History of Education Quarterly (2026), **66**, 255–256
doi:10.1017/heq.2026.10137

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

https://doi.org/10.1017/heq.2026.10137

EDITORIAL INTRODUCTION

Hope for the Future in an Uncertain World

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As the United States marks its 250th anniversary, official observances rightly recall the Revolution, the Declaration of Independence, and freedom's central place in the country's national identity. Yet much of the public conversation this year has been directed elsewhere: toward ongoing wars and the geopolitics that sustain them. Scholars estimate the United States has been engaged in military conflict for more than 90 percent of its history.[1] Today US defense spending is more than double the combined outlays of the next two largest military spenders, Russia and China. Political leaders insist that national security demands continuous attention, but that comes with serious consequences, as those high levels of military spending have reshaped the nation's political, social, and economic order.[2] As a version of the saying goes, "If you spend a fortune on a hammer, everything starts to look like a nail."

This past winter, US officials accused Iran's regime of killing or imprisoning tens of thousands of political protesters and of continuing to pursue nuclear capabilities. Diplomatic efforts failed, and "Operation Epic Fury" began. On its opening day, Shajareh Tayyebeh Elementary School in southern Iran was destroyed, killing and injuring many children.[3]

The destruction of a school is a moral rupture. Schools, like hospitals and houses of worship, are repositories of a society's hopes for its future and sanctuaries for its most vulnerable. When they are targeted, the damage is not only physical but symbolic: It undercuts any claim to moral superiority for those who wage or justify war.

In this issue of *HEQ*, we examine why educational institutions are treated with near-sacred regard and how that status has been contested. Schools, colleges, and universities are more than sites for transmitting facts. They are battlegrounds, where authority and social order are made and remade, where societies decide how to teach race, enforce cultural norms, and shape national identity. The essays that follow trace how competing

[1]David Vine, *The United States of War: A Global History of America's Endless Conflicts, from Columbus to the Islamic State* (University of California Press, 2020).

[2]Matthew Evangelista and Neta C. Crawford, "How Has War Shaped American Democracy?," *Daedalus* (Fall 2025), 8.

[3]Kevin T. Baker, "AI Got the Blame for the Iran School Bombing: The Truth Is Far More Worrying," *The Guardian*, March 26, 2026, https://www.theguardian.com/news/2026/mar/26/ai-got-the-blame-for-the-iran-school-bombing-the-truth-is-far-more-worrying.

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https://doi.org/10.1017/heq.2026.10137

interests have imagined competing futures, and they remind us that education is both a mirror of social life and an engine of social struggle. Understanding these histories is essential to defending more inclusive and globally sustainable futures.

We open with Meredith Barber's Barnard Prize-winning essay, "'Keeping Her Record Bright': White Women and Racial Instruction in Virginia's History Curricula, 1919-1932." Barber recovers how white, largely female educator-activists under Mary Munford's leadership organized a deliberate project of racial instruction. Drawing on archival curricula and state textbook commission materials—particularly the 1925 *Course of Study*—Barber shows how mandated lessons and textbook editing created a bureaucratic classroom backbone for Jim Crow. Barber's attention to teachers' records and the gendered dynamics of curriculum construction underscores how curricular control functions as an everyday mechanism of racial power.

In the first feature article of this issue, Thomas Fallace and Michael Hines reframe the history of progressive schooling for Black students in "Black Progressive Education and the Fusion of Academic and Practical Knowledge, 1915-1939." Drawing on classroom accounts and Black intellectuals' writings, they trace innovations that fused academic and practical learning to cultivate democratic dispositions, a perspective that, importantly, challenges binaries that cast Black education as either academic or vocational. Ultimately, they show how Black teachers and leaders adapted progressive tools to empower students for citizenship.

In the second feature article, "The Evolution of Exclusionary Dress Codes in Metropolitan Seattle Public Schools, 1950s and Onward," Mallory Hutchings-Tryon explores how appearance rules shifted from informal norms to formal, punitive policies. Her history ties gendered and racialized expectations to broader social currents, illustrating how dress codes have functioned as instruments of gatekeeping that unevenly discipline bodies and identities.

In "Instituting Identity: Schools and Arab American Identity Formation in Dearborn, 1980s-1990s," Alexandra Pasqualone examines a different set of tensions: As Dearborn schools absorbed growing numbers of Arab-descendant youth, districts moved from assimilationist policies toward conditional pluralism amid shifting global and local politics. Pasqualone shows how schools mediate nationality, religion, race, and gender in identity formation.

Finally, this issue includes a Policy Dialogue between Kevin Kumashiro and Michael Olneck. In their conversation, they diagnose contemporary assaults on DEI as efforts not only to recalibrate curricula but also to reshape the social imaginary. Together, they urge scholars and educators to articulate compelling alternative visions designed to withstand this political moment.

This issue also includes a number of excellent book reviews.

As we try to make sense of current events and our collective condition, this issue reminds us why education has played such important yet contested roles in society. Schools, colleges, and universities have represented the places where our most vulnerable learn and our greatest vulnerabilities are debated. They are institutions that harbor hope in a future shot through with uncertainty.

Cite this article: AJ Angulo and Jack Schneider, "Hope for the Future in an Uncertain World," *History of Education Quarterly* 66, no. 3, (August 2026), 255–256. https://doi.org/10.1017/heq.2026.10137