

William Torrey Harris Biography

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Biography

William Torrey Harris (1835-1909) was a dominant influence in American education through his writings and by his own example as a school administrator.

William T. Harris was born in North Killingly, Conn., on Sept. 10, 1835, into a Congregationalist farming family. He entered Yale College in 1854 and completed 2 years before traveling west. In St. Louis, Mo., he tried editing, tutoring, selling, and teaching shorthand. His permanent career in education started in 1858, when he was appointed to teach in a St. Louis grammar school. He married a childhood friend, Sarah Tully Bugbee, on Dec. 27, 1858.

In 1859 Harris became principal of one of St. Louis's expanding public schools. In 1867 he was appointed assistant superintendent of the entire school system, and the following year he became superintendent.

Harris's ascendancy in education was paralleled by his study of philosophy, particularly of G. W. F. Hegel and German idealism. His superintendency drew notice for its philosophical base and its well-organized management. His *Annual Reports* stressed the idea of education as a means of achieving the social and moral progress of civilization. He promoted new ideas, notably the kindergarten, making the St. Louis public school system the first in the nation to experiment with this European concept. He traveled, lectured, and published extensively.

Harris's service to St. Louis lasted until 1880, when he resigned to travel and analyze European education. On the advice of other American educators, President Benjamin Harrison appointed Harris commissioner of education in 1889. He held this influential office until 1906, gathering and disseminating national and international information concerning educational developments.

During the 1890s Harris served on significant investigatory committees of the National Education Association. In 1895, on a committee seeking to remodel elementary education, he articulated his theory of coordinated subjects as "windows of the soul" through which children might gain an understanding of people and nature.

Harris published more than 475 educational and philosophical works. He died on Nov. 5, 1909, in Providence, R.I.