

# Thomas Jefferson and Public Education

## General

### Grade Level

High School

### Author Info

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### Type of Lesson

Cooperative Learning

### Duration

1-2 days

## Objectives

### Overview

This lesson will examine Jefferson's pyramid for public education in Revolutionary America and the Early Republic.

### Prior Knowledge

Basic understanding of Colonial America and the Early Republic.

### State Standards

Florida State Standards: [SS.912.A.1.7#](#): Describe various socio-cultural aspects of American life

including arts, artifacts, literature, education, and publications.

## **Objectives/Learning Outcomes**

To introduce to students how new the concept of public education was to the new republic and why it was believed to be so important.

## **Technology Connections/outcomes**

Revolutionary War, Early American Education, Social and Cultural developments.

## **Additional Learning Outcomes**

Students will be able to understand the similarities and differences between the proposed educational system in early Virginia and evaluate it in comparison to their own system of education today.

## **Procedures**

### *1. 5 minutes*

Show a picture and give a brief introduction of Thomas Jefferson.

### *2. 5-10 minutes*

Pass out handout with excerpts from Bill 79, discussion questions, and directions of lesson.  
Review directions and questions.

### *3. 5 minutes*

You have the option of either dividing students into small groups of 3-4 or involving the entire class together during the discussion.

### *4. 30 – 35 minutes*

Students will listen to the audio for each of the seven parts of Bill 79 with their group and one will record their answers for discussion. If the audio is not available, have students read each part as it is covered and discussed.

### *5. 10-15 minutes*

During class discussion, go over terms and questions for each part.

a. After class discussion, have students critique the “education pyramid,” examining Jefferson’s concepts contained in Bill 79.

b. Essay: Have students write a short (five paragraph) essay on the strengths and shortcomings of Bill 79 and how they would improve upon it (Optional).

c. Worksheet: Have students do a side-by-side comparison of the different parts of Bill 79 and how what they see as its strengths and weaknesses. They can construct their own “education pyramid” on the back of the sheet (Optional).

6. *10 minutes*

1. Quiz for the next day (Optional).

## Materials

### Materials Needed

1. Teacher’s background summary on Jefferson and education. Complete with definitions and answers to questions (including quiz).
2. Student handout with breakdown of the seven parts of Bill 79 and questions.
3. Essay rubric
4. Worksheet for comparison of Bill 79.
5. Quiz.

### Background Information to Bill 79 (For teachers)

In 1779, Thomas Jefferson, then a Delegate to the Virginia Assembly, introduced a series of bills during the Revolutionary War. Jefferson believed that the revolution was not only to be political, but social as well. He believed the time was now to address issues such as religious freedom and primogeniture. He was concerned that unless proper steps were taken immediately to set the foundation of the republic, then America would not survive for very long, even if independence was won. Jefferson believed education was the cornerstone of that foundation. In Bill 79, Jefferson brought forth a plan to establish a system of public education, not unlike the one that already existed in New England at the time.

Jefferson had four basic principles woven into Bill 79:

1. That democracy cannot long exist without enlightenment.
2. That it cannot function without wise and honest officials.
3. That talent and virtue, needed in a free society, should be educated regardless of wealth, birth or

other accidental condition.

4. That the children of the poor must be thus educated at common expense (Padover 43).

In essence, Jefferson believed that education at public expense was a necessity for a republic to exist. Previously education was private and limited to the wealthy. Because of that his plan had limitations and faced barriers. He saw “common schools” lasting only three years and extending only to “free children” of Virginia. While his plan allowed for those “schollars” of “promising genius and disposition” the opportunity to move up his “pyramidal” blueprint, it would only allow very small numbers to do so.

Add to that the opposition of the plan within the Assembly because:

1. Virginia was rural and thinly dispersed.
2. No promotion of religion.
3. Opposition to additional taxes.

Bill 79 (and its sister, Bill 80, Amending the Constitution of William and Mary) did not pass in 1779 and a public school system within Virginia was not realized until the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Nonetheless, Jefferson would continue to promote education in the state of Virginia for the remainder of his life, especially after he left the presidency in 1809.

Jefferson had six objectives for primary (common school) education:

1. To give every citizen the information he needs for the transaction of his business.
2. To enable him to calculate for himself, and to express and preserve his ideas, his contracts, and accounts, in writing.
3. To improve, by reading, his morals and faculties.
4. To understand his duties to his neighbors and country, and to discharge with competence the functions confided to him by either.
5. To know his rights, to exercise with order and justice those he retains; to choose with discretion the fiduciary of those he delegates; and to notice their conduct with diligence, with candor, and judgment.
6. And, in general, to observe with intelligence and faithfulness all social relations under which he shall be placed (Peterson 239).

Answers to questions for Bill 79 handout

Preamble of Bill 79

1. Jefferson believed that educating citizens was necessary for the success of a republic.

#### Dividing into “hundreds”

1. The term “hundreds” was the geographic area that decides which “common school” a student was to attend. It was planned to be roughly five or six miles square.
2. Several terms may be used to describe “hundreds” today including “home school,” “attendance zones” and “neighborhood schools.”

#### Common School Curriculum

1. Primary or elementary school.
2. Jefferson viewed history as a vital instrument that a person could, “draw analogies between parallel circumstances of the past and of our own times which enable us to make forecasts as to what is to happen.” Therefore, the more exposure to history students could have would better prepare them in the future.
3. The term “free children” was designed to insure enslaved African-American children would not become students in the common schools.
4. “Gratis” means “without charge,” that is, students would not have to pay for their education. Many students were schooled at home with a paid tutor.

#### Overseers for Schools

1. The responsibility of the overseer was to hire teachers for the schools and to insure that a solid curriculum was being taught. Overseers could be considered on par with principals or even area superintendants.
2. “Fidelity” means “being faithful or loyal,” In the context of Bill 79, it means that the overseer is loyal to the educational standards of the state of Virginia.
3. The “visitors” are supervisors of the “overseers” and see that any general plan of instruction recommended by William and Mary College is followed.

#### Grammar School Curriculum

1. Grammar school then would be middle/high school today.
2. Grammar school curriculum was considered much more rigorous than the common school curriculum because they were educating different people for different jobs. Common school curriculum is two-fold. First, it is to give “every citizen the information he needs to transact his business.” In other words, to train those who will be at the bottom of the socio-economic pyramid, the farmers, the laborers, and the shop

keepers, etc. Second, it was to identify those who will be the professionals in law and medicine, etc., for example, and move them onto grammar school.

3. "Classical education" relates to or consists of studies in the humanities (including the classical languages of Latin and Greek) and general sciences, as detailed in Bill 79. It is also two-fold. First, it was to give students who would represent the "genius and disposition" of Virginia a well-rounded and rigorous academic background. Second, it would serve as a dividing line between those students who will go on to the College of William and Mary and those who will not.

#### Promotion to Grammar School

1. To find the very brightest in each of the "hundred schools" (or common schools) and place them in grammar school for the next level of achievement.
2. How well they have done in school and what economic level they live at.
3. "Disposition" is the tendency of one's mood or spirits. Jefferson wanted to have students rise not only because of their intellect but also because of their frame of mind, their temperament.

#### Dismissal from Grammar School

1. Jefferson was limiting the size of the continuing class as one-third was dismissed after one year, as they were "the least promising in genius and temperament." The remaining two-thirds would be there but for another year and of that only one would go onto the College of William and Mary after grammar school.
2. Where many current students who show the necessary intellect and talent can continue in high school and then onto college, Jefferson's system had a set policy to divest the school of economically disadvantaged students and severely limiting their chance to continue onto college.
3. The system is designed to promote based upon quantity of students (twenty state-wide each year) as opposed to quality of students.

#### Additional Questions

1. Women are only mentioned in the common schools portion of Bill 79 and not at all in the grammar school portion as all the references in that part of the bill state "boys." Jefferson did not believe there was any need for girls to go beyond the three years of common school for being able to run the household economy. There is no mention of African-Americans whatsoever and the bill states that only "free children" may attend.
2. As previously stated in the preamble of Bill 79, Jefferson writes that "those persons whom nature hath endowed with genius and virtue should be rendered by liberal education worthy to receive, and able to guard the sacred deposit of rights and liberties of their fellow citizens, and that they should be called to

that charge without regard to wealth, birth, or other accidental condition or circumstance.” Jefferson wants those with innate talents to become the leaders rather than those born to affluence.

3. Jefferson’s pyramid has a broad base at the bottom to promote egalitarianism (social equality) and opportunity. Education then would serve as a catalyst for upward social mobility and therefore create a “natural aristocracy,” rather than a hereditary one (Addis 32).

## **Technology Needs**

None

## **Assessment**

### **Homework**

Common Schools

Grammar Schools

Purpose

Purpose

Curriculum

Curriculum

Strengths

Strengths

Weaknesses

Weaknesses

### **Assessment**

1. Teachers may include participation points for discussion.
2. Essay
3. Worksheet.
4. Quiz (Questions may be used on a later test).

## U.S. History Quiz

### Bill 79: Jefferson's Pyramid for Public Education

Directions: On a separate sheet of paper, write the answers to each of the following ten questions.

1. Why did Thomas Jefferson attempt to establish public education in Virginia?
2. What were the "hundreds"?
3. Why did Jefferson include the term "free children" to describe those eligible to attend public school?
4. All those attending "common school" would do so "gratis." What does gratis mean?
5. What was the job of an "overseer"?
6. Why was there such a difference between the "common school" curriculum and the "grammar school" curriculum?
7. Name two factors used to determine a student's eligibility for promotion to "grammar school."
8. Why was there a dismissal clause in Bill 79 for "grammar school"?
9. Why were girls not eligible for the "grammar school" portion of the bill?
10. Why did Jefferson refer to his plan as an educational pyramid?

## Resources

Bill 79: "A Bill for the More General Diffusion of Knowledge." (Student Handout)

Overview: Bill 79 was introduced by Thomas Jefferson in 1779 at the height of the Revolutionary War to the General Assembly of Virginia, its state legislature. His purpose was to establish the foundation for public education in the Commonwealth (State) of Virginia. Below are seven excerpts from Bill 79 relating to the establishment of a school system in Virginia. Please note that the spelling contained in the document is from the 18<sup>th</sup> century and was different from current standards.

## **Excerpts from the Preamble of Bill 79**

“(W)hence it becomes expedient for promoting the publick happiness that those persons, whom nature hath endowed with genius and virtue, should be rendered by liberal education worthy to receive, and able to guard the sacred deposit of rights and liberties of their fellow citizens, and that they should be called to that charge without regard to wealth, birth or other accidental condition or circumstance...”

(Jefferson 527)

1. What was Jefferson saying about the role of education in a republic?

## **Dividing into “hundreds”**

“The said Aldermen (county officials)... shall meet at the court-house of their county, and proceed to divide their said county into hundreds (an area of five to six square miles)... so as that they may contain a convenient number of children to make up a school, and be of such convenient size that all children within each hundred may daily attend the school to be established therein, distinguishing each hundred by a particular name...” (527)

1. What do you think Jefferson meant by the term “hundreds”?

2. What term might we use today to describe “hundreds”?

## **Common School Curriculum**

“At every of these schools shall be taught reading, writing, and common arithmetick, and the books which shall be used therein for instructing the children to read shall be such as will at the same time make them acquainted with Graecian, Roman, English, and American history. At these schools all the free children, male and female, resident within the respective hundred, shall be entitled to receive tuition gratis, for the term of three years, and as much longer, at their private expence, as their parents, guardians or friends, shall think proper.” (528)

1. What level of school today might follow this definition of a common school?

2. Why do you think the wide range of histories was important in this curriculum?

3. Why was the term “free children” significant?

4. What does the term “gratis” mean?

## **Overseers for Schools**

“Over every ten of these schools... an overseer shall be appointed annually by the Aldermen... eminent for his (The overseer’s) learning, integrity, and fidelity to the commonwealth, whose business and duty it shall be, from time to time, to appoint a teacher to each school, who shall give assurance of fidelity to the

commonwealth, and to remove him as he shall see cause; to visit every school once in every half year at the least: to examine the schollars; see that any general plan of reading and instruction recommended by the visitors of William and Mary College shall be observed; and to superintend the conduct of the teacher in every thing relative to his school.” (528-29)

1. After reading the passage above, what do you think was the responsibility of an overseer? What term might we use to describe that job in education today?
2. What is “fidelity”?
3. What do you think was the job of the “visitors” of the College of William and Mary?

### **Grammar School curriculum**

“In these grammar schools shall be taught the Latin and Greek languages, English grammar, geography, and the higher part of numerical arithmetick, to wit, vulgar and decimal fractions, and the extraction of the square and cube roots.” (531)

1. What level of school today might follow this definition of grammar school?
2. How did the grammar school curriculum differ from the common school curriculum? What do you think was the cause for the difference?
3. The grammar school curriculum followed the idea of a “classical education.” What do you think the term “classical education” means?

### **Promotion to Grammar school**

“Every overseer of the hundred schools shall, in the month of September annually, after the most diligent and impartial examination and enquiry, appoint from among the boys who shall have been two years at the least at some one of the schools under his superintendance, and whose parents are too poor to give them farther education, some one of the best and most promising genius and disposition, to proceed to the grammar school of his district...” (532)

1. What did Jefferson attempt to do in this portion of the bill?
2. What factors were being used to determine the eligibility of candidates?
3. What did the term “disposition” mean at that time and why was it important to determine a student’s eligibility?

### **Dismissal from Grammar school**

“A visitation shall be held, for the purpose of probation, annually at said grammar school... at which one third of the boys sent thither by appointment of the said overseers, and who shall have been there one

year only, shall be discontinued as public foundationers, being those who, on the most diligent examination and inquiry, shall be thought to be of the least promising in genius and disposition; and of those who shall have been there two years, all shall be discontinued, save one only the best in genius and disposition, who shall be at liberty to continue there four years longer on the public foundation, and shall thence forward be deemed a senior.” (533)

1. What was Jefferson attempting to do in this portion of the bill?
2. How is this different from the current school system?
3. Are there any obvious problems or unfairness that was contained in this part of the bill?

### **Additional Questions**

1. How were young girls and African-Americans treated in this bill?
2. Jefferson was trying to create a “natural aristocracy” with this bill. What do you think that means?
3. Jefferson referred to this idea as a “pyramidal” organization. Why do you think he chose a pyramid to represent his ideas contained within Bill #79?