

Making the Good Reader and Citizen 2023

What Is Progressivism?

The Progressive Era began in the 1890s and lasted until World War II. It oversaw the change from Common Schools, our first real public school system, to our modern, more consolidated and standardized system. More specifically, some of our most important inheritances from the Progressive Era include standardized testing, school lunch programs, school nurses and social workers, compulsory schooling, compulsory vaccinations, grade levels (including the transformation from one-room schoolhouses to different levels of schooling), and a changed way of thinking about the classroom.

“Progressivism” does *not* denote a shared political position or even a coherent set of goals and reforms so much as a diverse movement that addressed a set of enormous social and political challenges, including rapid urbanization, entrenched poverty and disease, “boss” system politics, and expanded immigration. At the same time, new developments in medicine, psychology, and other sciences came to play a critical role in efforts to clean up and regulate cities and institutions, from building sanitation systems to Americanizing immigrant children (think Jacob Riis, Jane Addams). In general, women reformers led much of the groundwork as teachers, nurses, social workers and settlement house workers, but they lost authority over much of the movement as their work met municipal, state, and professional bureaucracies.

For our purposes, the most important division in the movement was between **administrative progressives**, who focused on school governance, relation, and organization (some called them “sorters”) and **child-centered or pedagogical progressives**, who focused on linking new understandings of children’s development with pedagogical theories and applications. This central division is the political forebearer of much of what we will be talking about in this institute.

Administrative Progressives:

“There is nothing about an individual as important as his IQ, except perhaps his morals.” (Lewis Terman, psychologist and inventor of the IQ test, 1922).

“Perhaps the most characteristic advance in school administration during recent years has been the rejection of the assumption that all children are practically alike in physical and mental endowments... Today, progressive school administration requires an earnest effort be made to sort out children on a scientific basis, so that group instruction may still be consistent with recognition of the fact that , as regards physical and mental traits, one group differs widely from another. Up to the present perhaps the greatest waste in education has been due to the crude classification of pupils.” (William Ettinger, NYC School Superintendent, c. 1918).

“While racial prejudice is given by the negro girl as cause for discrimination, they themselves are often at fault. The great gap existing between their home environment and the one in which they seek to find employment is possibly the greatest handicap in qualifying for efficient domestic service.” (Cincinnati principal, 1928).

“[Intelligence] tests have thrown floods of light on problems that have hitherto baffled me. I have felt my way in darkness as to what should be done in many cases. Now I proceed with more light.” (Oakland teacher, 1922).

Pedagogical Progressives:

“I believe that every child should be happy in school. So we have tried to substitute recreation for drill... We have tried to recognize types of mind as a mother does among her own children. We were losing the majority of children at the fifth grade. By letting them do things with their hands we have saved many of them. In order that teachers may delight in awakening the spirits of children, they must themselves be awake. We have tried to free the teachers. Some day the system will be that the child and teacher will go to school with ecstatic joy. At home in the evening, the child will talk about the things done during the day and will talk with pride. I want to make the schools the great instrument of democracy.” (Ella Flagg Young, Chicago Superintendent of Schools, 1916).

“Because poetry is understood and expressed only through the emotional approach, it affords an opportunity to connect an intellectual pursuit with the sublimation of the surging emotions of adolescent life.” (Los Angeles teacher, 1931).

How do Dewey and the New Critics come from this political landscape?