ESSAY REVIEW

Class, Politics, and Urban School Reform


In April 1983 the National Commission on Excellence in Education submitted a report to the American people condemning the nation's secondary schools and calling for reforms. Entitled A Nation at Risk, the Commission's report did not stand alone for long. It was soon joined by many other reports, each critical of American education at the elementary, secondary, or collegiate level. Such fanfares for reform have been a regular feature of American education since the mid-nineteenth century. Whether or not the current wave of criticism is able to prompt meaningful and lasting change, it reminds us that Americans have seldom been satisfied with the educational status quo. But what kinds of school reform have Americans favored and what explains the process by which proposals for change have been accepted or rejected?

Paul E. Peterson and David John Hogan have searched for answers to these questions by examining the transformation of urban education in the United States over the last quarter of the nineteenth and the first third of the twentieth centuries. In separate volumes each has scrutinized such reforms as the curricular enhancement and administrative reorganization of city schools. But their respective analyses differ significantly: Peterson stresses the importance of politics, while Hogan focuses on the role of social and economic status in educational change. A political scientist, Peterson relies on the concept of power to explain school reform. According to him, only through politics have such variables as class, race, and ethnicity contributed to the transformation of schools. A historian, Hogan, like many educational historians working today, believes in the primacy of class as an analytical tool. He shows how such disparate factors as ethnicity and benevolence, on the one hand, and social class, on the other, have interacted
to shape the process of educational change. In addition, he demonstrates the importance of ideology as a determinant of reform. Neither Hogan nor Peterson discusses Philadelphia, per se, but given the common ground in the history of urban schools, students of Philadelphia’s or any major city’s educational history can profit from the observations and analyses of these two authors.

Peterson’s work resulted from a collaborative effort, involving seven other researchers. His book focuses on three American cities: Atlanta, Chicago, and San Francisco. Located in different parts of the nation, they amount to a more representative sample than what is commonly found in historical case studies of urban school reform. To achieve change in these cities, Peterson says, reformers had to be resourceful and flexible, for the “complex pluralistic politics of urban America kept schools from becoming the captive of any special set of group interests” (p. 24). Contrary to what historians like Colin Greer and Michael B. Katz have said, school reform was not imposed from the top down but came about from bilateral contact among many constituencies. On such issues as the expansion of schooling, the diversification of the curriculum, racial desegregation, and the bureaucratization of public education, policy emerged from the accumulation of power. Formed to advocate one reform or another, coalitions composed of representatives from such different groups as labor, business, and education sought the same changes whether or not their members agreed on the reasons for their common action.

Educators called for the enlargement of the curriculum to develop “a wider clientele and . . . a broader base of support” (p. 52). Ethnic groups endorsed some academic reforms, favoring more foreign language instruction to preserve traditional cultures. Both business and working-class leaders supported vocational education, but they arrived at this consensus from different directions. Management spokesmen said that “additional courses in the practical skills [were] required for growing industrial economies.” Labor “defended the differentiated curriculum as an essential ingredient of a democratic society” (p. 71). That many educators spoke the language of business may have been a reflection of the distribution of power. But was their support for industrial training prompted only by a selfish concern for the well-being of the educational establishment?

The economic and cultural aspects of racial discrimination and civil rights reform receive insufficient attention in Peterson’s book. According to him,

1 See, for example, Colin Greer, The Great School Legend: A Revisionist Interpretation of American Public Education (New York, 1972); and Michael B. Katz, Class, Bureaucracy and Schools: The Illusion of Educational Change in America (New York, 1971).
minorities won "concessions only when they had the political strength to do so" (p. 95). In San Francisco the Chinese were excluded from the public schools, but the Japanese escaped the same fate because the Tokyo government persuaded President Theodore Roosevelt to intervene on its countrymen's behalf. Compared to those in Atlanta, blacks in Chicago fared somewhat better because of their clout in the local Democratic machine. In 1920 their schoolhouses were less crowded, if not integrated, because of their voting power, not unlike the situation in Philadelphia where blacks used their political influence in the 1930s to gain a seat on the board of education. But what of the economic and social factors affecting such school reform? Was Chicago more tolerant of blacks because its economy was strong? Did the historical and cultural differences among Atlanta, Chicago, and San Francisco make discrimination more or less intractable in each of these cities? While not ignored, such questions become secondary within the political framework of Peterson's book.

In the late nineteenth century bureaucratization stood out as a popular urban reform. The centralization and standardization of municipal management was said to be a necessary, even inevitable response to the increased size and complexity of cities, but in the 1960s some historians took a different and more critical view of bureaucratization. According to Samuel P. Hays, the reorganization or urban government robbed the poor of what little power they possessed, concentrating it in the hands of the rich. Hays questioned the reformers' claim that immigrant and working-class leaders could not be trusted with the public good.²

Peterson, however, views bureaucratic reform as an expression of broad-based support for modernization rather than as a manifestation of cultural conflict or class domination. In Atlanta ward bosses did not set school policy. When the city's board of education was reorganized in 1897, it was the traditional elite who were displaced. Dominated by men on the make, the new school board was devoted to regional progress, a goal toward which well-managed public schools could make a major contribution. In Chicago reformers, teachers, and labor endorsed bureaucratic school reform. Enacted by the Illinois legislature in 1917, the Otis bill strengthened Chicago's school superintendent, instituted a system of teacher tenure, and gave more autonomy to the board of education. Business leaders did not favor these reforms but compromised when faced with the prospect of legislation even

more supportive of bureaucratization than that which eventually passed. Compared to Atlanta, Chicago arrived at organizational reform from a more democratic direction. For Peterson, this difference demonstrates the limitations of any interpretation based upon conflict between the rich and the poor. If the same structural outcome could occur in two cities, despite different sources of support, how could it ever be explained as a “victory of economic and social elites over working-class organizations?” In reality, many constituencies were almost always involved, resulting in “a more complex pattern of social interactions than that suggested by the bipolarities of class conflict” (pp. 135-36). But common to all bureaucratic reform was “an emerging professional class” that was responsive to the growing complexity of America and committed to the use of scientific and rational means to manage change. This group stood to gain from modernization, but, says Peterson, its “self-interest was disciplined by a concomitant concern for the public interest” (p. 207).

In his book on school reform in Chicago, David John Hogan also examines the Otis bill and the history of school centralization. This kind of reform, he says, “imposed” on Chicago’s educational system “a hierarchically organized structure of authority, modeled on corporate industry” (p. 215). It applied business values to school administration. But its significance lies not only in what it did to promote educational efficiency but also in what it did to enhance class consciousness. “Centralization,” says Hogan, “was part and parcel of a process of class formation—the making of a professional middle class” (p. 217).

Class is a dynamic concept in Hogan’s work. Relying on the theory of the British historian, E. P. Thompson, Hogan rejects the idea that social classes are static categories used to sift population. Instead, he says, class should be thought of as a series of evolving relationships. Classes continually interact with their social and economic environment, recreating their institutions and rethinking their strategies for living. In Chicago the middle and working classes were not concerned with conflict or social control at the beginning of the twentieth century. Rather, they wanted to become more aware of their social and economic circumstances and better able to adapt to them.

Middle-class reformers responded to change by trying to overcome the bad effects of urbanization, industrialization, and the wage labor system. Led by businessmen, educators, and social workers, they established parks, playgrounds, and settlement houses, and they campaigned for workman’s compensation, child labor restrictions, and compulsory education. Their objective was not cultural uniformity or class domination but progress and harmony to be achieved through “individual moral development” and social
justice. They hoped that "the children of Chicago could simultaneously be saved from the market and prepared for it" (p. 94).

The behavior of the Chicago working class did not always conform to the expectations of the reformers, reflecting instead the workers' own commitment to class construction and reconstruction. To survive in a wage-labor system, many poor families sent their sons and daughters to work at an early age. Others took in boarders, and a few even depended on maternal employment. The goal of such sacrifice was home ownership, a class-based objective thought to protect against the uncertainties of life in a market economy. Between 1910 and 1930 the Chicago working class increasingly sent their children to school for a longer time, perhaps because more and more now believed that the skills acquired there had economic significance. But despite the importance of class in explaining Chicago's social and economic history, ethnicity shaped its development, too. By the 1920s immigrants from Italy and eastern Europe had become more committed to home ownership than those of native birth. The rapid growth of parish schools among Roman Catholics demonstrated a strong desire to preserve ethnic differences and culture-group solidarity. In a market economy Chicago's workers compromised between the demands of ethnicity and class.

Hogan's analysis portrays Chicago's working class as more reactive and insular than its middle class. In both their economic and ethnic lives those at the bottom protected themselves by adjusting to conditions beyond their control. Middle-class reformers, on the other hand, exceeded themselves, reaching out to those at other levels of society. Was this proactive and other-directed behavior a form of class reconstruction or an expression of paternalism and social control? Despite his disavowal of the social control hypothesis, Hogan makes concessions to it, especially in his treatment of vocational education in the Chicago public schools.

The total segregation of vocational students was an option given serious consideration by educators and businessmen in Chicago. Led by Marshall Field and George Pullman, the business community in the city opened a private manual training high school in 1884. To counteract this competition, the public schools soon incorporated practical subject matter into their curriculum. In 1888 the Chicago board of education made manual training a regular part of secondary education. Two years later it opened English High and Manual Training School, a new kind of high school which gave equal weight to mental and manual studies. The separation of vocational and academic work nearly became complete early in the twentieth century. In 1913, 1915, and 1917 the Illinois legislature considered but failed to enact a bill backed by businessmen from Chicago and the city's former school superintendent, Edwin G. Cooley, to establish a separate state system of vocational schools. But even without such reform the Chicago public
schools moved toward a more differentiated and class-biased approach to public education. Between 1890 and 1920 narrow trade training and curricular tracking replaced the more general exposure to the world of work represented by manual training. In the nineteenth century, Hogan says, a "republican liberal ideology" shaped American educational policy, justifying teachings which served both "commerce" and "virtue," freedom and order. But by 1900 "a strictly liberal conception of educational arrangements, based on an acceptance of a differentiated society and the priority of labor market requirements, superseded earlier republican liberal conceptions of common schooling" (p. 159). In addition to commercial and industrial courses, mental testing, junior high schools, and vocational guidance helped to "fine tune the calibration of schooling with the labor market" and "reconcile the individual to the available job structure" (p. 181). What distinguishes this argument from one characterized by social control? Is it the subjective intent of the reformers or the objective power of a wage-labor economy? Hogan's readers will search in vain for direct and clear answers to questions such as these.

The two books under consideration here are important contributions to the literature on the history of urban education in America. But are they relevant to the understanding of Philadelphia or, indeed, any city in Pennsylvania or the Middle Atlantic region? Since the 1930s many different scholars have written about the history of elementary and secondary education in the Delaware Valley. There are studies of Quaker education, black education, and the development of Roman Catholic schools. Some of the most important work deals with the origins of public education in Philadelphia. The aims of the common school reformers and the ethnic conflict their efforts spawned have been well researched. The bureaucratization of the public schools at the end of the nineteenth century has also received

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thoughtful attention. But no comprehensive history of the Philadelphia public schools has ever appeared. Education and schooling, in particular, were largely neglected by the many social historians who gathered around the files of the Philadelphia Social History Project in the 1970s. This is not to say that no one proposed to undertake such work. In fact, David Hogan and his colleague at the University of Pennsylvania, Michael B. Katz, looked at the relationship among the family, schooling, and work in nineteenth-century Philadelphia. Although their findings have not been published, the questions they posed resemble some of those Hogan asked about Chicago. How do such variables as family economy, social class, ethnicity, and gender affect school attendance and pupil performance? What is the connection between schooling and occupation? Paul Peterson likely would agree with Katz's and Hogan's belief that the reform of school management in Philadelphia and other cities was "the product of complex processes of political conflict and negotiation among competing groups."

The work of Peterson and Hogan can and should inform research on education in Philadelphia. Most accounts of Philadelphia school reform have stressed its elitism; this interpretation may or may not need to be revised. A comprehensive study of the forces which reshaped the Philadelphia board of education in the mid-1960s might demonstrate broad-based support for this political movement. The impact of class and ethnicity on the educational agenda, so apparent in the existing literature on schooling in Philadelphia, should be the subject of more research, especially for the years since World War I. The children of Jewish, Italian, and Polish immigrants became parents and teachers after 1920, bringing their own brand of ethnic and class concerns to the educational process. The rapid growth of the city's black population changed the relationship among the black middle class, the black working class, and the public schools. The persistence of school segregation cannot be explained entirely by racism. Perhaps the Philadelphia


public schools since 1954 should be examined from the perspective of Peterson's conclusion that "changes in school policy [have] followed changes in the political status of racial minorities much more than any changes in their economic place" (p. 116).

As the "workshop of the world" until after World War II, Philadelphia needed a large and competent labor force. Between 1885 and 1910 its school board opened four manual training high schools and later made vocational education integral to the comprehensive high school curriculum. But how the city's workers actually learned their trades and how much or how little they depended upon the public or parochial schools for such training are questions still awaiting answers. Since 1945 the city's shift to a service economy has made new demands on education. Lacking the requisite communications skills, a permanent underclass may be forming in cities like Philadelphia. At the same time the growth of one-parent and two-income families has profoundly influenced the demand for day care and early childhood education. What has been Philadelphia's response?

The historical study of education in Philadelphia can take many different directions in the years ahead. That it need not begin from scratch stems not only from what we already know about Philadelphia but also from what scholars like Hogan and Peterson have taught us about other cities. Their work is not without flaws. But their attention to such themes as class formation, interest group politics, and ideology moves beyond data to a conceptual basis for understanding. In bringing Philadelphia to the comparative study of urban school reform future historical work should do the same.

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