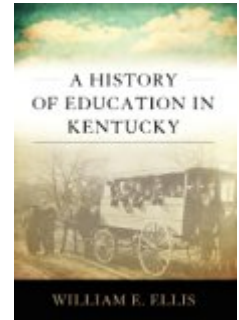


**William E. Ellis.** *A History of Education in Kentucky.* Topics in Kentucky History Series. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2011. 546 pp. \$40.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8131-2977-8.



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“Currently, the state ranks fourteenth nationally in highway spending, but last in education spending per person. The will to build better roads, and to fund other things, still remains stronger than the will to build—and maintain—a better higher education system. Asphalt often seems more valued than a young mind” (p. 422). In 2006, James C. Klotter, Kentucky’s state historian, made this statement regarding Kentucky’s education. While this message may be a somewhat harsh condemnation, Klotter’s words highlight the importance of the work William E. Ellis has undertaken with this publication, *A History of Education in Kentucky*. Not only does the book point to the good and bad associated with education in Kentucky over the last two centuries, but it also addresses a perceived lack of attention to education in Kentucky historiography. By offering a dedicated discussion to education in Kentucky from the 1770s to the present and by showing where this development fits in national trends, Ellis increases the awareness of the historical problems that need to be addressed, while celebrating

the achievements of specific individuals and institutions at all levels of education. Completing these goals is no easy task.

The structure that Ellis has chosen for the book is a pragmatic one that breaks down Kentucky’s historical narrative into manageable discussions. The time frame from the establishment of educational institutions during the late eighteenth century to the 1990s and the passage of the Kentucky Education Reform Act (KERA) (1990) are discussed in four distinct parts. Part 1 takes the reader from 1775 to the beginning of the Civil War. Part 2 covers the period from the Civil War through the onset of the twentieth century. The third part deals with 1900 to 1941, taking the narrative up to the United States’ entry into World War Two. Part 4 takes the story across a forty-year period, from the end of World War Two to the end of the 1980s, and the onset of KERA, before a well-articulated epilogue investigates the impact of the KERA reforms and subsequent legislation regarding education. The epilogue stands out, as it is the only section in which Ellis does not divide the dis-

cussion between elementary/secondary education and higher education. While this division is by no means necessary in the epilogue, dividing each of the four parts into distinct chapters reviewing the case of elementary/secondary schools and universities/colleges not only offers a way to show the different needs of the two educational frameworks, but also helps support Ellis's overriding sentiments: that there has been a lack of cohesion regarding each measure designed to improve education in Kentucky. Ellis introduces the structure and aims of *A History of Education in Kentucky* in a preface, rather than in an introduction. By foregoing a more detailed introduction, and instead briefly recounting how the book came to be written and why, Ellis is able to include his personal sentiments and his own educational experiences as both a student and educator. While others may have preferred a more extensive and dedicated introduction, I find that the personal reflection in the preface, which might otherwise have been missed, adds a great deal to the narrative.

In chapter 1, Ellis discusses the process of establishing public education in Kentucky up to the 1850s and investigates the challenges faced in providing education for youth during this period. One of the key themes in this chapter is that Kentucky lagged behind the rest of the nation from the beginning. Ellis's discussion of the Barry Report (1822), part of a plan to develop "Common Schools" in Kentucky, is well articulated. He stresses the need for such a report to underscore the failures of the existing "land grant academy system" as only serving families dwelling in towns or those wealthy enough to afford boarding fees (p. 17). In an era of national education growth, he notes, Kentucky did not have a general school system until the late 1830s, while a public school system was included in the 1850 constitution. It is here where Ellis first broaches a continuing theme in this work, the disruption of education by party politics. For example, Ellis states that the 1838 provision for a general school system would have its fund reduced before the law was

even enacted. The early case for education is not all pessimistic, however; Ellis is keen to show that the state became a leader in specialist schools for the deaf and blind, with Kentucky organizing the "first state-supported school for the deaf in the nation" (p. 18). This is also a common theme throughout *A History of Education in Kentucky*, as Ellis points to the areas in which Kentucky education has excelled and the people who were responsible for its development.

The discussion of higher education in Kentucky up to the Civil War is not as extensive as the one concerning elementary/secondary education. Transylvania University is the focus of chapter 2. The sense that collegiate education in the state prior to the middle of the nineteenth century was dominated by the well-to-do prevails.

It is not until part 2 that the discussion of higher education really advances, beyond a discussion of a denominational influence in the founding of colleges. In chapters 3 and 4, Ellis examines at length the various social and economic challenges that education faced in Kentucky up to 1900. This is an interesting section of his narrative, as he discusses the impact that the abolition of slavery had on education in the state, and notes that there were significant efforts to codify African American education, despite opposition to the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments. Despite a general argument that the Civil War made Kentucky more southern, Ellis points to the efforts of John G. Fee in founding an integrated school in Berea County as proof that biracial education was possible. He also shows that there were efforts to found an African American college in the state and that women were admitted to some institutions by the 1880s. However, while he addresses issues of teacher training and the poor-quality of school houses, Ellis also stresses that there were signs of educational progress up to 1900, at least for a public education system. Higher education is described as "limping along," thanks to a few dedicated individuals, as they competed over a small

pool of students (p. 142). Ellis portrays both elementary/secondary and higher education in this period as suffering from major funding issues, worse than in other states. A factor in these financial issues appears to be the role of the officials elected to oversee education. Ellis is clear in his assessment that Republican politicians of the era were more progressive, and that it was Democratic cronyism that was impeding the overhauls needed to address major educational concerns.

While the first two parts set the tone regarding the state of education in Kentucky prior to the twentieth century, it is in parts 3 and 4 where the greatest insights emerge. For Ellis, the opening decades of the twentieth century see great efforts at (and challenges to) education reform in the state. A 1908 law designed to provide standardized criteria for high schools faced opposition when it was implemented, while teacher training, or rather lack of, was a constant concern. When combined with the discussion of the University of Kentucky in chapter 6, the efforts at reform and improvement in line with national trends always appear dependent on a few dedicated individuals, rather than a coherent plan of action, as funding issues limited the scope of improvements for schools and universities. For Ellis, “as often occurs in Kentucky, a good idea gets bound up in politics” (p. 208). Such funding issues became less of a concern in the immediate aftermath of World War Two, when the main issues concerning reform were a lack of teachers.

It is in part 4 where Ellis’s discussion carries the most weight and is strengthened by the opportunity to discuss his personal experience as a student and educator. Civil rights and integration carry specific resonance, with Ellis experiencing these issues as a high school teacher and graduate student. His personal discussion excels especially when he addresses how curriculum has developed during the twentieth century. Regardless of ideological leanings, Ellis’s discussion of the teaching of evolution in Kentucky classrooms is bal-

anced, sensitive, and well-articulated. Both conservative and liberal politicians can learn a great deal from this measured approach founded on personal experience in opposing the inclusion of “creationism” in the science curriculum on academic grounds; the overriding message being, let teachers teach. Despite the addition of personal experience in these chapters, the same issues keep arising in both elementary/secondary and higher education: namely, the issue over funding. Higher education in Kentucky in this period to the 1980s is characterized as benefiting from the GI Bill to expand enrollment, with all universities benefiting to some degree. For Ellis, this is also the period during which the success of private denominational colleges was broken due to new public funding for higher education. Yet, despite the University of Louisville being brought under state control in this period, the new funding initiatives appear to have created a lot of competition among higher education institutions. Creating one fund for higher education led to infighting among universities during the 1970s over courses and students. By the 1980s, state funding sought to find specific roles for all universities and colleges in Kentucky.

Ellis continually revisits the issue of funding. For Ellis, Kentucky’s poor educational record is a result of funding issues and politics, something that is more acutely felt in rural areas. Any gains made in education, he argues, are held back or halted by financial problems or political push-back. Substantial investment is needed at all levels, he notes, with recognition of the need for long-term continuity. However, this is being held back by the issue of money, and determining who should pay for the improvements required. In presenting these issues, Ellis shows that Kentucky education has been characterized by short-term political aims and a lack of adequate funding for teachers and students. In all the eras discussed here, Ellis always stresses where the state has ranked nationally, with Kentucky consistently

paying teachers less, and spending less per student, than neighboring states.

In providing such a comprehensive history of education in the state, it is difficult to criticize Ellis's aims and intentions. However, this desire to be so comprehensive presents its own challenges, and is often the publication's greatest drawback. By dividing his discussion into elementary/secondary education and higher education, Ellis is able to assess the state of education in Kentucky, as well as draw attention to the specific impact of reforms and the individuals who stand out in trying to improve education. However, there are drawbacks to this approach. Despite it being the most effective way to structure the discussion, there are unavoidable instances of repetition, as similar events are discussed in relation to elementary/secondary schools and universities. These instances of repetition highlight the relative lack of importance education has been given in Kentucky historiography, and present problems for Ellis when seeking to contextualize his discussion points. Often, the first piece of evidence cited in Ellis's notes comes from a general history of the state, or from the likes of Klotter and Thomas Clark, rather than from contemporary source material or specific historiographical studies. While this is not a major criticism, it does show how limited the discussion of Kentucky education has been, and points to the need for this publication.

*A History of Education in Kentucky* adds something new to the historiography of Kentucky. With its argument over the need for consistent, long-term funding for education at all levels, it provides lessons that those currently in charge of education reform in the state would do well to take notice of.

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