

## *A THIRST FOR UNDERSTANDING*

The opportunity to obtain a formal education is a relatively recent addition to the **social goods** we think of as necessary for a productive life. For most of history, only a privileged few enjoyed the fruits of being taught to read and write, to use mathematics in problem-solving or to reason by means of logic.

In the colonial period and early decades of our nation, private schools, most of which were founded for purposes of teaching religious doctrine, provided the institutional framework from which arose an enlightened citizenry. Periodicals spread the news of the day. Freedom of the press offered opportunities for expression of diverse opinions. As the philosophy of democracy took hold, the nation's leaders recognized the value of education, and publicly-financed schools appeared in communities throughout the nation.

This was the atmosphere in which Henry George grew to adulthood in the mid-nineteenth century. For the children of most native-born families, at last some schooling was available during their years of nurturing. The arrival of industrialization and its factory system later in the century seriously threatened this equalitarian character of the Republic, which resulted in the era of reform we refer to as Progressivism. New laws restricted the use of child labor, established modest health, safety and sanitary standards, and expanded public support of education. States founded **land grant** colleges all across the country to train teachers and conduct agricultural and other forms of scientific research. Education was also seen as a means of "Americanizing" the millions of immigrants who brought with them not only a foreign tongue but very different cultural (and religious) values.

In some ways, we have become **one people** with a shared sense of national identity. Education has played a primary role in this process. Moreover, there is a very visible shift in how people identify with one another that transcends ethnic or racial background and even religious beliefs. Beneath all the discussion surrounding our **cultural pluralism** is the homogeneity of values associated with socio-economic well-being. Many of us have achieved the standards of at least moderate material success -- a college education or specialized skills, homeownership and enough leisure time to enjoy life -- increasingly unobtainable for too many of our fellow citizens.

For reasons that seem mysterious to our nation's leaders today, all of the billions of dollars spent on public goods have not begun to solve our societal problems. And yet, education remains the key to understanding. Moreover, for most people discussion is a primary means of learning. For almost sixty years now, the Henry George School has provided this type of learning environment, and a long list of very dedicated people have contributed their time and energies to this task. We do not pretend that Henry George has answers to all our societal problems; public policy in a democratic society often relies on a shifting consensus. George's gifts to us were many, not the least of which was a set of well-reasoned principles from which the consequences of our actions could be assessed. As many of us have understood, without adoption of the important structural changes George identified, many of our problems would worsen despite the hopes and good intentions of reformers. Reform without a thorough understanding of causes may mitigate but cannot resolve problems.

*-- Edward J. Dodson, President, Henry George School*