PUBLIC SPONSORSHIP OF SPECIAL EDUCATION IN PENNSYLVANIA FROM 1818 TO 1834

By Roderick N. Ryon*

THE Pennsylvania General Assembly forged the Commonwealth's first public school system in 1818 when it voted to open free schools for poor children in Philadelphia City and County. Sixteen years later, in 1834, another session of the legislature crowned the work of its predecessor. It voted to expand the system by opening school districts throughout the state and to expand the new, tax-supported schools themselves by opening them free of charge to all children. The public school in Philadelphia had inspired surveys of literacy throughout the state, a wealth of promotional literature, a state society to spread the need for common schools, and lobbying at Harrisburg over the years, all of which culminated in the Act of 1834. So great, in fact, was the crusade for public schools after 1818 that it also spawned experiments of state support for private institutions of special education. State sponsorship was an important by-product of the public education movement. The Pennsylvania General Assembly subsidized schools for deaf, blind, and delinquent children. These financial grants permitted tiny institutions offering special education to survive and to expand. Leading crusaders for public education and the guiding ideas of the public education movement spurred the state to help private schools from 1818 to 1834.

The free school movement in Pennsylvania did not begin with workers or Utopian radicals who demanded that the state match the educational offering of private schools for the well-to-do. Nor did a widespread conviction of the rights of citizens to free education spark the crusade. Instead, the extremely bitter winter of 1816-1817 touched off the first campaign for public schools.

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Aroused by reports of food and fuel shortages and illness among the poor, a band of Philadelphia's aristocrats, including prosperous businessmen, lawyers, judges, and philanthropists, organized the Pennsylvania Society for the Promotion of Public Economy in February, 1817. The society collected funds for the poor and investigated the causes of urban pauperism. Within a year the members concluded that public schools would remedy the ignorance and immorality which caused poverty and required vast outlays for poor relief and punishment of crime. The society petitioned the General Assembly to open public schools in the city, and the Act of 1818 incorporated most of the provisions of a draft of a bill prepared by the members.1

"Schooling for all" and moral reform were the ideas which underlay both the proposal of the Philadelphia reformers and the Act of 1818. Workingmen's parties and urban laborers have sometimes been credited in Pennsylvania and elsewhere with democratizing public education and abolishing the hated pauper schools. Philadelphia aristocrats, however, suggested common schools nine years before the city's laborers protested against the class distinctions of the public schools. The legislature did reject the society's plea that charges for tuition be waived for all children, but the lawmakers hoped to insure schooling for the entire citizenry. The mass of poor children would fill the classrooms of the public schools, while other scholars would continue to enroll in the state's many private schools. No reformer exposed the gap between the theory of education for all and the class education established by the General Assembly, but the dream of some type of school for every Pennsylvania child immediately posed a question about the handicapped. Were not deaf, blind, and delinquent children among the body of "all children"? And were they not especially likely to appear on poor relief rosters or in local jails? Poverty, it appeared, would persist despite the new schoolhouses in Philadelphia unless the state moved toward its goal of education for all.2

Experiments with education for the deaf demonstrated how

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much the fate of private, special education rested upon the crusade for public schools. Two months before Philadelphians organized the Public Economy Society, several of them had tried and failed to open a private school for the deaf. William Tilghman, Chief Justice of the Commonwealth, had convened a public meeting in Philadelphia in December, 1816, where Laurent Clerc and Thomas Gallaudet had appealed to the citizenry for funds for a school. Gallaudet founded the American Asylum for the Education of Deaf and Dumb Persons at Hartford, Connecticut, one year later. Tilghman had been helped by Jonah Thompson, later a director of Philadelphia schools, and by Roberts Vaux, an energetic founder, teacher, and administrator of several Quaker charity schools, later renowned for his agitation for penal reform. Vaux and Thompson were the real sponsors of the Public Economy Society's suggested school bill in 1817.²

The speeches of Gallaudet and Clerc accomplished nothing in December, 1816. The well-to-do citizens to whom Tilghman, Thompson, and Vaux had directed their pleas dismissed the notion of teaching deaf children when no one had yet provided for normal children whom all recognized as educable. The shortage of financial pledges also shattered the reformers' optimism. A charity school dependent on private contributions alone could not survive. A school for deaf children needed a state subsidy, but the General Assembly would never vote the funds until public schools were going enterprises.⁴

Educational reformers, therefore, returned to their old project for special education at the first opportunity after public schools opened in Philadelphia. David Seixas, a young merchant in the city, attracted their attention when he assembled a few young mutes in his shop on Market Street in 1819. The amateur schoolmaster taught the children his self-devised sign language. Roberts Vaux and Horace Binney, later a Congressman and founder of the Apprentices' Library in Philadelphia for poor workers, convened a meeting of their charity-minded friends who voted to sponsor Seixas's class as the Pennsylvania Institution for the Deaf and


⁴ Laurent Clerc to Jonah Thompson, April 10, 1817, Thompson Papers, Historical Society of Pennsylvania; Allen, Brief History, p. 8.
Dumb. They wrote a constitution, elected officers, voted a salary for Seixas, and sent him to Hartford to examine Gallaudet's American Asylum. The Board of Directors, however, acknowledged that despite its impressive title the school was only a tiny class of poorly taught students. Only a handful of day scholars could enroll, and dozens, perhaps even hundreds, of deaf children throughout the Commonwealth could never be touched by the institution.5

The directors chose Roberts Vaux to prepare a petition to the General Assembly begging for state aid. As president of the Board of Controllers of the public schools Vaux had already won a reputation as an expert on education. He worked with another friend of public schools to win the votes of reluctant legislators for a subsidy. Senator Samuel Breck was a director of public schools in Philadelphia County and fourteen years later gained fame for his sponsorship of the School Act of 1834. He then presided over the joint committee of the General Assembly which investigated the condition of education throughout the state and prepared the Act of 1834.6

Breck presented the petition of the Pennsylvania Institution in December, 1820, and was chairman of the committee which urged the Senate to pass it. To convince the doubting Thomases of the Assembly, Seixas and several directors accompanied six children to Harrisburg. There the youngsters showed their sign-language skills to the Governor and the House of Representatives on January 10. The directors feared the Assembly's crowded calendar would crowd out an appropriation bill for the school, but the exhibition delighted the lawmakers, and a bill which gave the school $8,000 passed both houses within a month. The bill also promised the institution $160 for each Pennsylvania student unable to pay expenses, whom the school would educate free. The Assembly, therefore, clung to the principle adopted in 1818: the Commonwealth would not teach every child without tuition charges, but it would insure a chance for an education for each child.7

5MSS Minutes of the Pennsylvania Institution for the Deaf and Dumb, April 29-November 22, 1820, Pennsylvania School for the Deaf, Philadelphia.
The grant of $8,000 overjoyed the Board of the Pennsylvania Institution, but it did not, of course, pay the host of bills for materials, salaries, and administration which multiplied as the school expanded. The directors spent the money for a building site on Broad Street, and the grant permitted them to borrow $15,000 for a classroom edifice and dormitories. Although they were plagued by a mounting debt, they discovered that state sponsorship, which they proudly explained in tracts and pamphlets, encouraged private contributions. In one year, 1822, the school added 217 names to its list of subscribers, an increase of 179. Thousands of dollars had been pledged in bequests by 1825.

In 1822 publicity of a scandal at the school and an intraboard feud actually brought to light the directors' unwavering faith in appropriations from the state. The board had voted to fire David Seixas as principal in November, 1821, and to replace him with the renowned Laurent Clerc. A majority of the directors suspected Seixas of immoral, or at least indiscreet, treatment of teen-age girls at the school. Charges against him had not been proved, but he had also angered the directors when he refused to teach manual arts. The directors believed that education for a trade and moral training were the greatest weapons against poverty, and that only a schoolmaster above reproach merited a position. A minority of the directors, however, supported the deposed principal, and in January, 1822, both sides scrambled for help from their friends in Harrisburg in their battle for control of the institution. The supporters of Seixas persuaded the General Assembly to investigate the circumstances of his removal. A committee of the House criticized the board but refused to demand that the directors reinstate him. Seixas and his friends on the board consequently founded a new school, the Philadelphia Asylum for the Deaf and Dumb. Fearing a collapse without state help, each school demanded the tuition grants for itself and lobbied against help for the other for two years. Appealing to state pride, Seixas called his teaching methods the "Pennsylvania System" in tracts and petitions forwarded to the legislature. The Philadelphia Asylum, however, won

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9 Ibid., 1822-1823, p. 16.
10 Ibid., 1825-1826, p. 13.
only $1,000 from the General Assembly, and, true to its sponsors’

The legislature passed supplementary acts in 1825, 1829, and 1833, which continued the tuition grants for poor children educated by the Pennsylvania Institution. In 1827 the Assembly agreed to exempt its facilities from property taxes.\footnote{Acts of the General Assembly, 1824-1825, p. 31; 1826-1827, pp. 44-45; 1828-1829, p. 23; 1832-1833, p. 51.} The enrollment climbed rapidly after new buildings were completed in 1827, and the school taught reading, writing, mechanical arts, and “morals” to almost eighty students each year. It had edged the state slightly toward its goal of education for all children.

The General Assembly did not subsidize education for juvenile delinquents until 1827, but again it was educational agitators and debates on public schooling that stirred the state to action. In 1826 several members of the Philadelphia Society for Alleviating the Miseries of Public Prisons and several of the city’s prominent Quaker philanthropists began collections for a House of Refuge for delinquents. The project caught the eye of the city’s press and public because it stemmed from the campaign of the society for the construction of a new penitentiary. They anticipated that Eastern State Penitentiary would implement the celebrated “Pennsylvania” or “solitary confinement” system of penal discipline. Campaigners for a House of Refuge borrowed the ideas of these penal reformers, since they accepted their notion that contamination of youngsters with hardened criminals nurtured careers of law-breaking. They also, however, based their project on the principle that ignorance and illiteracy fostered crime. John Griscom, a New York educator and disciple of the popular European pedagogues, Pestalozzi and Fellenberg, had organized the Society for the Prevention of Pauperism in New York City in 1817. He had founded the New York House of Refuge in 1825 to fight crime and poverty. In Philadelphia, the new institution also became a school to battle against law-breaking and indigence.\footnote{John Sergeant, An Address from the Managers of the House of Refuge to their Fellow Citizens (Philadelphia, 1826), p. 6; Negley K. Teeters, “The Early Days of the Philadelphia House of Refuge,” Pennsylvania History, XXVII (April, 1960), 165-187.}
The movement for public schools had gathered momentum concurrently with the agitation for a school for delinquents. Led until 1827 primarily by supervisors and the Board of Controllers of Philadelphia’s public schools, its chief organs of propaganda were the controllers’ widely-circulated annual reports. These tracts consistently noted the host of poor children who avoided school to wander the streets. The act of incorporation of the House of Refuge in 1826 therefore provided that habitual vagrants could be confined in the new institution. The law was actually the first compulsory school attendance act, albeit for special youngsters, which the Commonwealth passed.\(^4\)

The House of Refuge won more aid from the General Assembly than the Pennsylvania Institution for the Deaf and Dumb. The legislature exempted its property from taxation in 1826 and the next year voted $10,000 for the penal school, while Roberts Vaux, John Sergeant, and other educators in the city had collected only $8,000 from private subscriptions. Philadelphia County added $20,000 in 1828 and 1829 for a lot and a building. Annual payments from the state after 1829 quickly filled the institution’s coffers, and by April, 1834, it had received $88,000 of public monies. Since the state and Philadelphia County had contributed heavily, the mayor of the city and the Judge of the Court of Quarter Sessions of Philadelphia chose five of the twelve managers of the institution after 1832.\(^5\)

The Board of Managers purchased a five-acre site in the city, and the first inmate was accepted in the new building in December, 1828. Dr. John Keagy, an author of educational tracts and a friend of New England’s Bronson Alcott, was chosen superintendent in 1829. Keagy, a former professor, had also studied the writings of the reformers Pestalozzi and Fellenberg. Most of the children whom magistrates and the Overseers of the Poor committed were under sixteen. They learned weaving, tailoring, and cobbbling, but no student was released until he could write his lessons and read the Bible. Since reformers valued moral teachings over all else, students were grouped not by academic abilities or age but according to how well they had mastered lessons of duty and obedience. A work-study program was so successful that Phila-


\(^5\) Ibid., 1826-1827, pp. 76-79; 1829-1830, p. 134; 1831-1832, pp. 224-225; 1832-1833, p. 224.
delphia workingmen protested in 1829 that the sale of the juveniles’ goods hampered their efforts to win higher wages, but the Board disregarded their complaints. By 1834 the institution was confining over one hundred children annually.\textsuperscript{16}

Although the Philadelphia laborers failed to stifle the growth of the House of Refuge, they did cast a spotlight on the divisions within the ranks of educational reformers when they protested the competition from the penal school. The Workingmen’s party and its newspaper, the \textit{Mechanics’ Free Press}, joined the crusade for free schools in 1827 and campaigned for four years. Concurrently, principals of academies, prominent professors and politicians, and experimenters in private schools for manual education spoke out for public schools. The Pennsylvania Society for the Promotion of Public Schools, also organized in 1827, conducted surveys of literacy and campaigned for education throughout the Commonwealth. The School Act of 1831, which authorized a special fund from the sale of land for public schools, stemmed from the work of these groups. Most supporters, however, adhered to the ideas of “schools-for-all” and character training which had guided the public school movement since 1818. Moreover, Philadelphi’a’s prominent reformers remained at the helm of the crusade, outlasted the agitation of the workers, and alone determined the fate of state aid for special education.\textsuperscript{17}

Philadelphia’s wealthy reformers provided an ironic demonstration of power over special education projects when a split within their ranks smothered the Infant School movement. Mathew Carey, the state’s famous publisher and a member of the Public Schools Society, Bishop William White, later president of the Pennsylvania Institution for the Instruction of the Blind, and John Sergeant, president of the House of Refuge, sponsored petitions in 1828 to incorporate private Infant Schools for pre-school-age children into the public school system. Roberts Vaux, who presided at meetings of both the Public Schools Society and the Board of Controllers, opposed the measure because he believed it would weaken the hold of monitorial, or Lancasterian, education on the


public schools. Borrowed from charity schools in England, the
monitorial system authorized one instructor in a class of two to
five hundred children. The teacher was assisted by several
monitors, slightly older and more advanced students, who re-
peated verbatim the lessons of the teacher. The controllers had
adopted it for Philadelphia schools in 1818 precisely because it
was especially suited to instilling principles of morality. Delaying
tactics and lobbying by Vaux kept Infant Schools out of the
system until 1834.18

Crusaders for public schools failed until 1834 to persuade the
General Assembly that taxes, not a meager school fund, were
needed to support a statewide system. Governor George Wolf
and Samuel Breck began pressuring the General Assembly for a
new law in December, 1833, and the candor of the two powerful
friends of free schools at once signaled supporters of special ed-
ucation to reunite. They hoped to channel the sentiment for general
education into a school for the blind. Several Philadelphia edu-
cators had organized the Pennsylvania Institution for the Instruc-
tion of the Blind in January, 1833. Impressed by Samuel Gridley
Howe's experiments at the newly opened New England Asylum
in Massachusetts, they planned to seek state aid even before they
organized the new school. They hired a principal, Joseph Fried-
lander, a teacher of the blind from Prussia, and opened the doors
of a tiny school in April, 1833. The constitution of the institution
averred that it would be supported by private subscriptions and
donations and by state funds. The managers chose Governor Wolf
as a patron of the school and addressed a circular letter to mer-
bers of the General Assembly which asked them to enumerate the
blind in their districts.19

Like the deaf school fourteen years earlier, the institution merely
subsisted until January, 1834, when several children gave a musical
recital and an exhibition before the General Assembly and over
one thousand guests in Harrisburg. Breck recorded in his diary
that when the blind youngsters sang and recited poems about

18 Ibid., pp. 155-159; Charles C. Ellis, Lancasterian Schools in Philadelphia
(Ph. D. Thesis, University of Pennsylvania, 1907), pp. 41-50; Vaux to Henry
Simpson, January 20, 1831, Gulielma M. Howland Collection, Haverford
College.

19 Constitution, Charter, and By-Laws and Documents Relating to the
Pennsylvania Institution for the Instruction of the Blind at Philadelphia
(Philadelphia, 1837), pp. 11-12; Elisabeth D. Freund, Crusader for Light:
Julius R. Friedlander: Founder of the Overbrook School for the Blind:
parents whom they had never seen, there was “scarcely a dry eye amongst us.” An appropriation of $10,000 passed the Assembly two months before the lawmakers enacted the Public School Act of 1834. The law also promised the school $160 for each child whom the board judged too poor to pay expenses and $10,000 additional if it could raise $20,000 from other sources. The board raised the $20,000 and opened a new school building in October, 1836, on Race Street in Philadelphia. The managers advertised the state’s grant throughout the state and declared it allowed them to hire new teachers and offer musical, manual, and, of course, “moral” lessons to over one hundred students.

The year 1834 closed a chapter in Pennsylvania public education and its by-product private, special education. Although enemies of public schools almost forced a repeal of the Act of 1834, new friends of public schools, including non-Philadelphians, politicians such as Thaddeus Stevens, and full-time educators fended off the attacks, and tax-supported common schools began to open throughout the state. The new supporters of public schools did not agitate for larger grants to private schools, perhaps because they believed the victory had been won. The public school movement from 1818 to 1834 had been a crusade to build character and elevate public morals, and since private schools instilled principles of virtue in children who especially needed them, the crusaders had demanded that the state sponsor them also. An interlocking directorate had, by and large, ruled the special and public education movements. The reformers who had written tracts, organized societies, and lobbied for public schools had also prepared petitions, organized boards, and campaigned for funds for private schools for the deaf, the delinquent, and the blind. Public money had converted make-shift schools into flourishing institutions. The subsidies had not replaced, but only encouraged, greater private contributions, and they were never a step toward public ownership of the schools. Conceived at a time when Americans throughout the North were agitating for public schools, they are evidence that, in the Age of the Common Man, the uncommon child also found a champion in his state government.

MSS, January 27, 1834.