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Book Review: A History of Education in Kentucky

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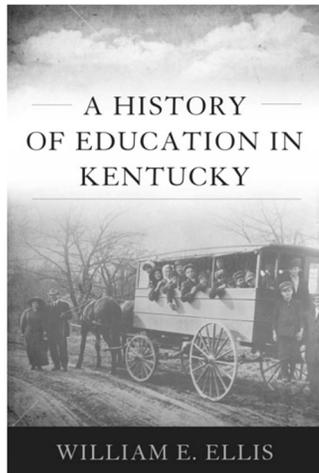
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Ellis, William E. *A History of Education in Kentucky*. Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 2011. ISBN 978-0-8131-2977-8. \$40.00.

In the preface to the immense and richly detailed *A History of Education in Kentucky*, William Ellis suggests that “The Struggle for Equity and Equality” might have been a proper subtitle for his book (p. ix). Indeed, “struggle” is the central theme of this survey, which frames Kentucky educational history from the late eighteenth century to the present within larger social and political conflicts. Providing comprehensive coverage of both public and private schooling at the primary, secondary, and postsecondary levels, Ellis emphasizes the frustrating cycle of “reform followed by regression” that has defined education in Kentucky from the very beginning (p. 271). Whether clashing over the desegregation of schools, debating the merits of teaching evolution, or bickering about proper methods of funding, Kentuckians always seem to find themselves mired in controversy, unable to keep pace with national standards. While Ellis discusses a number of efforts that have gradually expanded and improved educational opportunities in the state over time, including the development of the Minimum Foundation Program in the 1950s, his

narrative primarily highlights the barriers to progress that inevitably arise in a culture that does not consistently value or prioritize education for all citizens.

Perhaps the greatest strength of the book is the manner in which Ellis directly addresses Kentucky’s pernicious legacy of elitism and racism, which has often hindered attempts to make quality education more accessible to African Americans and other marginalized groups throughout the state. Ellis clearly demonstrates the negative impact of segregation and other problematic policies, offering precise descriptions of legislative battles and explaining the consequences for Kentucky students and teachers. At the same time, the personal is never far from the political in Ellis’s narrative; the author draws on numerous first-person accounts that reveal the harsh realities of legal and cultural inequality in the educational system, such as Lyman Johnson’s disturbing memory of seeing burning crosses in Lexington during the summer of 1949, when he became one of the first African Americans to attend the University of Kentucky. In the later chapters, Ellis also incorporates his own experiences as a Kentucky resident and educator, including a powerful story about his players facing discrimination during his stint as the white coach of Harrodsburg High School’s integrated football team in the early 1960s.

This is not to say, however, that Ellis only focuses on race relations. Simply put, the scope of this ambitious work, which includes more than sixty pages of endnotes, is vast. Ellis covers almost every conceivable topic related to teaching and learning in Kentucky classrooms, from issues of class and gender to concerns over religious education and student conduct to difficulties associated with the Civil War and other national conflicts. Ellis also finds

time to profile prominent figures in Kentucky educational history, including reformers such as Horace Holley and Robert Breckinridge. Moreover, noting their “vital function in educating Kentuckians,” the author even spotlights the significant achievements of libraries, particularly the Carnegie libraries constructed at the University of Kentucky, Centre College, and other institutions in the early twentieth century (p. 223). Ellis concludes the book by outlining current educational challenges in the state, many of which pertain to assessment and accountability in the era of No Child Left Behind, as well as the seemingly endless struggle for adequate funding at all levels of the system. In pinpointing these problems, *A History of Education in Kentucky* functions not only as history but also as advocacy, with Ellis rightly indicating that persistent educational disparities cannot be corrected without ongoing support in time, attention, and dollars.

Despite its regional emphasis, this book is an essential purchase for any library supporting an education program. In addition to an abundance of important dates,

facts, and statistics, Ellis provides crucial insight into the relationship between education and society, a relationship often fraught with tensions and contradictions. The only quibble that some readers might have with *A History of Education in Kentucky* is that, at times, the amount of detail can be exhausting, threatening to overwhelm the text with information and making it difficult to read the book for an extended period. At the very least, Ellis should have included section divisions within the lengthy chapters (some lasting more than fifty pages) to help the reader navigate the content and avoid information overload. Nevertheless, for scholars, students, and other readers interested in educational history, this book serves as a major contribution to the field and a welcome voice for progress. As Ellis’s book confirms, our ability to improve education surely depends on our willingness to struggle, to continue the fight for positive change.

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