THE ONE BEST SYSTEM

A History of American Urban Education

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Centralization and the Corporate Model: Contests for Control of Urban Schools, 1890–1940

They talked about accountability, about cutting red tape, about organizing coalitions to push educational reform, about the need to face the realities of class and power in American society. "They" were members of a movement composed mostly of business and professional elites, including university people and the new school managers. At the turn of the twentieth century, they planned a basic shift in the control of urban education which would vest political power in a small committee composed of "successful men." They wished to emulate the process of decision-making used by men on the board of directors of a modern business corporation. They planned to delegate almost total administrative power to an expert superintendent and his staff so that they could reshape the schools to fit the new economic and social conditions of an urban-industrial society. They rejected as anachronistic, inefficient, and potentially corrupt the older methods of decision-making and school politics. Effective political reform, said one of their leaders, might require "the imposition of limitations upon the common suffrage." They ridiculed "the exceedingly democratic idea that all are equal" and urged that schooling be adapted to social stratification.[1]

As we have seen, during the nineteenth century urban school-

men and their lay allies were slowly moving toward the strategy which would shape the centralization movement during its heyday, the years from 1890 to 1920. From the 1870's forward, reformers like Philbrick and the patrician businessman Charles Francis Adams had called for small, "non-political" boards which would delegate the actual administration of the schools to experts. But until the 1890's in most large cities the school board remained large, ward boards kept substantial powers, and the whole mode of lay management was diffuse, frequently self-contradictory, and prone to conflict. Defenders of the ward system argued that grass-roots interest in the schools and widespread participation in school politics was healthy, indeed necessary, in large cities, but centralizers saw in decentralization only corruption, parochialism, and vestiges of an outmoded village mentality. The men and women who sought centralization of control and social efficiency in urban education at the turn of the century—the people I shall call the "administrative progressives"—wished nothing less than a fundamental change in the structure and process of decision-making. Their social perspective tended to be cosmopolitan yet paternalistic, self-consciously "modern" in its deference to the expert and its quest for rational efficiency yet at times evangelical in its rhetorical tone.[2]

As Joseph Cronin and others have shown, the administrative progressives were notably successful—indeed, their success so framed the structure of urban education that the subsequent history of these schools has been in large part an unfolding of the organizational consequences of centralization. In 1893 in the twenty-eight cities having populations of 100,000 or more, there were 603 central school board members—an average of 21.5 per city; in addition, there were hundreds of ward board members in some of the largest cities. By 1913, the number of central school board members in those cities had dropped to 264, or an average of 10.2, while the ward boards had all but disappeared and most central board members were elected at large. By 1923 the numbers had continued to diminish until the median was seven members. Case studies of centralization in particular cities as well as large-scale investigations of urban school boards in general indicate that school boards after centralization were overwhelmingly composed of business and professional men.[3]

As important as the size and social-class membership of school boards was the change in the procedures of decision-making. Increasingly the model of the corporate board of directors with its expert manager became the norm. The crucial changes were the reduction or elimination of administrative subcommittees of the board and the turning over of the power of initiative and the agenda largely to the superintendent.[4]

The "administrative progressives" (1) were a movement with identifiable actors and coalitions; (2) had a common ideology and platform; and (3) gained substantive power over urban education. Their movement and program closely resemble Samuel P. Hays's interpretation of general municipal "progressive" reform. The experience of centralization in cities like New York, Philadelphia, St. Louis, and San Francisco indicates that the chief support for reform "did not come from the lower or middle classes, but from the upper class." Like reforms in public health, city government, or police and welfare work, urban educational reform followed a familiar pattern of muckrakers' exposure of suffering, corruption, or inefficiency; the formation of alliances of leading citizens and professional experts who proposed structural innovations; and a subsequent campaign for "non-political" and rational reorganization of services. Public rhetoric might portray a contest between "the people" and "the politicians," but as Hays says, the reformers wished "not simply to replace bad men with good; they proposed to change the occupational and class origins of decision-makers." [5]

During this period there was a blurring of the lines between "public" and "private" in businessmen's quest for a stable, predictable, rational social organization. While educational reformers spoke of schools as "quasi-public corporations" and emulated the business board of directors as a model of "public" control, liberal industrialists founded Americanization classes, kindergartens, and day-care centers in factories, improved working conditions and health care for their workers, and provided a variety of fringe benefits calculated to enlist the loyalty and reliability of labor. Public school managers often catered to the wishes of their "major stockholders," the business leaders, especially with regard to vocational education and citizenship training. Civic-minded elites such as the Chamber of Commerce of

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Cleveland supported programs to build new schools, to improve public health, and to create playgrounds and vacation schools. "Progressive" school superintendents found such businessmen their natural allies in reform. To change the schools, however, one first needed to concentrate power at the top so that the experts could take over.[6]

1. AN INTERLOCKING DIRECTORATE AND ITS BLUEPRINT FOR REFORM

It is time to face the facts, Charles Eliot told the Harvard Teachers' Association in 1908: our society "is divided, and is going to be divided into layers whose borders blend, whose limits are easily passed by individuals, but which, nevertheless, have distinct characteristics and distinct educational needs." Freedom produces inequalities, and it is foolish to educate each child to be President of the United States. There are "four layers in civilized society which are indispensable, and so far as we can see, eternal": a thin upper one which "consists of the managing, leading, guiding class—the intellectual discoverers, the inventors, the organizers, and the managers and their chief assistants"; next, the skilled workers, whose numbers are growing with the application of technology to production; third, "the commercial class, the layer which is employed in buying, selling and distributing"; and finally the "thick fundamental layer engaged in household work, agriculture, mining, quarrying, and forest work." By discovering the talented child in the lower layers—"the natural-history 'sport' in the human race"—the school might foster mobility among the layers, but it should be reorganized to serve each class "with keen appreciation of the several ends in view"—that is, to give each layer its own appropriate form of schooling.[7]

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1. SUCCESS STORY: THE ADMINISTRATIVE PROGRESSIVES

Looking back in 1930 on the previous quarter century in city school administration, George D. Strayer of Teachers College, Columbia, saw twenty-five years of steady progress. The keys to this success were "the application of the scientific method" and "the professional training of school executives," he believed. At the beginning of the century "a relatively powerful and able group" of administrators had been dubious about the benefits of educational science, he said, but by 1930 almost all influential schoolmen had become converts. The results were everywhere apparent: "better organization of the administrative and supervisory" employees into line and staff categories; the differentiation of the "traditional elementary school and senior high school" into institutions like junior high schools, vocational schools, and junior colleges that "provide unique opportunities for boys and girls who vary greatly in their ability to acquire skill and knowledge"; grouping of pupils by scientific tests; the expansion of high schools with multiple tracks until they enrolled 50 percent of students of high school age; extensive revision of the curriculum; the keeping of detailed records on students, from IQ's to physical history and vocational and recreational interests; and rapid upgrading of the standards of training for all professional personnel. The principle underlying such progress was "recognition of individual differences" and the consequent attempt "to adjust our schools to the needs and capacities of those who are registered in them." [1]

Statistics revealed the magnitude of the transformation and

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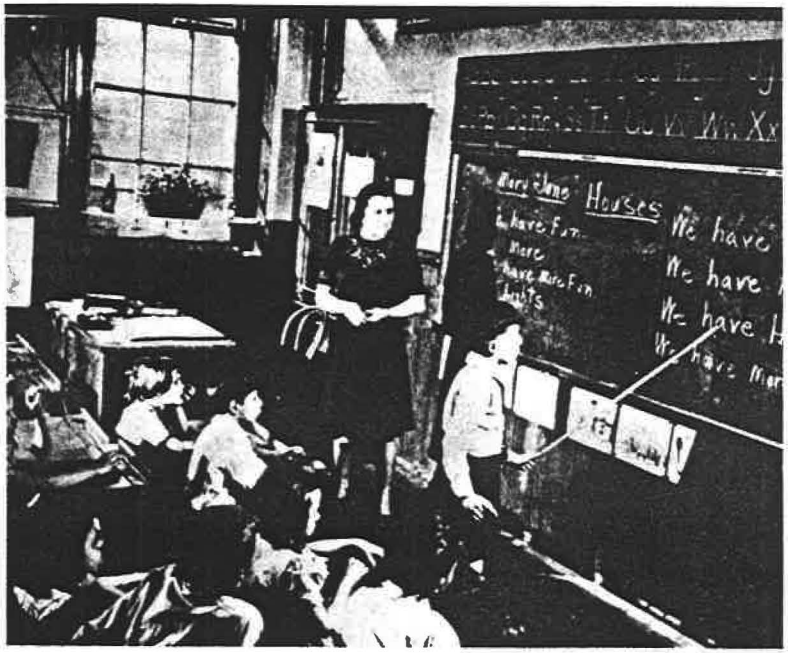

A New York Elementary Classroom, 1942

suggested the character of the challenges schoolmen faced as education became increasingly universal through the high school years. The costs of city schools in 1910 were twice as high as in 1900, three times higher than 1890. From 1890 to 1918 there was, on the average, more than one new high school built for every day of the year. Attendance in high schools increased during that period from 202,963 to 1,645,171, an increase of 711 percent while the total population increased only 68 percent. The curve of secondary school enrollment and graduation continued to soar: in 1920, 61.6 percent of those fourteen to seventeen were enrolled, and high school graduates represented 16.8 percent of youths seventeen years old; in 1930, the figures were 73.1 percent and 29 percent; in 1940, 79.4 percent and 50.8 percent. As these statistics suggest, during the first two decades of the twentieth century compulsory schooling laws were increasingly effective. From 1900 to 1920 educators became less am-

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A New York High School Classroom, 1938

bivalent about coercion than they had often been during the nineteenth century. Gradually school accommodations began to catch up with demand, the size of classes diminished, and the gospel of social efficiency helped create a commitment to universal education as an achievable goal. State aid increasingly was tied to average daily attendance, and thus stimulated the pursuit of truants. School leaders joined muckraking journalists, foes of child labor, and elite reformers in political campaigns to translate their concerns into compulsory schooling and child labor laws. In part as a consequence of the new laws, school systems developed new officials whose sole purpose was to insure universal attendance (usually to age fourteen). Members of these new bureaucracies—school census takers, truant officers, statisticians, and school social workers—became experts in "child accounting." [12]

As city systems grew in size and bureaucratic complexity, the number of specialized administrative offices and administrators expanded dramatically. In 1889 the U.S. Commissioner of Education first included data on officers "whose time is devoted

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wholly or principally to supervision." The category was new enough to cause confusion—and indeed statistics on the number of administrators and their nonteaching staffs are still hard to determine. That year 484 cities reported an average of only 4 supervisors per city. But from 1890 to 1920 the number of "supervisory officers" jumped from 9 to 144 in Baltimore, 7 to 159 in Boston, 31 to 329 in Detroit, 58 to 155 in St. Louis, 235 to 1,310 in New York, 10 to 159 in Cleveland, and 66 to 268 in Philadelphia. Robert and Helen Lynd pointed out that in 1890 in Middletown the superintendent was the only person in the system who did not teach, but by the 1920's there was between the teacher and superintendent "a whole galaxy of principals, assistant principals, supervisors of special subjects, directors of vocational education and home economics, deans, attendance officers, and clerks, who do no teaching but are concerned in one way or another with keeping the system going." Problems were met "not by changes in its foundation but by adding fresh stories to its superstructure." [13]

Schoolmen created special programs for retarded, deaf, blind, delinquent, gifted, anemic, and other groups of children, and specialized tracks and schools for vocational and other special training. With such differentiation came dozens of new job categories, programs of professional preparation, and many new bureaus and officials. Specialists of all sorts formed their own professional associations: superintendents, secondary school principals, elementary school principals, counselors, curriculum directors, vocational education teachers, high school teachers of art, music, English, social studies, and many others. Together with the rapidly expanding college and university departments and schools of education, professional associations helped to persuade state legislatures to pass laws requiring certificates for the various specializations. Replacing the earlier licenses based on examinations, the new certificates were based on completion of professional training and legitimized specialists by *level*—kindergarten, elementary school, junior high school, high school, and so on—and by *function*—principal, guidance counselor, school librarian, supervisor, or teacher of vocational subjects, and so forth. In 1900 only two states had specialized credentials; by 1930 almost all states had elaborate certification laws. In the

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decade following 1912, fifty-six cities created research departments that kept track of the new credentials and bureaus, tested the "intelligence" and achievement of pupils, helped to channel students, and amassed statistics for "child accounting" and business management.[14]

In the half century following 1890, then, there was a vast influx into urban schools of youth who previously might have gone to work or roamed the streets, pushed into the classroom by child labor laws and compulsory attendance or attracted by new curricula, activities, and facilities. At the same time, the structure of urban schools became enormously complex and differentiated for diverse groups in the population.

Differentiated education was not a new phenomenon in city schools, of course. We have seen that schoolmen sometimes treated groups like the Irish poor or black children in a manner different from the mainstream of children in the common school. But the goal of uniform education had been an attractive one in the nineteenth century both for practical and ideological reasons. Many of the innovations designed to offer differentiated schooling in the nineteenth century stemmed not so much from career educators as from wealthy philanthropists, merchants, and industrialists. Influential lay people, for example, founded private kindergartens for poor children in cities as far apart as Boston and San Francisco; in a number of cities they privately funded the first public trade schools and commercial high schools, as well as "industrial schools" for the children of the poor; they supported the first program of vocational guidance; they created "parental schools" and other institutions for truants and pre-delinquents; and they sometimes subsidized municipal research bureaus, which were the forerunners of research departments of city school systems. Through these programs the elites sought to reach children bypassed by the public schools or to provide skills or services absent in the one best system. Thus kindergartens or industrial schools had taken children off the slum streets; commercial or trade schools had taught skills which industrialists or merchants wanted; vocational counselors in settlement houses had helped boys and girls find jobs. Piece by piece such new agencies were added to the public school structure.[15]

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A Critical View of School Surveys

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But the administrative progressives were not content with piecemeal reform, however much they might agree with the specific changes pioneered by lay elites. After all, the corporate model of school governance was predicated on the idea that experts should design and run the system. Education professors like Strayer, Judd, and Cubberley were training superintendents at Columbia, Chicago, and Stanford. The new "school executives" were taking control of big cities and the professional associations. Together they were developing new strategies for public schooling as well as differentiated structures. A group of such educational leaders formed the "Cleveland Conference," which agreed at a meeting in 1918 that the time was ripe for "a radical reorganization" of schooling and concluded that changes would "go on in the haphazard fashion which has characterized our school history unless some group gets together and undertakes in a cooperative way to coordinate reforms." [16]

The administrative progressives were convinced that "traditional education"—the old one best system—was profoundly anachronistic and flawed. In their journals, they attacked the old uniform curriculum, the undifferentiated structure, the recitation methods, and the skimpy training of teachers typical in nineteenth-century city schools as rigid, unscientific, wasteful, and inhumane. They were evangelists for new educational goals of science and social efficiency. They still wanted a one best system, but it was to be a more complex, differentiated organization adapted to new social and economic conditions.[17]

Social efficiency demanded a new relationship between school and society. The administrative progressives believed that the schools should better prepare students for the tasks they would face in life. To them the old idea that a common school grounding in the three R's would suffice for any career and that public education could train any boy to be President of the United States was clearly absurd. Cubberley wrote that urban schools should "give up the exceedingly democratic idea that all are equal, and that our society is devoid of classes," and should adapt the school to the existing social structure. "Increasing specialization . . . has divided the people into dozens of more or less clearly defined classes," he wrote, "and the increasing centralization of trade and industry has concentrated business in the

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hands of a relatively small number. . . . No longer can a man save up a thousand dollars and start in business for himself with much chance of success. The employee tends to remain an employee; the wage earner tends to remain a wage earner." It was clear that "success is higher up the ladder now than it was a generation ago, while the crowd about the bottom increases every year." Simple realism decreed that the public schools should prepare some students directly for subordinate roles in the economy while it screened out those fit for further training in higher education. As we shall see, the "science" of psychological measurement would enable schoolmen to retain their traditional faith in *individual* opportunity while in fact the intelligence tests often were unintentionally biased against certain groups.[18]

The vocational education movement clearly expressed the type of reform Cubberley had in mind. During the nineteenth century some educators regarded industrial education as appropriate for low status people, and they experimented with different versions of skill training in reform schools and in institutions for black and Indian youth.[19] But specific vocational preparation spread to other segments of the population, especially when private donors founded commercial and trade high schools in large cities. In city after city businessmen decided that the regular school curriculum did not provide skills they needed in industry or commerce. They gave large sums to establish special schools; in New York, for example, J. P. Morgan endowed the New York Trades Schools with $500,000. By the early twentieth century most such commercial and technical schools founded by philanthropists had been absorbed into the public system, and businessmen in the National Association of Manufacturers and Chambers of Commerce were calling for greatly expanded vocational instruction in urban schools. By 1910 the movement had won broad support, with endorsements from the NEA and the American Federation of Labor (which had long been suspicious of the trade schools as sources of scab labor, but which apparently joined the movement in the hope of sharing in its control and improving the earnings of skilled labor). By 1918 the advocates of vocational training helped to secure federal funds through the Smith-Hughes Act.[20]

As Norton Grubb and Marvin Lazerson argue, the vocational

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education movement was significant not so much for the numbers of students who actually enrolled in industrial curricula or courses—normally under 10 percent—but because it represented an increasing conviction "that the primary goal of schooling was to prepare youth for the job market" and that the way to do this was through vocational guidance and testing, junior high schools, and differentiated curricula. Most arguments over the character of vocational education concerned who should control it—the existing school boards or new governing groups—and whether industrial schools were "simply a mechanism of social class stratification offering second-class education." By and large educators successfully fought separate boards of control, and instead they included vocational schools, tracks, or courses within the comprehensive system. The question of stratification proved more complex, as the vocational program often became a dead-end side track for lower-class youth.[21]

William H. Dooley, principal of Technical High School in Fall River, Massachusetts, described in 1916 how industrial education could serve the student he described as the "ne'er-do-well" (educators have been prolific in names for the "laggard," "slow learner," "retarded," "reluctant," "hand-minded," "disadvantaged," child who does not fit the system). Dooley maintained that schooling should be mostly adapted to the 85 percent of pupils who would become workers in industry and commerce and who were in danger of becoming cogs in the machine. Untrained, such people might become technologically unemployed, a condition that "breeds discontent that threatens the existence of our government." The old patterns of learning to work on a farm or through apprenticeship no longer worked for city children, nor did the older forms of moral socialization operate effectively. Now a child might wake up in the morning to find his parents off to the mill, go to school dirty and hungry, and "spend the day and evening on the streets, with the result that the dormant vicious tendencies are allowed to develop instead of being stifled by proper parental influence." Schools that teach an abstract curriculum and promote students on the basis of a literary test fail the "motor-minded" child. An efficient school, on the other hand, will measure and account for every child, providing different opportunities depending on his or her needs.

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"Unskilled and socially inefficient" children of new immigrants constituted a particularly troublesome subset of the "ne'er-do-well" class. It would be unwise to forbid such children to work in factories between the ages of fourteen and sixteen, thought Dooley, for "they have descended from ancestors who mature early in life and have intensely practical ideas, and therefore should develop useful industrial habits during the early part of adolescence." It is only misguided "groups of social workers in this country attempting to tear down our institutions" who would force "unjust legislation on the community, such as compulsory full-time education for children up to sixteen years of age or over." No, what these children need is the industrial discipline of a job supplemented by a vocational part-time school. However harsh Dooley's attitude may appear today, his concern for the millworker's child was genuine and his proposal for a continuation school was at least an advance over a ten-hour day of unbroken drudgery.[22]

Not all administrative progressives agreed with Dooley's particular specifications for the proletarian child or with Cubberley's open avowal of class-based education, of course. But the underlying principle of differentiating schooling to meet the needs of different classes of pupils—as determined by the educational expert in the light of the presumed career of the student—almost all would have accepted. This was the heart of the doctrine of social efficiency. It was partly for this reason that the educational sociologist David Snedden so admired the experiments possible in reform schools, for there the experts had a preselected population over whom they had virtually total social control.[23]