

First American Schoolbook: The New England Primer

(1 of 2)

School is about to start up again, so let's talk about school as a part of US history. Ask students what they think schoolbooks were like in colonial times in America; for example, in the Massachusetts Bay Colony. How would a Puritan schoolbook have been like today's textbooks, and how would it have been different?

Select and share different sections of the New England Primer with your students. The full text is available at <http://www.sacred-texts.com/chr/nep/1777/>. Explain that the Primer was a schoolbook created to teach Puritan children important lessons in language arts and religion. The collection includes hymns, prayers, rhymes, rules, alphabet lessons, verses, and advice for children. As you share different sections, ask your class to compare the lessons from the Primer to the lessons students learn today. What topics were used to teach Puritan children the alphabet? What rules for behavior were they taught? Why did prayers, hymns, and scripture verses play such an important part in Puritan education? What similarities can be found between the Primer and the lessons your students learn today? (*The Golden Rule, vowels, consonants, syllables, the alphabet.*)

After you have previewed the New England Primer with your students, assign your class to work in pairs and give each pair a copy of "An Alphabet of Lessons for Youth" from the Primer (see below). Let students know that each of the lessons in the alphabet is a quote from the Bible. One of the most important reasons Puritans wanted their children to learn to read was so they could read the Bible.

Assign pairs to read the lesson and use it as a model to write their own set of alphabet lessons, creating one rule for each alphabet letter to help younger students in our day. The pairs should think of rules that would be taught by teachers or parents to contemporary kindergartners. Once students have completed the assignment, invite them to share their alphabet lessons with the class. What rules are like the rules in the Puritan version? Which rules are different, and why? How has education changed, and how is it the same? Why has education changed in certain ways? (*Religion is no longer part of public education.*)

EXTENSION #1: Have students create a class alphabet book using some of the lesson rules they created for the activity. Assign each pair in the class a set of alphabet letters. Have partners make pages for each of their assigned letters to place in a class book. Pages must include the letter, the rule, and artwork. Collect the pages from each pair and combine them into a class book with a title such as "The Room [#] Primer."

EXTENSION #2: Although not extensive enough to be considered a true schoolbook, the first learning tool in the American colonies was the hornbook. Have students find examples of hornbooks from colonial New England online and compare them to the New England primer. Another tool was the sampler, an embroidered alphabet stitched by colonial girls. Have students find early samplers as well. How would these tools have helped colonial children learn to read?

The New England Primer: An Alphabet of Lessons for Youth (2 of 2)

A wise son maketh a glad father, but a foolish son is the heaviness of his mother.

Better is a little with the fear of the Lord, than great treasure & trouble therewith.

Come unto Christ all ye that labor and are heavy laden and he will give you rest.

Do not the abominable thing which I hate saith the Lord.

Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.

Foolishness is bound up in the heart of a child, but the rod of correction shall drive it far from him.

Godliness is profitable unto all things, having the promise of the life that now is, and that which is to come.

Holiness becomes God's house for ever.

It is good for me to draw near unto God.

Keepesthy heart with all diligence, for out of it are the issues of life.

Liarshall have their part in the lake which burns with fire and brimstone.

Many are the afflictions of the righteous, but the Lord delivereth them out of them all.

Now is the accepted time, now is the day of salvation.

Out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaketh.

Pray to they Father which is in secret; and thy Father which sees in secret shall reward thee openly.

Quit you like men, be strong, stand fast in the faith.

Remember thy Creator in the days of thy youth.

Seest thou a man wise in his own conceit, there is more hope of a fool than of him.

Trust in God at all times, ye people, pour out your hearts before him.

Upon the wicked, God shall rain an horrible tempest.

Wo to the wicked, it shall be ill with him, for the reward of his hands shall be given him.

EXhort one another daily while it is called to day, lest any of you be hardened thro' the deceitfulness of sin.

Young men ye have overcome the wicked one.

Zeal hath consumed me, because thy enemies have forgotten the word of God.