoning and poor history.

One modern effort deserves special attention here. The [National Council on Bible Curriculum in Public Schools](#) has spent decades advocating an elective course, *The Bible in History and Literature*, designed for use in public high schools. Its central idea is strikingly appropriate to this Forgotten Classroom: if students are going to study the Bible's enormous influence upon history, literature, culture, language, law, and Western civilization, they should actually be permitted to **read the Bible itself** rather than encounter it only through secondary summaries. The organization says its curriculum has been implemented in **3,500 public high schools across 41 states** and that more than **650,000 students** have taken the course nationwide, on school campuses, during school hours, for credit.

My friends and co-author the late **Chuck Norris** and his wife **Gena Norris** were among the program's prominent supporters. They joined the organization's board and publicly encouraged communities to make the elective course available in their local schools, explaining that they believed students should understand the Bible's influence upon history and literature. The organization also featured Chuck and Gena in public-service messages promoting the course and continues to preserve their endorsement in its historical materials. [Bible in Schools](#)

For parents, educators, school-board members, and citizens interested in recovering serious biblical literacy within appropriate constitutional boundaries, this is a resource well worth investigating: [BibleInSchools.net](#)

There is, however, another historical question that can be answered with far greater confidence: **Does biblical religion legitimately belong within an honest history of American education?** The answer is unquestionably yes.

The 1642 Massachusetts law required household religious catechesis. The 1647 statute explicitly identified knowledge of the Bible as part of its rationale for education. Harvard's early founders expressed fear that the churches might be left with an illiterate ministry. The New England Primer later combined reading instruction with biblical, moral, catechetical, and devotional material. The Massachusetts Constitution of 1780 continued to connect learning, virtue, religion, schools, public

welfare, and liberty, while the Northwest Ordinance of 1787 linked religion, morality, knowledge, good government, and education in the governing framework of the new nation's western territory. ([“The Laws and Liberties of Massachusetts”](#); Massachusetts Commonwealth, [“Old Deluder Satan Law of 1647”](#); Harvard Divinity School, [“History and Mission”](#); Smithsonian National Museum of American History, [“The New-England Primer Improved”](#); Commonwealth of Massachusetts, [“Massachusetts Constitution”](#); National Archives, [“Northwest Ordinance \(1787\)”](#).)

Whatever constitutional conclusion one ultimately reaches about particular Ten Commandments laws in 2026, it would therefore be historically inaccurate to teach the development of American education as though biblical religion entered the classroom only recently as an outside intrusion. In important parts of early America, biblical religion was part of the intellectual world that helped produce the classroom itself, and the founding generation continued to speak openly about the relationship among knowledge, virtue, religion, and republican liberty.



America's Reading Crisis Raises a Deeper Question

We can now return to the literacy statistics with which this Classroom began.

If only 48 percent of the K–2 students in Amplify's beginning-of-year sample were on track to learn to read, educators are right to focus intensely upon evidence-based reading instruction, early screening, phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary, fluency, comprehension, teacher preparation, intervention, parental involvement, and the other practical tools children require to become capable readers. Nothing in the Old Deluder story should become an excuse for romanticizing the past or neglecting sound educational science. (Current Education Research: Amplify, [“Early Literacy Progress Stalls: New Amplify Data Shows K–2 Reading Scores Unchanged From Last Year”](#), October 8, 2026.)

The national picture also deserves nuance. Nine-year-olds have regained meaningful reading ground compared with the pandemic period, while thirteen-year-olds remain stagnant. Responsible analysis should acknowledge both the encouraging and troubling findings rather than selecting only the statistic that produces the most dramatic headline. (Current Education Research: National Assessment Governing Board, [“NAEP Long-Term Trend Assessments Show Different Trends for 9- and 13-Year-Olds”](#), June 10, 2026.)

Yet *America's Forgotten Classroom* asks another question that standardized reading data cannot answer: once children learn **how** to read, what do we want reading to accomplish?

Certainly we want young people capable of completing their education, entering trades and professions, earning livelihoods, understanding instructions, navigating modern technology, and enjoying great literature. Those are worthy objectives, and none should be minimized.

The older educational vision, however, expected literacy to serve additional purposes. Reading allowed people to encounter the Bible, understand laws, investigate ideas, pursue higher learning, participate more intelligently in the commonwealth, and compare what they were being told with written authorities.

That raises questions that belong every bit as much to 2026 as they did to 1647. Can our children read an important text and determine what it actually says? Can they distinguish evidence from assertion and reporting from commentary? Can they recognize manipulative language? Can they read America's founding documents rather than relying solely upon someone else's summary of them? Can Christians examine the Bible for themselves rather than outsourcing every biblical question to a preacher, celebrity, social-media personality, or artificial intelligence system?

Those questions extend beyond reading proficiency because they concern the kind of people our education is forming. The Christian question is ultimately larger still: are

we educating children merely to become successful adults, or are we helping form men and women capable of loving God with heart, soul, **mind**, and strength and loving their neighbors faithfully? ([Mark 12:29–31.](#))



The Old Deluder Has New Tools—And Weapons

The Puritans could never have imagined the technological world their descendants would inhabit, but if we could somehow explain that world to them, one feature would probably seem immediately familiar: deception has become enormously scalable.

A misleading interpretation in 1647 might travel from one preacher to one congregation or through a pamphlet passed among hundreds of readers. Today a false claim can reach millions of people before the afternoon. A photograph can be altered, a voice imitated, a quotation invented, or a persuasive story circulated around the globe before careful verification catches up with it.

Artificial intelligence makes the educational question still more complicated because it can generate fluent information faster than most people can verify it. The technology itself is not the Old Deluder, any more than the printing press was. Both can distribute truth as well as error. The danger arises when powerful information tools meet people who have never learned how to evaluate what those tools produce.

In my recent CrossFireUSA investigation of [artificial intelligence](#), I examined the extraordinary benefits AI can bring while also warning that one of its quieter dangers may be what it encourages human beings **not to do for themselves**. Students—and adults—can now ask a machine to summarize a chapter they never read, explain a document they never opened, compose an argument they never developed, compare sources they never examined, or even produce a biblical explanation without carefully studying the passage in context. The obstacle is therefore no longer simply illiteracy; increasingly it can be **an absence of the desire to read at all**. When convenience becomes substitution, the habits required for serious thought—sustained attention, patient reading, wrestling with difficult language, tracing an argument, checking evidence, comparing sources, remembering what was learned, and tolerating the discomfort of not immediately knowing an answer—can gradually weaken. That is one reason my recent AI treatise emphasizes that these technologies must remain servants of human thought rather than replacements for it. (Further Investigation: Chaplain Todd DuBord, CrossFireUSA, [“Free Downloads & Research — Artificial Intelligence Investigation”](#).)

That concern is echoed by **Dr. John C. Lennox (1943–)**, Oxford mathematician, philosopher of science, and author of *2084 and the AI Revolution*, who has repeatedly emphasized that AI can be enormously useful while warning that habitual dependence upon it can erode the very intellectual effort education is supposed to cultivate. In a recent discussion of AI and deception, Lennox warned that **“it’s going to make people inevitably lazy”** if machines are allowed to perform mental work people should still be doing for themselves; elsewhere he has stressed that AI only simulates intelligence and that its outputs therefore still require human verification and judgment. (Current Scholarship: Dr. John C. Lennox, [“Communicating Truth in an Age of AI and Deception”](#); *2084 and the AI Revolution*.) For the Christian, the danger extends beyond intellectual laziness because the Bible describes deception as possessing a spiritual dimension as well: Paul warned that **“the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelieving.”** ([2 Corinthians 4:4](#).) The Old Deluder therefore has no need to burn books if a generation voluntarily stops reading them; nor does deception need to suppress truth completely if people become too distracted, hurried, or intellectually dependent to examine whether what they are being told is actually true.

That is why the educational challenge of our century requires more than literacy in the narrow mechanical sense. Children need the intellectual habits that help them evaluate sources, understand context, recognize uncertainty, detect manipulation, follow evidence, and admit when something they believed turns out to be wrong.

Christians should recognize those habits as compatible with rather than hostile to faith. The Bible repeatedly warns against deception, false teachers, careless judgment,

and gullibility while commending wisdom, testing, discernment, and truthfulness. Paul warned that a time would come when people would accumulate teachers according to their own desires rather than endure sound teaching, a description that should make any generation cautious about confusing popularity with truth. ([2 Timothy 4:3–4](#).)

The Puritans described the struggle in seventeenth-century language and personified the deceiver exactly as the Bible does by calling him the “**old deluder**.” Our technologies have changed almost beyond recognition, but human susceptibility to deception remains remarkably familiar.



What the Old Deluder Satan Act Really Teaches Us

When we step back from the famous opening phrase and assemble all the evidence, the 1647 statute reveals an educational philosophy considerably richer than the caricature we might imagine from its unusual name.

Its lawmakers believed the Bible mattered and that ordinary people should not remain ignorant of it. They believed interpretation mattered because religious truth could be clouded by deception. They believed learning had to be intentionally preserved because an educated generation would eventually die. They believed families carried

major educational responsibilities, while towns acquired additional obligations as communities grew.

They valued elementary literacy, but they also valued advanced scholarship capable of preparing students for university. Their educational system connected home, school, church, trade, community, grammar school, and college. The phrase “**Church and Commonwealth**” captured an understanding in which intellectual, religious, familial, vocational, and civic formation overlapped rather than occupying completely separate worlds.

That educational philosophy did not disappear with the seventeenth century. By 1780, Massachusetts explicitly declared wisdom, knowledge, and virtue necessary for preserving rights and liberties. Benjamin Rush linked religion, virtue, liberty, and republican education; Jefferson argued that educating the people helped them recognize ambition and resist tyranny; Washington joined religion and morality with political prosperity while urging the diffusion of knowledge; and the Northwest Ordinance declared religion, morality, and knowledge necessary to good government and encouraged schools accordingly.

The vocabulary evolved, the institutions changed, and the founding generation represented theological perspectives broader than those of the Massachusetts Puritans. Yet the basic American question remained remarkably consistent: **How do we form people capable of living responsibly under liberty?**

None of this requires us to pretend Massachusetts Bay was an ideal Christian society. It was not. Its leaders could be intolerant, opportunities were unequal, religious liberty was incomplete, and later generations would rightly challenge important features of its social order.

Yet imperfect societies can still understand important truths, and one truth these settlers understood unusually well was that **a civilization must intentionally educate the next generation or eventually lose what the previous generation knew**. That is the larger meaning hidden beneath their fear that learning might be buried in the graves of the forefathers.

For Christians, however, the lesson ultimately reaches deeper than cultural preservation. We do not pass truth to our children merely so that a civilization can survive. We teach because God has revealed truth, because children are entrusted to our stewardship, because wisdom is more valuable than mere information, and because every generation must decide whether it will know the Lord for itself rather than live only on the borrowed faith of its ancestors. The tragedy described in Judges

was not simply political decline but generational spiritual amnesia: “**another generation arose after them who did not know the Lord.**” ([Judges 2:10.](#))

That is a forgotten classroom no Christian family can afford to ignore.



The Classroom America Forgot

Perhaps the most revealing contrast between 1647 and 2026 is not simply how technologically primitive their world appears beside ours. It is how deliberately those early settlers—and eventually many members of the founding generation—asked what education was **for**.

We possess schools they could never have imagined, universities with vast financial and technological resources, libraries holding millions of volumes, digital archives that place original historical documents on a screen within seconds, and devices capable of accessing more information than any seventeenth-century scholar could have accumulated in a lifetime. Artificial intelligence can summarize, translate, analyze, and generate information with extraordinary speed.

Yet millions of children still struggle to read well, and even among those who read fluently we increasingly debate how to distinguish trustworthy sources from misinformation, history from propaganda, fact from interpretation, and evidence from

confident assertion. The technology has improved astonishingly, but the fundamental educational problem has not disappeared.

That is why the Old Deluder statute is worth recovering, not because twenty-first-century America should reproduce the political or religious institutions of seventeenth-century Massachusetts, but because those settlers force us to confront a question modern education can sometimes avoid: **What are we educating human beings to become?**

The Revolutionary generation sharpened that question further. If ordinary people were going to govern themselves, then education was no longer merely helpful for private advancement. It became one of the means by which citizens learned enough history, law, morality, religion, and civic responsibility to protect liberty from both tyranny and disorder.

If education is reduced entirely to employment, the school becomes principally a workforce-development institution. If education is reduced to information acquisition, modern technology can deliver information more efficiently than any classroom in history. If credentials become the final objective, the diploma gradually becomes more important than the knowledge it supposedly represents.

A Christian philosophy of education can embrace mathematics, science, history, literature, art, technology, vocational preparation, and rigorous professional training without treating any of those disciplines as meaningless. It simply places them within a larger understanding of the human person. Minds are worth cultivating because truth matters, character matters because knowledge without virtue can be dangerous, citizenship matters because liberty requires responsible people, and religious understanding matters because Christians believe human beings ultimately answer to God rather than merely to institutions.

The older classroom was imperfect, but it remembered something our more sophisticated educational systems can still forget: **education always forms someone, not merely something.** For Christians, that formation reaches ultimately toward the renewal of the mind described by Paul, who urged believers not to be conformed passively to the age around them but to be transformed through renewed thinking so they could discern what is good and true. ([Romans 12:2.](#))



So What? — The 1647 Question for 2026

The greatest lesson of Classroom 5 may ultimately have less to do with what Massachusetts required its towns to do in 1647 than with what parents, grandparents, pastors, teachers, and Christian leaders are willing to do in 2026. Our children certainly need to learn how to read, but the history we have examined suggests that literacy was once understood as only the beginning of education. Reading was expected to lead toward understanding, discernment, religious knowledge, civic competence, useful work, and the preservation of learning from one generation to another.

That older vision places a particular responsibility upon the family. The lesson of the 1642 and 1647 laws is not that every Christian parent must recreate a Puritan household or withdraw a child from public education. It is that education cannot safely be surrendered entirely to institutions outside the home. Parents and grandparents remain uniquely positioned to ask children what they are learning, read important material with them, discuss difficult questions, correct misinformation, explain family history, introduce the Bible, and help them distinguish assertion from evidence.

Grandparents possess an especially valuable role because they carry something no formal curriculum can manufacture: lived memory. They can tell children what earlier generations experienced, where family traditions came from, which mistakes proved

costly, what convictions endured hardship, and why certain liberties should not be taken for granted. In that sense, the Puritan fear that learning might be “buried in the graves of our fore-fathers” is not merely a quaint seventeenth-century expression. Every family faces some version of the same danger whenever knowledge, faith, wisdom, and experience are allowed to disappear without being intentionally passed onward.

The task becomes even more urgent in an age when children encounter extraordinary quantities of information before they possess the maturity necessary to evaluate it. A generation surrounded by screens, algorithms, social media, artificial intelligence, and persuasive digital imagery requires more than technical reading ability. Children need adults who will help them evaluate sources, recognize manipulation, understand context, ask whether a quotation is authentic, distinguish fact from interpretation, and develop enough intellectual humility to admit when evidence challenges what they previously believed.

For Christian families, that naturally includes biblical literacy. A child should not reach adulthood knowing how to navigate every digital platform yet remain dependent upon someone else to explain everything the Bible says. The Bereans were commended because they listened carefully and then examined the Bible to determine whether the teaching they received was true. ([Acts 17:11](#).) That combination of listening, reading, examining, and judging provides a remarkably durable model of Christian intellectual responsibility.

The lesson of 1647 therefore reaches far beyond the peculiar circumstances of Massachusetts Bay. The old lawmakers believed ignorance created vulnerability and learning had to be consciously preserved. The founding generation broadened that concern by insisting that knowledge, virtue, and education were indispensable to liberty and self-government. Nearly four centuries later, our tools have changed beyond recognition, but those propositions remain difficult to dispute. Children who are never taught how to examine information remain vulnerable to whoever speaks most persuasively, while knowledge that is never intentionally passed to another generation eventually disappears.

For Christians, however, the responsibility goes still further. We are not merely handing children a cultural inheritance; we are charged with pointing them toward eternal truth. Paul reminded Timothy that from childhood he had known the sacred writings that were able to make him wise for salvation. ([2 Timothy 3:14–17](#).) That is an educational vision large enough to encompass mind and soul, this life and the life to come.



The Firepoint: Teach Your Children to Love Reading!

The Old Deluder Satan Act deserves to be remembered not because seventeenth-century Massachusetts provides a blueprint for twenty-first-century education, but because its lawmakers forced themselves to answer a question modern societies can sometimes leave unstated: **Why should a child learn to read in the first place?**

Their answer certainly included practical usefulness and civic responsibility, but it extended considerably further. Literacy allowed people to encounter the Bible, understand law, pursue advanced learning, examine teaching, resist misleading interpretation, and preserve knowledge after the death of the generation that first possessed it. Education therefore served both “Church and Commonwealth,” joining intellectual formation with spiritual and civic responsibility.

That philosophy developed within a society containing serious flaws and limitations, and those shortcomings should never be concealed. Yet acknowledging them does not require us to discard the insight that education is fundamentally an act of inheritance. Every generation receives knowledge it did not create, examines that inheritance, decides what it considers true and worth preserving, and then determines whether the next generation will receive it intact, distorted, or not at all.

The Revolutionary generation inherited that responsibility and expressed it in new language. Massachusetts declared that wisdom, knowledge, and virtue were necessary

for preserving rights and liberties. Rush connected religion with virtue and virtue with republican liberty. Jefferson wanted the minds of the people illuminated so they could recognize ambition and defeat tyranny. Washington urged the diffusion of knowledge while calling religion and morality indispensable supports of political prosperity. The Northwest Ordinance connected religion, morality, knowledge, good government, human happiness, and schools in one remarkable provision.

That continuity matters because it shows that the Old Deluder law was not merely an isolated Puritan curiosity. Across nearly a century and a half of American development, one conviction repeatedly resurfaced: **liberty cannot safely rest upon ignorance.**

That is why the most haunting language in the 1647 law may not actually be its reference to Satan. It may be the warning that learning could be **“buried in the graves of our fore-fathers.”** The Massachusetts lawmakers understood that civilization possesses no automatic mechanism guaranteeing that accumulated wisdom will survive. Books can remain while the desire or ability to read them disappears; constitutional documents can survive while their principles are forgotten; Bibles can remain in homes while families lose familiarity with what they contain.

The responsibility of education, therefore, is not merely to place information before children. It is to help them understand what they have inherited, examine it honestly, recognize what is true, and become capable of passing worthy knowledge to those who follow them. That responsibility confronted Massachusetts families and communities in 1647, passed visibly into the Revolutionary generation, crossed into the territories of the new republic through the Northwest Ordinance, and despite nearly four centuries of extraordinary technological change, confronts ours in 2026 as well.

Yet for the Christian family, church, and teacher, there is something even greater at stake. We are not simply attempting to preserve a civilization, important as that may be. We are raising a generation that will stand before God, make moral choices, form families, influence communities, face temptation, encounter suffering, distinguish truth from error, and eventually teach another generation of its own. The question is not merely whether our children will know enough to succeed. It is whether they will possess the wisdom to know **what success is for.**

Solomon prayed not primarily for wealth, power, or longevity, but for an understanding heart capable of discerning good from evil. ([1 Kings 3:9](#).) James later told believers who lacked wisdom to ask God for it. ([James 1:5](#).) Those passages remind us that education reaches its highest purpose not when a student merely knows

more, but when knowledge is ordered toward wisdom, truth, righteousness, service, and faithfulness.

That is the classroom America cannot afford to forget.



Classroom Assignment — Recovering the Family Classroom

One practical way to recover this older understanding of education is remarkably simple. Sometime during the coming week, parents or grandparents might choose an important text and read a portion of it with a child or grandchild. Depending upon the child's age, that could be a Psalm, the Ten Commandments, a passage from one of the Gospels, the Declaration of Independence, the opening of the Constitution, Washington's Farewell Address, the Northwest Ordinance, or another document carrying historical, moral, or spiritual significance.

The important part is not merely completing the reading. Take enough time to discuss what the author actually said, what unfamiliar words mean, why the document was written, what problem its author was confronting, and whether the claims being made are supported by evidence. When reading the Bible, examine the surrounding passage

rather than isolating a verse from its context; when reading history, consider who wrote the document, when it was written, and what circumstances shaped it.

That kind of conversation teaches something larger than vocabulary or pronunciation. It helps a young person understand that reading involves interpretation, judgment, context, evidence, and a search for meaning. It also quietly restores the home as a place where important ideas can be discussed instead of leaving every serious intellectual question to schools, screens, celebrities, politicians, pastors, or algorithms.

For Christian parents and grandparents, there is an additional opportunity here. Do not merely ask children whether they understood the words. Ask what the passage reveals about God, human nature, right and wrong, truth, responsibility, wisdom, courage, liberty, or love of neighbor. Let them ask difficult questions, and do not fear questions whose answers require further study. A faith that is true does not need protection from honest investigation, and children should learn that Christianity makes truth claims intended to withstand serious examination.

Then pray with them. Ask God for wisdom together. Let them hear an older generation thank God for His Word, confess dependence upon Him, and ask for courage to live truthfully in a confused world. Such moments may never appear on a report card, but they can become part of the spiritual architecture of a life.

The Bible repeatedly presents this kind of generational teaching as sacred stewardship. Moses commanded parents to teach God's words diligently to their children. ([Deuteronomy 6:6–7](#).) The psalmist described one generation declaring God's works to another. ([Psalm 145:4](#).) Paul remembered the sincere faith that had lived first in Timothy's grandmother Lois and his mother Eunice before appearing in Timothy himself. ([2 Timothy 1:5](#).)

That is a picture worth recovering.

The preservation of knowledge has always depended upon one generation caring enough to teach another, but the preservation of faith requires something still more personal. Children need to see truth not merely printed in books but embodied in people they know. They need grandparents whose lives testify that faith endured disappointment, parents who admit mistakes and return to the Bible, pastors who teach truth faithfully, teachers who honor evidence, and adults who demonstrate that intellectual seriousness and biblical conviction are not enemies.

The Old Deluder law arose from the fear that ignorance could separate people from the Bible and allow learning itself to disappear when an educated generation died. Nearly four centuries later, Christian families confront the same underlying

responsibility in a vastly different world. We have more access to information than those settlers could ever have imagined, but access alone cannot guarantee wisdom, faithfulness, or truth.

A civilization cannot assume that its children will automatically understand what their parents understood, cherish what their grandparents cherished, or recognize the truths for which earlier generations sacrificed. A republic cannot assume that citizens will preserve liberty if they do not understand the history, principles, responsibilities, and virtues upon which liberty depends. A church cannot assume that the next generation will inherit biblical faith merely because the previous generation possessed it. And a family cannot assume that a Bible sitting unopened on a shelf will somehow form the heart and mind of a child.

Those things must be taught, discussed, lived, examined, prayed over, and handed onward.

That is why this old Massachusetts law ultimately points us toward something much larger than colonial education. It reminds us that every generation eventually becomes the “forefathers” of another generation. The question is what will be buried with us and what will still be living in our children and grandchildren when we are gone.

May ours be a generation that does not bury truth with itself, but teaches it faithfully; that does not merely produce informed children, but wise ones; that does not merely prepare them to make a living, but prepares them to live lives worthy of their calling; and that does not merely hand them books, technology, opportunities, and possessions, but points them toward the God who is the source of truth and wisdom.

The biblical charge is both simple and profound: **“One generation shall commend your works to another, and shall declare your mighty acts.”** ([Psalm 145:4](#).)

That was the responsibility Massachusetts lawmakers were trying, however imperfectly, to protect in their own time. The Revolutionary generation carried that educational responsibility forward when it declared that wisdom, knowledge, and virtue were necessary for the preservation of rights and liberties and when the new nation encouraged schools because religion, morality, and knowledge were considered necessary to good government.

For Christian parents, grandparents, pastors, and teachers today, the responsibility is clearer still. We must not allow the next generation to inherit our possessions while losing our understanding of truth, our knowledge of the Bible, our memory of liberty, or our faith in God.

The classroom is still open. The next generation is already sitting in it, and what we teach them now will help determine what they carry forward when our own generation has entered the graves of its forefathers.

