

Teaching Civil Behavior

By Judy Haynes

Civilized: showing evidence of moral and intellectual advancement; ethical, reasonable; enlightened, refined, educated¹

September, school is underway, and each town since colonial days has held education as vital to a successful future for the student. Reading, writing, and arithmetic were the basics with other subjects added as the schools' curriculum broadened to include geography, history, health, and music. Civil behavior was not a subject as such, but it was the means by which the information was presented by the teacher and absorbed by the pupils in the classroom. First a bit of history.

History

While Massachusetts didn't require compulsory education until 1852 Massachusetts colonialists passed a law that towns with 50 or more families gathered, should hold a "common school."² Thus, schooling was valued from our earliest days. One had to be able to read the Bible and absorb its moral teachings; thus, literacy was encouraged. Once compulsory education was law, the school terms required a minimum of three months with six weeks of consecutive school days, usually this was in the form of a Summer term and a Winter Term. Summer term might begin in May and end in August while winter term usually started in Autumn and ran for several weeks or months into winter.



SARGENT'S FIRST READER
Boylston Historical Society & Museum, Inc.
Collections

The Setting

A schoolhouse was often no bigger than one large room with little or no heat or furnishings, other than benches for sitting until later 1800s (See [Carrie Crane's article](#) for the addition of school desks.)³ From the early 1800s -1851 Boylston had five neighborhood schools (Centre, South, East, Northeast aka Six Nations, West), and later six schools when Sawyers Mills school was built in 1851. Neighborhood schools made sense to those who had to walk or ride a horse to school. Arriving on a barge or school bus wouldn't be available until the end of the nineteenth century or early twentieth. The one room could hold pupils from age five to 15, such a broad range of ages presented challenges to any teacher and consequently there were difficulties and behavioral problems. Books at first were whatever one could get, and the school report of 1846 asked the town to authorize the school committee to select texts and make them available at all schools for consistency. It was noted that 47 different books were used at one time.



LEARNING AT SCHOOL
Lesson 157 from Sargent's Standard First Reader
Boylston Historical Society Collections

Teachers

Boylston printed School Reports from as early as the year 1839. Copies are available at the Boylston Historical Society for review. A great deal of information can be gleaned regarding the schools, the teachers, and the behavior of the scholars.⁴ The school committee had the responsibility to provide teachers for the schools, and in earlier years it was apparent that just about anyone who could read and write, who wanted to help the youngsters, could become a teacher. That changed when the Normal Schools, the standardized schools to educate men and women on how to teach, came to be. The first Normal School in the U.S. was started by Samuel Read Hall, 1823, in Concord, Vermont. It was created first to train teachers for primary schools; later it evolved into teachers' colleges. Lexington, Massachusetts was the first in Massachusetts and was opened and founded in 1839 by Horace Mann. It was the first state-sponsored 'Normal' school in

¹ American Heritage College Dictionary, 2002; Oxford American Dictionary, 2002

² Diorio, Gina L. History of Public Education in the U.S.

³ Fridays Fascinating Finds, Crane, Carrie, 'Don't Write on that School Desk,' August, 2025

⁴ Boylston School Reports, 1839-1907, Boylston Historical Society & Museum collection.

the nation.⁵ This meant that by 1840s and later the school committee could hope to hire a person with a normal school certificate and expect a reasonably able teacher, but the certificate wasn’t always a guarantee of success.

Success in the classrooms seemed to stem from the following goal: Educators should model civil behavior in their classrooms, demonstrating respect, kindness and empathy towards peers, authority figures and to their students. These words were characteristics of the word “civilized” as defined in Wikipedia. This description turned out to be key for the best and most successful Boylston teachers.

Rowdiness and Insubordination

The earliest school masters were men, thought to be what was needed to maintain control, particularly during the Winter terms when the bigger boys were no longer farming, and would attend classes. If the teacher was successful in handling the rowdy boys, education commenced, if not, all bedlam erupted with whispering, throwing things, and generally rude behavior. The 1847 School Report stated that order was good in all the schools except the “Centre Winter School.” In 1854 the Centre School boys continued to be disruptive and were even characterized as “evil.” “Evil is confined to a small number of the large boys.” A good deal of turnover took place with new teachers’ names appearing in the reports time after time when classroom law and order failed.

Summer terms were generally quieter with more female pupils in attendance with behavior in school reports showing fewer or no instances of insubordination, a term often appearing in the reports. By 1841 female teachers were hired and found to be successful. An “unusual degree of prosperity and peace” reigned. The overseers felt the schools were “governed on the principal of love” with mutual regard shown between teacher and scholar.⁶ The females shared more “kindness, patience, and perseverance” and that resulted in education taking place in a civil atmosphere. This was a win for the school system in more than one way. The committee strongly recommended hiring more women as it was considered more economical. The 1842 School Report stated hiring a female cost “half the money that would be requisite to secure the services of a competent male teacher.”⁷ The 1846 School Report indicated 10 teachers were hired: 5 females and 5 males.

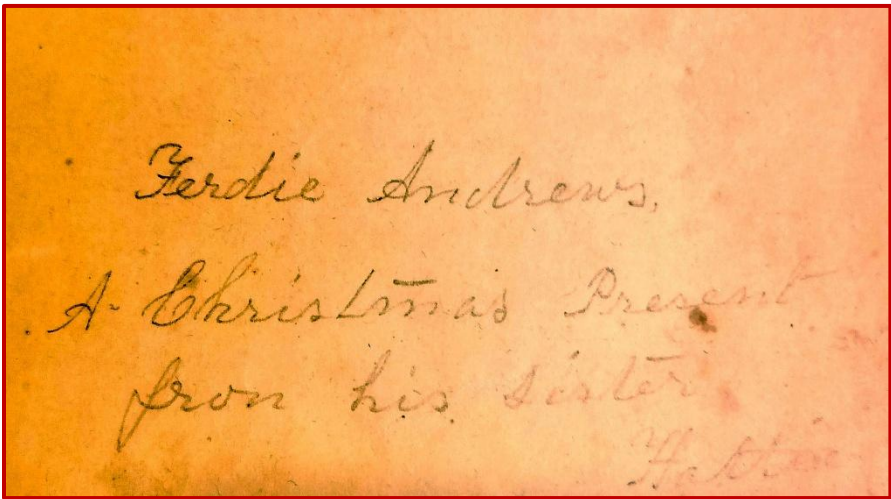
Parents’ Important Role

Parents played a role as well. They were always encouraged to be sure the youngsters were in attendance and absent only when sickness was a legitimate excuse. The interest of the parents is “indispensable to a successful and profitable school” noted the 1845 School Report. It was also suggested they get to know their teachers, invite them to their homes, show some concern for the success of the educational process. At the end of terms parents were asked to attend the oral examinations. Those invited to the final examination days at the Northeast school in 1845 showed it was well attended and successful.

In these small schoolhouses there might be one decoration or painting on the wall, that of the first President, George Washington, who was himself a concerned stepparent. George Washington believed “education was a cornerstone of his guardianship. He strongly believed in the importance of learning and encouraged his stepchildren to prioritize their studies. Frustrated when his stepson Jacky displayed disinterest in school, Washington frequently communicated with Jacky’s educators to ensure he stayed on track.” Washington’s letters...reflected a belief “that education could steer youth away from potential pitfalls and vices, marking him as a parent who genuinely cared about his family’s future.”⁸

The Final Examination

Discipline and order were keys to a successful school year and success in the 19th century Boylston schools at the end of the school year was measured with an examination by oral recitation; proof that one had learned to read and could memorize and feedback the lesson verbally. The Society’s library holds two books from the mid-19th century that focus on elocution, proper speech and presentation.



THE INSCRIPTION INSIDE THE SARGENT’S FIRST READER
“A CHRISTMAS PRESENT TO FERDIE ANDREWS FROM HIS SISTER HATTIE”
Ferdinand, born June 1867 in Boylston the son of Albert Willard Andrews and Elizabeth Bond, went on to become a Chemist. His sister, Harriet Bond Andrews, born January 1862, became a Public School Teacher.

Civil behavior required “discipline and order.” At the final examination each student had to stand and orally present an appropriate piece of information, each word spoken with proper pronunciation and with care. This required politeness on the part of the fellow classmates, listening without interrupting or disturbing the peace. When the learning environment showed respect between fellow students and teachers, the results were satisfactory to all. It appears that the best way to teach civil behavior was by example. Those parents and teachers who modeled the code of moral, enlightened, and refined comportment resulted in passing this civilized behavior on to their scholars. This resulted in moral and intellectual advancement for our children; the goal of the educational system was achieved!

⁵ Wikipedia, history of Normal Schools.
⁶ Boylston School Report, 1841 and others.
⁷ Boylston School Report, 1842, p.1.
⁸ www. biography host. From Palmer, Stone, George Washington: The Father Figure of Mount Vernon, 2025
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