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# A Bill for the More General Diffusion of Knowledge



As part of his work in revising the laws of Virginia during the late 1770s and early 1780s, Thomas Jefferson put forth a bill that has become one of his most enduring works on the subject of education: Bill 79, "A Bill for the More General Diffusion of Knowledge." Its oft-quoted preamble reads as follows:

Whereas it appeareth that however certain forms of government are better calculated than others to protect individuals in the free exercise of their natural rights, and are at the same time themselves better guarded against degeneracy, yet experience hath shewn, that even under the best forms, those entrusted with power have, in time, and by slow operations, perverted it into tyranny; and it is believed that the most effectual means of preventing this would be, to illuminate, as far as practicable, the minds of the people at large, and more especially to give them knowledge of those facts, which history exhibiteth, that, possessed thereby of the experience of other ages and countries, they may be enabled to know ambition under all its shapes, and prompt to exert their natural powers to defeat its purposes; And whereas it is generally true that that people will be happiest whose laws are best, and are best administered, and that laws will be wisely formed, and honestly administered, in proportion as those who form and administer them are wise and honest; whence it becomes expedient for promoting the publick happiness that those persons, whom nature hath endowed with genius and virtue, should be rendered by liberal education worthy to receive, and able to guard the sacred deposit of the rights and liberties of their fellow citizens, and that they should be called to that charge without regard to wealth, birth or other accidental condition or circumstance; but the indigence of the greater number disabling them from so educating, at their own expence, those of their children whom nature hath fitly formed and disposed to become useful instruments for the public, it is better that such should be sought for and educated at the common expence of all, than that the happiness of all should be confided to the weak or wicked: ...<sup>1</sup>

The Bill was presented in the House of Delegates in 1778 and 1780, but was not

passed; [James Madison](#) presented the bill several more times to the state legislature while Jefferson was serving in [Paris](#) as [Minister to France](#). A much-revised version was finally passed into law in 1796 as an "Act to Establish Public Schools."<sup>2</sup>

- Anna Berkes, 4/2009

## FURTHER SOURCES

- [Report of the Committee of Revisors Appointed by the General Assembly of Virginia in MDCCLXXVI](#). Richmond: 1784. This text is presented as part of the Library of Congress's online exhibit, "Thomas Jefferson."
- Wagoner, Jennings L. [Jefferson and Education](#). Charlottesville, VA: Thomas Jefferson Foundation, 2004.
- [Search the Thomas Jefferson Portal for other sources on Jefferson's contributions to public education.](#)

1. [PTJ](#), 2:526-27. The manuscript of this bill has not been found. [Transcription](#) available at Founders Online.

2. [PTJ](#), 2:535n. [Editorial note](#) available at Founders Online.

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