

Advertisement, Vote 314x Yes

By P.S. Malcom

This paid advertisement in support of Measure 314, the compulsory public school attendance bill, appeared in many newspapers across the state in the weeks prior to the 1922 general election. The bill targeted Catholic and elite private schools by requiring parents to send their children to public school.

Members of the Scottish Rite Masonic Order, a national fraternal organization, initiated the measure. Masons in Oregon were split on the issue, however. Some historians suggest that the bill's true architect was the Ku Klux Klan, which viewed the Oregon measure as an early step in a national campaign.

The goal of the bill was to eliminate private schools, where, according to supporters, the elite learned to be "snobbish," and, more dangerously, recent immigrants resisted Americanization at best, and created "cults" and "factions" at worst. That Oregon was one of the most homogeneous states in the country made it an appealing test case for compulsory public education—advocates may have assumed that resistance would be minimal.

Opponents considered the bill, and this advertisement in particular, to be deceiving. While the advertisement stated that the bill did not propose religious restrictions, elsewhere the bill's proponents declared openly the benefits of closing Catholic schools.

The public commonly referred to the initiative as the "compulsory education bill." Its name and the language used to support it bore resemblance to—but also distorted—successful movements to establish a system of free public education and the state's right to make some form of education compulsory. Attendance at a school of one's choosing was already accepted widely and required by law up to age fifteen. All schools had a legal obligation to meet standards outlined by public school administrators, including instruction in English.

Many agreed with Wm. D. Wheelwright, chairman of the Oregon State Child Welfare Commission, when he called the bill insincere. In a state that was overwhelmingly white and Protestant, Wheelwright maintained that the conditions that the bill sought to correct were non-existent in Oregon. The bill, he claimed, incited citizens to "war against a phantom," creating bitterness and hostility for no reason.

The measure passed by a narrow margin on November 7, 1922. However, the U.S. Supreme Court declared it unconstitutional before it had a chance to go into effect. The episode demonstrated that nativism and anti-immigrant sentiments were alive in Oregon during the 1920s, much as they were elsewhere in the nation.

Further Reading: Holsinger, M. Paul. "The Oregon School Bill Controversy, 1922-1925." *Pacific Historical Review* 37: 3, 1968: 327.

Nitz, Carl F. "The Compulsory Education Bill." Unpublished term paper, 1945.

Tyack, David B. "The Perils of Pluralism: The Background of the Pierce Case." *American Historical Review* 74:1, 1968: 74.

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