

Outside In and Inside Out: Civic Activism, Helen Oakes, and the Philadelphia Public Schools, 1960–1989

IN JANUARY 1952 THE *SCHOOL EXECUTIVE*, a professional journal for school administrators, published a special issue on citizens and schools that called attention to a flurry of citizen involvement with public education in the United States since the end of World War II. Of course, citizen participation in public education was, by then, nothing new. In the nineteenth century, citizens had often concerned themselves with schools, forming school societies, organizing advocacy groups, and joining school boards. Such volunteers were usually educated men of means, but women became involved too. The Civic Club of Philadelphia, for example, brought together many prominent white women who aimed to promote “by education and active cooperation a higher public spirit and better public order.” The club’s agenda included the election of women to school boards and the beautification of public schools.¹ But even as these men and women were reaching out, the professionalization of teaching and the centralization of policy making were gradually changing the relationship between citizens and schools, erecting barriers, both formal and informal, to citizens’ influence.

A series of economic, social, and political crises after 1930 drove many Americans to engage with the public schools. The onset of the Great Depression convinced some businessmen and taxpayers to participate in deliberations about the financial support of public schools. In New York and Chicago, citizens’ committees formed that called for massive budget

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¹Anne Firor Scott, *Natural Allies: Women’s Associations in American History* (Urbana, IL, 1991), 120–21, 127; Julie Johnson, “The Civic Club of Philadelphia,” in *Invisible Philadelphia: Community through Voluntary Organizations*, ed. Jean Barth Toll and Mildred Gillam (Philadelphia, 1995), 352–53.

cuts. A Citizens' Conference on the Crisis in Education, assembled by President Herbert Hoover in January 1933, did just the opposite; it recommended sacrifice in the private sector to maintain existing levels of funding for public schools. Once the United States entered World War II, citizen support for national defense spilled into the public schools, prompting the federal government to appropriate money for some school districts to change the way they prepared their students. The threat posed by totalitarianism abroad persuaded the president of Harvard University, James B. Conant, to call for the organization of a national citizens' group on public education in 1942, but it would be five years before a cluster of leaders in public relations and journalism—headed by Roy E. Larsen, the president of Time Incorporated—would form the National Citizens Commission for the Public Schools (NCCPS). Dismayed by what it perceived to be shameful, even dangerous, neglect, the commission called upon all Americans to form local advocacy groups.² By the time the *School Executive* published its special issue in 1952, there were more than 1,500 citizens' committees in the United States, working both with and for educators to revitalize the public schools. Writing for this special issue, Eleanor Cole, the assistant director of the NCCPS, called such groups "workshops of democracy." Foster Brown, dean of the State University Teachers College in Cortland, New York, echoed the sentiment that all Americans were responsible for their public schools. Only by exercising "their rights and duties as citizens" could they ensure the quality of their children's education.³

But what did it mean to exercise such rights and duties? According to the political scientist Michael Schudson, the model citizen is not just involved; he or she is also informed. The tension between broad-based participation in government and the expertise required to understand its complex issues—a dynamic explored with care by Walter Lippmann and John Dewey in the 1920s—was becoming ever more acute. Television coverage of the presidential nominating conventions in 1952 and 1956 turned millions of ordinary Americans into political voyeurs drawn in by a story line fashioned by well-trained journalists. In 1960, CBS News

² "Educational News and Editorial Comment," *School Review* 41 (1933): 161–74; Benjamin Fine, "Commission Set Up to Study Schools," *New York Times*, May 16, 1949, 23; Charles Dorn, *American Education, Democracy, and the Second World War* (New York, 2007), 76–79, 86–91; David B. Dreiman, *How to Get Better Schools: A Tested Program* (New York, 1956), 68.

³ Eleanor Cole, "Results Citizens Committees Have Secured," *School Executive* 71 (Jan. 1952): 62; Foster S. Brown, "Local Citizens Committees: Roots of the Vine," *ibid.*, 53.

executive Don Hewitt shaped the future of presidential politics when he produced and directed the first of four televised debates between Richard M. Nixon and John F. Kennedy. Even as television made Americans more informed, however, many were choosing to become less involved. According to Theda Skocpol, citizen participation in American social and political life transformed in the 1950s as civic organizations run by volunteers started giving way to professional advocacy groups.⁴

It was at the inception of this transformation that one citizen, Helen Oakes, decided to become both informed and involved, choosing as the object of her attention the Philadelphia public schools. A member of what Robert Putnam has called the “long civic generation,” Oakes belonged to that cohort of men and women born between the two world wars whose commitment to civic engagement outdistanced that of both the preceding and succeeding generation.⁵ Her long career as a civic activist demonstrates both the limits and the possibilities of citizen engagement with public schools. It began when she joined several local civic organizations. The middle-class men and women who belonged to these groups believed they could influence the policies and practices of the Philadelphia public schools by building a network of communication and understanding among people like themselves. These fruitful connections, referred to as social capital by social scientists such as Pierre Bourdieu, might help them make a difference in the schools.⁶ But public

⁴ Michael Schudson, *The Good Citizen: A History of American Civic Life* (Cambridge, MA, 1998), 211–15, 233–39; Theda Skocpol, “Voice and Inequality: The Transformation of American Civic Democracy,” *Perspectives on Politics* 2 (2004): 3–20.

⁵ Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York, 2000), 132, 254.

⁶ The theory of social capital is closely associated with French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, who studied the social networks acquired in school, and American sociologists Robert D. Putnam and James S. Coleman. It is central to the argument in Putnam’s best-selling book, *Bowling Alone*, in which he tried to explain what he perceived to be the collapse of civic engagement in the United States in the last third of the twentieth century. Coleman used it to study changing patterns of school attendance and variable levels of student achievement. See, for example, his “Families and Schools,” *Educational Researcher* 16 (Aug.–Sept. 1987): 32–38. Some historians of education have used this theory to analyze the expansion of schooling and the education of immigrants, while others have explored its role in the history of educational politics. For examples of the first two lines of argument see: Claudia Goldin and Lawrence F. Katz, “Human Capital and Social Capital: The Rise of Secondary Schooling in America, 1910–1940,” *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 29 (1999): 683–723; John L. Rury, “Social Capital and Secondary Schooling: Interurban Differences in American Teenage Enrollment Rates in 1950,” *American Journal of Education* 110 (2004): 293–320; and Reed Ueda, “Second Generation Civic America: Education, Citizenship, and the Children of Immigrants,” *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 29 (1999): 661–81. For two examples of the third

officials do not always respond favorably to civic activists, especially if they are unable to augment the social capital amassed among friends and neighbors by building bridges between themselves and other social and political groups. When her organizations' efforts to improve West Philadelphia's public schools failed to gain traction with local government, Helen Oakes asserted herself. By writing and publishing her own newsletter on the Philadelphia public schools, she challenged long-standing assumptions by demonstrating that a stay-at-home mother could play a leadership role. Her work helped pave the way for Dr. Constance Clayton to become the city's first female superintendent of schools, but it did not prepare her for the resistance she would encounter first as a citizen activist and then as a member of the Philadelphia school board. The social capital she developed among outsiders like herself did not guarantee her access to power, and it eroded once she became a public official; as an insider, she could no longer participate freely in the network of communication and understanding upon which her rise to a position of power was built. The expertise she developed proved to be no special asset on the board either. No matter what she knew or how well she knew it, her knowledge alone was not enough to change the schools. Oakes's work was not wasted, however, for both as an outsider and an insider, she helped shape the conversation in Philadelphia about public schools.

Becoming a Citizen Activist

Born in 1924, Helen Baum Oakes received an elite, private education. After graduating from the Harley School in Rochester, New York, she attended Smith College (BA 1944) where she majored in physics. Among her peers at Smith was Betty Friedan (née Bettye Naomi Goldstein), whose famous book, *The Feminine Mystique* (1962), published many years later, voiced the frustrations shared by many educated, middle-class women confined to the home. By the late 1950s, Oakes was a member of this demographic group. She and her husband, Earle, settled in Overbrook, a suburban enclave in upper West Philadelphia, where they enrolled their four children in public schools. Neither Oakes nor her husband could have known then that she would become well known as an

approach, see Nancy Beadie, *Education and the Creation of Capital in the Early Republic* (New York, 2010), esp. 320–23; and Christine Woyshner, *The National PTA, Race, and Civic Engagement, 1897–1970* (Columbus, OH, 2009).

expert on public education and serve on the Philadelphia school board. But it did not take her long to become involved. She joined the Overbrook Elementary Home and School Association, a logical move, and then the West Philadelphia Schools Committee, an informal group of community leaders concerned about segregation in their neighborhood schools. In 1965 Oakes began a five-year stint as chair of the Education Committee of the League of Women Voters, a membership organization known for its commitment to reasoned debate and the nonpartisan exploration of public issues.⁷ This position helped her become informed as well as involved and won her the respect of those whose help she would need when she eventually struck out on her own.

In 1964 Oakes learned a valuable lesson about the politics of public schools. By then the Philadelphia Home and School Council had been in existence for twenty-nine years. It recognized parents by giving them a sanctioned role, but, unlike its predecessor, the Philadelphia Home and School League, it never rocked the boat. The council's officers came from a small pool and were chosen by consensus, but in 1964 a group of parents proposed that the process by which these officers were selected be reformed. Assembling their own list of candidates, these parents argued that voters should have a choice. Helen Oakes was on their slate as a candidate for vice president. "We think the Council should be independent of the school administration," she explained to a newspaper reporter. "Now it's a puppet."⁸ The council's nominating committee was unmoved, but Helen Oakes was not deterred. Instead, she became better informed and even more involved, attending a Philadelphia school board meeting for the first time that fall—one of many to follow.

⁷ Daniel Horowitz, "Rethinking Betty Friedan and *The Feminine Mystique*: Labor Union Radicalism and Feminism in Cold War America," *American Quarterly* 48 (1996): 8, 23–25; Maralyn Lois Polak, "Helen Oakes: She talked out of school," ca. 1990, and "Biographical Data, June 9, 1986," in series 13, box 46 (Confidential Correspondence 1982–1986), folder O, Helen Oakes Papers: Board of Education (Acc. 707), Special Collections Research Center, Temple University Libraries, Philadelphia, PA. Hereafter cited as Oakes Papers: Board of Education (SCRC 17).

⁸ Peter Binzen, "Home and School Rebels Fight to Get Slate on Ballot," *Philadelphia Bulletin*, Mar. 31, 1964, and "Home and School Council Blocks Slating for Office of 7 Independents," *ibid.*, Apr. 8, 1964, in Helen Oakes: Home and School Council envelope, George D. McDowell Philadelphia Evening Bulletin Newsclippings Collection, Special Collections Research Center, Temple University Libraries. Hereafter cited as Bulletin Clippings Collection.

The West Philadelphia Schools Committee

Since the origins of urban public education in the early nineteenth century, citizens have vied with school officials for control. Local decision making competed on an equal footing with centralized governance in most urban school districts at first, but, beginning in the 1850s, reformers gradually altered the status quo by arguing successfully for apolitical policy making and the professional management of public schools. Never at the cutting edge of such reform, the School District of Philadelphia (SDP) did not have a superintendent until 1883—long after Boston, Buffalo, Chicago, and St. Louis. Another twenty-two years would pass before its central school board would have the power enjoyed by its counterparts elsewhere.⁹ But even though the distance between those making public school policy and those affected by it grew slowly in Philadelphia, some private citizens resisted, hoping to retain influence if not achieve control. Educators dealt with this resistance by welcoming parents as long as they did not interfere with the work of the professionals. Between 1910 and 1940, home and school associations became commonplace at the elementary level, helping to make the neighborhood school a symbol of citizen involvement in Philadelphia. But neighborhood schools also served as the point of no return for both whites and blacks during the heyday of the civil rights movement because desegregated schools implied at least the possibility of integrated neighborhoods.¹⁰

By 1965 there were many local and even some citywide citizens' groups working to improve Philadelphia's public schools. The challenge they faced was monumental: decrepit buildings, underpaid teachers, and overcrowded classrooms were not the exception but the rule. Because of such conditions, a well-organized and militant teachers' union had been certified and was now asserting itself. Changes in the student population presented yet another challenge; thousands of African American children

⁹ David Tyack, *The One Best System: A History of American Urban Education* (Cambridge, MA, 1974); William H. Issel, "Modernization in Philadelphia School Reform," *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 94 (1970): 358–83.

¹⁰ William W. Cutler III, *Parents and Schools: The 150-Year Struggle for Control in American Education* (Chicago, 2000), 74–84; Jon S. Birger, "Race, Reaction, and Reform: The Three Rs of Philadelphia School Politics, 1965–1971," *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 120 (1996): 163–216; Matthew Countryman, *Up South: Civil Rights and Black Power in Philadelphia* (Philadelphia, 2006), 244–57. See also Silvie Murray, *The Progressive Housewife: Community Activism in Suburban Queens, 1945–1965* (Philadelphia, 2003), 126–28, 166–67; and Amanda I. Seligman, *Block by Block: Neighborhoods and Public Policy on Chicago's West Side* (Chicago, 2005), 214–15.

whose parents had come to Philadelphia looking for work during and after World War II were now enrolled in the city's public schools. "Stimulated and guided" by the NCCPS, the Citizens Committee for Public Education in Philadelphia (CCPEP) came together in 1953, bringing to fruition organizing efforts dating back to 1947. Claiming to be "neither an arm of the Board of Education nor a finger pointed at it," the CCPEP described itself as an organization committed to nothing less than educational excellence. It participated in a successful reform campaign that reduced the size of the school board from fifteen to nine and gave the city council the power to set school tax limits. The Ogontz Area Neighbors Association (OANA) made public education one of its priorities. Formed with the help of the Philadelphia Commission on Human Relations in 1959, it wanted to "stabilize" a residential neighborhood in the northwest quadrant of the city that was by then rapidly evolving. Led by Florence Cohen, whose husband, David, was a local attorney and an aspiring politician, it tried to slow "white flight" by discouraging realtors from block busting, a strategy that only worked for a while. In a move that may have been counterproductive, OANA persuaded the Board of Education to transfer one hundred pupils from a predominantly black to a predominantly white elementary school. But no matter how well or poorly they did, organizations like OANA soldiered on. By 1963 they had become so visible that they banded together to form the Philadelphia Federation of Community Councils.¹¹ Its members hoped they could turn the social capital they built among their friends and neighbors into citywide political influence.

Most neighborhood associations in Philadelphia dealt with a wide range of issues, but the West Philadelphia Schools Committee (WPSC) focused on just one—public education. Anchored on its eastern end by the Drexel Institute of Technology and the University of Pennsylvania, West Philadelphia was being transformed. The Penn and Drexel campuses were expanding, displacing many longtime residents. African

¹¹ "7 Rallies to Back School Needs," Apr. 11, 1947, CCPEP: 1962 and before, Bulletin Clippings Collection Microfiche; CCPEP flier, Oct. 1956, CCPEP: Large Clippings, Bulletin Clippings Collection; Marilyn Gittell and T. Edward Hollander, "The Process of Change: Case Study of Philadelphia," in *The Politics of Urban Education*, ed. Marilyn Gittell and Alan G. Hevesi (New York, 1969), 230–32. Florence Cohen to Sam Gabor, June 3, 1960, in box 1, folder 18, Correspondence Florence Cohen, 1959–1960 and "Neighborhood Groups Cooperate and Get Results," *Sunday Bulletin*, Feb. 3, 1963, box 5, folder 12, Scrapbooks and Clippings, 1962–1969, Ogontz Area Neighbors Association (Philadelphia, Pa.) Records (Acc. 879), Special Collections Research Center, Temple University Libraries. Hereafter OANA Records.

Americans of modest means now lived there, clustered around the street-car lines that fed the city's downtown. As their numbers grew, they became increasingly isolated in their neighborhoods. Ten of the public elementary schools to which they sent their children were now totally segregated. The black enrollment of West Philadelphia High School climbed from 85 to 97 percent between 1959 and 1961.¹² Responding to these conditions, representatives from a dozen home and school councils and community groups banded together in 1960 to form the WPSC. They drew from a reservoir of young, middle-class residents brought to the area by its proximity to the downtown, its relatively inexpensive but still upscale housing stock, and its institutions of higher education. The founders of the WPSC believed that the city's future depended on good public schools and that efforts to improve them all could not be successful if the ones in West Philadelphia became completely segregated. "The purpose of the West Philadelphia Schools Committee," its bylaws said, "is to obtain and secure for every child an equal opportunity to achieve his maximum potential in an integrated public school offering quality education."¹³

Helen Oakes became the chair of the WPSC in 1966. She had worked her way up, serving on the organization's executive committee and for one year as its co-chair. By then, the WPSC had earned a reputation for thoughtful, pointed commentary on the public schools. A detailed critique of a three-year building program released by the SDP in 1962 had been an important step. Testifying at a public hearing several months later, the WPSC called the plan a blueprint for failure and accused the leaders of the SDP of disingenuousness. Even as the SDP told the white and black communities in West Philadelphia what they each wanted to hear, their plan discriminated against some neighborhoods, the WPSC said, especially those that were poor, black, and mute. The WPSC dis-

¹² Office of Research and Evaluation, School District of Philadelphia, *1959-1968 Negro Enrollment in the Philadelphia Public Schools* (Philadelphia, 1969), 1-3. In the SDP as a whole, black students achieved majority status for the first time in 1962.

¹³ Sandra Featherman, "Public Education Reform in the Twentieth Century," in Toll and Gillam, *Invisible Philadelphia*, 698; Sherman Dorn, *Creating the Dropout: An Institutional and Social History of School Failure* (Westport, CT, 1996), 114; Recruitment letter, West Philadelphia Schools Committee, May 30, 1962, box 1, folder Meeting Minutes 1962, and Constitution and Bylaws of the West Philadelphia School Committee, June 1962, box 1, folder Constitution and Bylaws, both in West Philadelphia Schools Committee Records (Acc. 306), Special Collections Research Center, Temple University Libraries. Hereafter cited as WPSC Papers. See also Helen Oakes Interview, May 15, 2012, box 1, folder 5, William W. Cutler Oral Histories (SCRC 9), Special Collections Research Center, Temple University Libraries. Hereafter cited as the Oakes interview. The CCPEP and an elite group known as the Greater Philadelphia Movement led the citywide reform effort.

missed the SDP's claim that black families recently arrived from the South were responsible for their children's low achievement. It blamed the district's inexperienced teachers, overcrowded classrooms, and segregated schools instead.¹⁴

The leaders of the WPSC believed that the SDP would have to take drastic steps to overcome the impact of residential segregation on the public schools. A school buildings survey prepared in the mid-1960s for the district failed to satisfy Oakes and her colleagues; they thought its approach to new construction would simply reinforce existing demographic patterns. To make a real difference, the SDP would have to fulfill its stated commitment to comprehensive planning. Like City Planning Commission director Edmund Bacon, who wanted to revitalize Philadelphia by building self-contained business and shopping districts, especially in or near the downtown, the leaders of the WPSC opposed scattered-site school construction, favoring instead a series of educational parks, each of which would be built to educate children at all grade levels. They were not the only ones interested in this idea; school reformers in Pittsburgh, Syracuse, and even New York City considered it too. The Philadelphia Urban League proposed it, as did many civil rights and community groups. But no one embraced this idea more enthusiastically than Helen Oakes. In 1966 the Philadelphia Committee for Educational Parks, whose seven-member board included her husband, Earle, put forward a plan for twenty educational parks to be built in Philadelphia over the next fourteen years. Representing the WPSC, Oakes testified in favor of this proposal before the Board of Education in February 1967. Only a "system" of educational parks, she said, could stem white flight and provide the kind of diversified education needed by all students.¹⁵

¹⁴ Membership development letter, spring 1965, in box 1, folder Membership 1965; Statement of the WPSC to the District One Subcommittee appointed to review the Non-Discrimination Policy of the School District of Philadelphia, May 16, 1963, box 1, folder 1963 Statements of the WPSC; Statement to the Board of Public Education Regarding the Proposed Building Program by the WPSC, Sept. 20, 1962, box 2, folder Proposed Building Program, all in WPSC Papers.

¹⁵ Public Testimony on the 1964 List of Schools, Feb. 27, 1964, box 2, folder Public Testimony—Junior High Schools 1964; A Short History of the Junior High School at 46th and Market Streets, Feb. 16, 1965, box 2, folder Comprehensive School Building Plan, 1965; Statement on the Educational Park Study Presented to the Board of Public Education by the WPSC, Feb. 20, 1967, box 2, folder Public Statements & News Releases, 1967, WPSC Papers. Emphasis is in the original. See also Michael Clapper, "School Design, Site Selection, and the Political Geography of Race in Postwar Philadelphia," *Journal of Planning History* 5 (2006): 253–54; Countryman, *Up South*, 245; Alfred P. Fernandez, "The Educational Park: A Second Look," *Journal of Secondary Education* 45 (May 1970): 223–29.

Oakes's testimony to the board was informed by an exchange of letters with James S. Coleman, the person most responsible for *Equality of Educational Opportunity*, a national report on student achievement that had caused a sensation among educators and policy makers when it was published the year before. The Coleman report raised questions about the efficacy of public schools and was cited by the CORDE Corporation, which had been hired by the SDP to conduct a feasibility study of educational parks. The CORDE Corporation urged caution, claiming that black achievement improved significantly only when black children attended predominantly white, middle-class schools. Unconvinced, Oakes tracked Coleman down in England, where he was on leave from his faculty position at Johns Hopkins University, and then used to her advantage his guarded response in which he admitted that his findings on student achievement in segregated schools were inconclusive and that educational parks were such a novel idea that no one really knew whether they could make a difference.¹⁶ The SDP never built any educational parks, but that did not discourage Oakes. She remained committed to gathering reliable information and then using her findings to make what she hoped would be convincing arguments for reform in the Philadelphia public schools.

More than a Citizen Activist

The WPSC folded in 1971, its members frustrated by what they perceived to be the arrogance of Philadelphia school officials. As the WPSC saw it, these officials did not take their ideas seriously—they merely listened politely before proceeding with their original plans. Perhaps this was because the committee was never able to build what some social scientists refer to as “civic capacity”—a combination of influence and authority that derives from broad-based support by both community

¹⁶ Helen Oakes to Dr. James S. Coleman, Feb. 7, 1967, and James S. Coleman to Helen Oakes, Feb. 13, 1967, both in box 1, folder Correspondence 7/1/66–3/6/67, in WPSC Papers. See also An Analysis by the WPSC of the CORDE Corporation's Feasibility Study of Educational Parks, Feb. 13, 1967, box 2, folder Public Statements and News Releases, 1967, WPCS Papers. CORDE was an acronym for Community Resources and Development, Inc. Soon after receiving the CORDE Report, the SDP issued a school building plan that favored scattered site construction, not educational parks. Anne E. Phillips, “A History of the Struggle for School Desegregation in Philadelphia, 1955–1967,” *Pennsylvania History* 72 (2005): 65–66.

leaders and public officials.¹⁷ Although its membership was multiracial, the majority of WPSC officers came from one demographic group: middle-class whites. None held appointive or elective office in Philadelphia. Helen Oakes, however, took advantage of the knowledge she had gained and the network of contacts she had acquired as the organization's chair. Acting on her own, she wrote and self-published a lengthy paper titled "The School District of Philadelphia: A Critical Analysis." Its purpose, she said, was to call attention to the fact that, despite recent reforms, the SDP still fell far short of what the citizens of Philadelphia had a right to expect. "This paper," she wrote, "is written to stress the fact that existing conditions demand that the Board of Education, the Superintendent of Schools, and the Superintendent's staff must focus their full attention and the School District's resources on devising and implementing plans which will lead to immediate improvement in the quality of teaching and the amount of learning taking place in hundreds of classrooms at the same time."¹⁸

Oakes first turned her attention to the Board of Education. Reorganized in 1965, its nine members were no longer appointed by the judges of the Court of Common Pleas—who had shouldered this responsibility for nearly a century—but by the mayor from a slate of candidates put together by a nominating panel whose members he had selected. Presided over by former mayor Richardson Dilworth, the new board had made many improvements to the district's facilities, faculty, and programs. But, according to Oakes, it had not addressed such fundamental problems as high dropout rates and low achievement levels. "Too many teachers and administrators," she complained, believed that "the children themselves, their parents, their backgrounds and their environment" were to blame.¹⁹ The fault really lay with the district itself, which needed to engage in some soul searching. Anticipating what investigative journalist Charles E. Silberman would soon assert in his acclaimed book *Crisis in the Classroom*, Oakes argued that the Dilworth Board of Education had made change for the sake of change and did not really know where it

¹⁷ Jeffrey R. Henig and Clarence Stone, "Civic Capacity and Education Reform: The Case for School-Community Realignment," in *City Schools: How Districts and Communities Can Create Smart Education Systems*, ed. Robert Rothman (Cambridge, MA, 2007), 125–26, 129.

¹⁸ Helen Oakes, "The School District of Philadelphia: A Critical Analysis," 2, box 22, folder 8, Helen Oakes Papers: Personal (Acc. 995), Special Collections Research Center, Temple University Libraries. Emphasis is in the original. Hereafter cited as Oakes Papers: Personal.

¹⁹ Gittell and Hollander, "Process of Change," 218, 222; Oakes, "Critical Analysis," 25, 27–28.

wanted to take the district. Silberman called this kind of leadership “mindless.” Oakes was more cynical, labeling it a “smoke screen.” Simply “modernizing buildings and equipment, and implementing new programs,” she said, “does not change the deplorable truth that black children and poor children (black and white) are still being neglected and short-changed . . . in the city’s schools.”²⁰

Would Helen Oakes have written this paper had there never been organizations like the WPSC? Perhaps—by the late 1960s the federal government was actively promoting citizen involvement in public schools—but without it she never would have had the social capital necessary for her words to have an impact. Because of her work with the WPSC and the League of Women Voters, she knew there was an audience for her ideas, a network of people like herself who would read and react to what she wrote. She would build on this foundation two years later when she began to write and publish the *Oakes Newsletter*. The idea for this publication actually came from her husband, but she did most of the work herself. Assisted by her sister-in-law, who edited what she wrote, Oakes published ten times a year at first. Leading educators such as Jack Niemeyer, the president of the Bank Street College of Education in New York, were the source of many insights, but she relied mainly on local fieldwork, ecumenical reading, and the careful analysis of SDP reports and records.²¹ No longer just informed, Helen Oakes now represented herself as an expert on educational policy and practice. It was a bold move, especially for a woman with no formal training in a field populated if not dominated by people with advanced degrees and prestigious titles. But believing in the power of what she knew, Oakes made the newsletter viable, persuading two foundations and a few hundred loyal subscribers to pay its bills.

Over the course of its run (1970–89), the *Oakes Newsletter* became very well known. Its circulation never exceeded 2,400, but its visibility was great because Oakes sent it to local leaders in government, business, and education, who then passed it around. She reached out to them—but not to the SDP’s teachers or their union leaders—because she wanted to influence the making of public school policy. The *Oakes Newsletter* was,

²⁰ Charles E. Silberman, *Crisis in the Classroom: The Remaking of American Education* (New York, 1970), 10–11; Oakes, “Critical Analysis,” 39.

²¹ Oakes interview, 12–14. On social capital formation in Philadelphia, see Richardson Dilworth, ed., *Social Capital in the City: Community and Civic Life in Philadelphia* (Philadelphia, 2006), 5.

in effect, her attempt to build a different kind of social—and, ultimately, political—capital, the kind intended to connect her with the city's corporate leaders and public officials. They might be persuaded by the careful research that went into each issue, if not by her progressive point of view. But because the newsletter often criticized the educational status quo, it made enemies as well as friends among Philadelphia's most powerful people. Mayors, superintendents, and school board members read it because they might have to defend themselves. The newsletter covered a wide range of topics, among the most common being the teaching of reading, school finance, and desegregation. Social justice was a theme, especially when it came to the schooling received by at-risk students. Incompetent management was always fair game, and for those whose leadership she condemned, its criticism must have stung. "The Newsletter's goal," Oakes explained more than once, "is to contribute to restoring the Philadelphia public school system to financial health and changing the system so that it will better serve the educational aspirations and needs of the students."²²

Oakes stressed the idea that public education depends on public participation. "The public and school staff members must hammer the budget out together," she wrote in the inaugural issue (April 1970), when the SDP was facing the first of what would turn out to be many fiscal crises.²³ In the absence of such collaboration, the community could not rest assured that its priorities would be known, much less honored. Achieving this was no easy task, especially in an institution that was so big and bureaucratic. But for meaningful participation to occur, more than just interest was needed; civic activists had to do their homework. As if to prove that such people existed, Oakes held up the work of Floyd Logan and Annette Temin for celebration and emulation. As the leader of the Educational Equality League, a civil rights group that he founded, Logan "used statistics, logic, documented facts, analysis of School District reports, and a methodological approach to achieve breakthroughs and improvements." Oakes and Temin were well acquainted, having sat together on the board of the CCPEP in the early 1970s. Even as its president, Temin eschewed the limelight, Oakes told her readers in 1974, preferring collective achievement to individual recognition. Her work habits

²² "Biographical Data, June 9, 1986"; Oakes interview, 31.

²³ *Oakes Newsletter*, Apr. 1970, 1. All issues of the *Oakes Newsletter* are in box 1, Oakes Papers: Personal. They are distributed as follows: folder 1, Apr. 1970–June 1975; folders 4 and 5, Sept. 1975–May/June 1982; folders 6 and 7, Sept. 1982–May/June, 1989.

were as important as her integrity. "She keeps abreast of new or experimental programs," Oakes wrote, and when she finds one that is worthwhile, she arranges a trip or a meeting to learn more about it. "In this way, she has introduced new ideas and concepts and stimulated others to try them."²⁴ With these words, Helen Oakes might just as well have been describing herself. They reflect what she did for many years as the writer and publisher of her newsletter.

Holding Insiders Accountable

The *Oakes Newsletter* had been in publication for more than twelve years when Dr. Constance Clayton became Philadelphia's school superintendent. For all that time Oakes had commented on the performance of the SDP's professional staff and administrative leaders. Put another way, she held them accountable. In 1974 she called attention to the district's convenient but dysfunctional habit of compiling the final grades for high school students two or three weeks before the school year ended. Once grades were in, she pointed out, student effort fell off and attendance diminished. School officials blamed the problem on the district's computers, but Oakes was not satisfied. "Teachers of all elementary and secondary school students have a responsibility to give students high quality instruction as long as school is officially in session," she wrote. "Administrators have a responsibility to see that this happens."²⁵

The process by which Philadelphia teachers were hired and supervised gave Oakes another reason to focus on the gap between what the community had a right to expect and what the SDP actually delivered. She complained loudly about teacher absenteeism, a pervasive and persistent problem tolerated by principals at a cost of millions. Such common practices as the provisional appointment of teachers and the transfer rather than dismissal of weak or inept ones belied the district's public statements about educational excellence. "If you strip the excuses away," Oakes observed, "what remains as the primary obstacle to dismissing teachers is a spineless, defeatist, immoral attitude toward the problem on the part of the decision makers or their advisers." The result, in her estimation, was a "crime against children."²⁶

²⁴ *Oakes Newsletter*, Jan. 1975, 4, Oct. 1974, 1, 4.

²⁵ *Oakes Newsletter*, Mar. 1974, 2-4.

²⁶ *Oakes Newsletter*, Feb. 1974, 7, Feb. 1976, 2-4.

Oakes took a special interest in the leadership provided by the SDP's quintessential insiders, its superintendents. Appointed in 1972, Matthew Costanzo received mixed reviews in the *Oakes Newsletter*. He won Oakes's respect for insisting that instruction continue "as long as school is officially in session"; he drew criticism for failing to do the research that was needed to cut chronic teacher absenteeism. But Costanzo shined in comparison to the school board that hired and eventually fired him. That board, she wrote, "decreased his effectiveness by interfering with personnel appointments, reversing his decisions and publicly displaying by their manner a lack of respect for him."²⁷ Led by public transit official Arthur Thomas, most of its members owed their seats to Frank L. Rizzo, a man who often spoke for the city's blue-collar, white residents. As Philadelphia's police commissioner in the 1960s, Rizzo had caught their attention by routing a crowd of black students demonstrating at the headquarters of the Board of Education in November 1967. Four years later he campaigned successfully for the city's highest political office on a law-and-order platform that included a promise to fire Mark Shedd, Costanzo's Harvard-educated predecessor. In 1975, Mayor Rizzo persuaded the school board to replace Costanzo with another Italian American, Michael P. Marcase. A Philadelphia native and SDP lifer, Marcase had taught industrial arts at three city high schools before being invited "downtown" in the mid-1960s.²⁸ If ever there was an SDP insider, it was Marcase.

By the end of Rizzo's first term, the SDP was in serious trouble. Plagued by budget deficits, it cut programs and furloughed teachers. "What happens in the classroom," Oakes wrote in 1977, "is inextricably joined with the budget and the way that the Board and the Superintendent accept their responsibility to balance and fund it." The SDP needed much more money, but its leaders were not about to risk their status as insiders by challenging an overbearing mayor who adamantly opposed any tax increases. Oakes was disgusted. "The superintendent and the Board have abandoned their responsibilities and are serv-

²⁷ *Oakes Newsletter*, Mar. 1974, 4, Feb. 1974, 4, Sept. 1975, 4. In September 1975, the *Oakes Newsletter* expressed "thanks" to Costanzo two months after the board abruptly dismissed him. *Oakes Newsletter*, Sept. 1975, 4.

²⁸ Countryman, *Up South*, 225–28; Lynne Litterine, "Michael Marcase: Unapologetic Conservative," Dec. 28, 1978, in Michael Marcase—Schools Superintendent, Bulletin Clippings Collection.

ing instead as city hall puppets.”²⁹ Their behavior discredited some of her most prized ideals: professional competence and respect for students.

Between 1977 and 1982 Oakes joined many others in criticizing Marcuse, whose credentials and conduct left so much to be desired that eventually only the two men who mattered most—the president of the school board and the mayor—thought he still deserved to be the superintendent. In 1978 the board approved a new collective bargaining agreement with the Philadelphia Federation of Teachers (PFT), a move that prompted Oakes to call for Marcuse’s removal. “He has demonstrated his incompetence,” she said, “and should be replaced at once.” Never before had she taken such a bold step, but the new agreement specified that “seniority alone” would determine staffing levels and assignments. This placed the students’ education at the mercy of the most objective but least professional measure of insider status: length of employment. The superintendent, she wrote, “should have foreseen the devastating consequences this policy would have as it ruined programs and wrecked departments.”³⁰ The PFT favored it, of course, and Marcuse was more than amenable. After all, it relieved him of having to make difficult personnel decisions, but wasn’t that, Oakes asserted, the real job of the superintendent? If the good citizen had a responsibility to become well informed, then surely the board and the superintendent had an even greater obligation to insist upon professional competence.

Helen Oakes did not get what she wanted in 1978. In fact, it would take the election of a new mayor to dislodge the superintendent. But Oakes did not back away, and eventually most of the city’s business and political leaders came to share her views. She did not bring Michael Marcuse down, but he was unable to withstand the pressure she helped bring to bear on him. By 1981 the city’s press was saying that confidence in the district would be impossible to restore as long as he remained the superintendent.³¹ When Rizzo left office, Marcuse’s days were numbered.

²⁹ *Oakes Newsletter*, Nov. 1977, 4, Sept. 1978, 4.

³⁰ *Oakes Newsletter*, Oct. 1978, 3–4.

³¹ *Oakes Newsletter*, Sept./Oct. 1980, 1, Mar. 1982, 1; “Why the Mayor Wants Marcuse Out,” Aug. 9, 1980, and “End the Marcuse Contract,” Aug. 18, 1980, both in Marcuse Editorials; Mary Bishop, Thomas Ferrick Jr., and Donald Kimmelman, “Michael Marcuse,” Aug. 31, 1981, School Superintendents: Features, all in Bulletin Clippings Collection.

Helen Oakes and Constance Clayton

On a humid day in October 1982, Constance Clayton replaced Michael Marcase as Philadelphia's school superintendent. A lifelong Philadelphian, Clayton was also an SDP insider; she had attended the city's public schools in the 1940s and had been employed by them almost continuously since 1955, when she graduated from college. With a master's degree from Temple University and a doctorate from the University of Pennsylvania, she possessed the credentials as well as the experience to justify her selection. But she was also a single woman, and chief school officers were rarely unmarried and even more rarely women. A well-established feature of employment in American education for more than a century, gender discrimination became even more pronounced after World War II. According to a study published by the American Association of School Administrators in 1981, the proportion of women superintendents in the United States had dropped from 9 to less than 1 percent in a single generation. Marital status presented a special dilemma for women who aspired to be superintendents. If they were married, they could be seen as insufficiently committed; if they were not, they could be stigmatized as unfeminine. For black women the challenge was even greater because so few of them ever became superintendents; in the early 1980s there were just eleven. Only two ran big city school systems: Floretta D. McKenzie in Washington, DC, and Ruth B. Love in Chicago. Throughout the search for Marcase's replacement, most of those mentioned as potential candidates had been men. Among the five finalists, Clayton was the only woman but not the only African American.³²

It would be wrong to say that Constance Clayton owed her selection to the editor and author of the *Oakes Newsletter*. As soon as it had become clear that Marcase's term would end, Oakes weighed in. Hoping for a reformer like Mark Shedd, she argued that the board should look for someone from outside the SDP. He or she could operate independently, making decisions free from the political and personal baggage that comes

³² Jackie M. Blount, *Destined to Rule the Schools: Women and the Superintendency, 1873–1995* (Albany, NY, 1998), 128–31, 148–49, 176; Nancy L. Arnez, "Selected Black Female Superintendents of Public School Systems," *Journal of Negro Education* 51 (1982): 309–10; Deborah Wilkinson, "New Superintendent Holds Key to School's Future?" *Philadelphia Tribune*, Aug. 24, 1982, 3. See also Pamela Smith, "Dr. Constance Clayton," *Philadelphia Tribune*, Oct. 12, 1982, 6; and Deborah Wilkinson, "17 Blacks Can Fill Marcase's Position," *Philadelphia Tribune*, Feb. 6, 1982.

with advancement inside any school system. He or she might even be able to disregard the “ethnic alliances” that had formed among the blacks, Italians, and Jews who worked for the SDP. Oakes did not lobby for any candidate, but her own career as a researcher and writer clearly demonstrated that competence and professionalism were not gendered. After Clayton was chosen, Oakes publicly supported the school board’s decision. Although the new superintendent was hardly the outsider Oakes had wanted, Clayton had a lot to recommend her. “She offers the promise of new leadership in new directions,” Oakes wrote. She “puts the children first. Her goal is excellence.” That the new superintendent was a well-qualified woman may have factored into Oakes’s thinking, but it is surely not coincidental that by the time she wrote these words Oakes was a Philadelphia school board member.³³

Over the course of her eleven years as the SDP’s superintendent, Constance Clayton gradually developed a reputation for being a domineering leader. Her strength and vision were assets when dealing with the press or the teachers’ union, but they could also make her “seem rigid and inflexible in other situations.” The standardized curriculum that she implemented placed the children first, but it limited the freedom of teachers, principals, and other administrators. Working relationships with the officers of the board and even some of her staff sometimes broke down over policy or procedural differences. When this happened, those who disagreed with her often left the system. Among big city superintendents, her long tenure was impressive. In Philadelphia it was exceptional, and Helen Oakes experienced most of it from inside the school system.³⁴

³³ *Oakes Newsletter*, Mar. 1982, 3, Oct. 1982, 1, 4. Mayor Bill Green appointed Oakes to the Philadelphia school board on April 12, 1982. “Biographical Data, June 9, 1986.” During the search process for Marcuse’s replacement, Oakes went south to evaluate other candidates. One of them was Wilmer S. Cody, the superintendent of schools in Birmingham, Alabama. According to the *Philadelphia Tribune*, she preferred him to Clayton. Jim Davis, “Green Light Did Not Come Easy for Clayton,” *Philadelphia Tribune*, Oct. 5, 1982, 25. Helen Oakes to Debra Weiner, Aug. 3, 1983, series 13, box 46 (Confidential Correspondence, 1982–1986), folder W, and Oakes memo to Ernestine Rouse, Jan. 13, 1984, series 13, box 46, folder R #1, Oakes Papers: Board of Education (SCRC 17); Oakes interview, 20.

³⁴ Superintendent’s Evaluation, Draft #4, June 23, 1984, series 12, box 44, folder marked superintendent’s evaluation #2, Oakes Papers: Board of Education (SCRC 17); Dale Mezzacappa, “Clayton Announces Retirement but May Stay through November,” *Philadelphia Inquirer*, July 17, 1993, A1; Mezzacappa, “The Tenor of a Tenure,” *ibid.*, Aug. 29, 1993, E1. See also Larry Cuban and Michael Usdan, *Powerful Reforms with Shallow Roots: Improving America’s Urban Schools* (New York, 2003), 102.

The social capital Oakes had amassed among other citizen activists and the recognition her newsletter had gained for her among the city's economic and political leaders made her a reasonable choice for the Board of Education. She accepted her appointment when it eventually came, believing she would be better able to make a difference as an insider. She also promised her readers that she would continue the newsletter. Some of her new colleagues objected, arguing that by doing so she put herself ahead of them; she responded by inviting them to publish newsletters of their own. Once she became a board member, however, her credibility as an independent critic gradually diminished because she no longer had the same freedom of association and expression.³⁵ As an insider, she had to exercise discretion in all that she said and did.

From Outsider to Insider

When Mayor Bill Green offered Helen Oakes a seat on the Philadelphia Board of Education, he compensated for a political decision made by his predecessor. Given the chance to appoint Oakes when she was nominated for the first time in 1979, Frank Rizzo chose Joseph Previty, a retired businessman from South Philadelphia, instead—an action that must have come as no surprise to anyone familiar with him. The board Oakes joined three years later included three women, only one of whom, Dolores Oberholtzer, was a veteran member. Since the mid-1950s there had occasionally been as many as three women on the city's Board of Education. Among the most prominent and enduring were Tobyann Boonin, a longtime member of the Home and School Council, and Elizabeth Hallstrom Greenfield, the wife of a wealthy businessman and political power broker.³⁶ Initially completing an unexpired term,

³⁵ Oakes interview, 9, 18; *Oakes Newsletter*, May/June 1982, 1. Board member Samuel Katz said that Oakes should reserve her criticism of the SDP to public meetings of the board. Samuel Rubin and Dolores Oberholtzer claimed that continuing to publish a subscription newsletter created a conflict of interest for Oakes. Dan Rottenberg, "More Newsletters Needed," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, Mar. 26, 1983, 11A; Oakes interview, 19–20.

³⁶ "Retired Exec's on School Board," July 3, 1979, Arthur Thomas: School Board, 1978, Bulletin Clippings Collection. Oakes was no doubt aware that George Hutt resigned as chair of the WPSC executive committee in 1965 to join the Philadelphia Board of Education, on which he served until his death thirteen years later. His appointment may have been due to his association with the WPSC but was more likely attributable to the fact that he had once been the director of the Education Council of the Greater Philadelphia Chamber of Commerce. Box 1, folder Membership 1965, WPSC Papers. Data on Philadelphia school board membership come from the *Philadelphia Bulletin Almanac* (Philadelphia, 1956–81). For more on Greenfield's impact on the board, see Gittel and Hollander, "The Process of Change," 228–29.

Oakes received her own appointment from Mayor Green in July 1983, six months ahead of schedule. The mayor also named Rodney Johnson, the city's managing director, and Christine Torres-Matrullo, a psychologist of Puerto Rican heritage. Having made it clear that he was not running for reelection, the mayor appeared to some to be stocking the school board with his future in mind. Perhaps, like former mayor Richardson Dilworth, he wanted to be appointed to the board with an eye to becoming its president.³⁷

The timing of these appointments did not sit well with some black politicians and civic leaders. Augustus Baxter, who left the board in 1983 after serving for twelve years, called Green's actions a "charade." The mayor's heir apparent, Wilson Goode, publicly complained that, as a lame duck, Green should have waited to consult with him after the election. Goode did not openly question the qualifications of Green's appointees, but when Oakes's full term on the board ended six years later, he replaced her with Floyd Alston, a black banker from Mt. Airy, one of the city's few integrated neighborhoods. Oakes was not ready to step down, and some attributed her departure to Constance Clayton. But the politics of race almost certainly had as much to do with Goode's decision as her relationship with Clayton. Because of the city's increasingly well-organized black electorate, black power was now much more than a slogan in Philadelphia. In the SDP, black students far outnumbered those from any other racial or ethnic group. All of these factors justified the selection of a black man over a white woman, regardless of their respective qualifications.³⁸

The reservations Oakes had harbored about Clayton when she was an inside candidate for superintendent carried over into the beginning of her administration. Oakes asked pointed questions from time to time and complained to others when she could not contain her frustration. She agreed with those who perceived a lack of leadership in the SDP—not enough people who took responsibility for the quality of life in the schools, were dedicated to their renewal, and cared about the students. When Clayton agreed to hold regular meetings with the board at the

³⁷ Jim Davis, "Green Must Have Personal Interest in School Board," *Philadelphia Tribune*, July 15, 1983.

³⁸ Oscar Berryman, "School Selection Is a 'Charade,'" and "Goode: New Mayor Should Have Made Selection," both in *Philadelphia Tribune*, July 12, 1983; "Goode Picks Black for School Board," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, Mar. 9, 1989, B3; Dale Mezzacappa, "Helen Oakes Leaves School Board after 7½ Years," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, Dec. 2, 1989.

beginning of her second year, Oakes reported being “very pleased,” but opined that something more was needed. The superintendent, she insisted, should declare “what she hopes to accomplish this year, next year and further down the road.” Gradually, Oakes became more approving—praising Clayton’s “philosophy, mission and goals for the system.” They came together on the subject of desegregation, but there continued to be some disagreements, especially about her leadership style, creating tension between them.³⁹ As a well-informed citizen, Oakes had sometimes weighed ethics against expedience before voicing a criticism or making a recommendation. As a board member, she had to cooperate with others and be guarded in her public statements. The decision to publish the *Oakes Newsletter* on a quarterly basis in 1987 was made not just because of declines in foundation support and subscription revenue. Oakes had begun to feel the burden of putting it together on a regular basis. It had also become a distraction—a holdover from her time as a citizen activist. Oakes pulled the plug entirely in January 1989, explaining with regret that it was time for her “to undertake something new.”⁴⁰ With its last issue, it is not an exaggeration to say, an era in the history of the SDP had ended.

While Clayton was its superintendent, the SDP took a new approach to desegregation. As reported in the *Oakes Newsletter*, the Philadelphia Board of Education and the Pennsylvania Human Relations Commission signed a memorandum of understanding on October 24, 1983, temporarily suspending the litigation over school segregation that had put the two at loggerheads for seventeen years. The basis for this agreement was a “modified desegregation plan” that the superintendent hoped would be true to its title: “To Educate All Our Children.” Conceding that desegregation could not be mandated, it targeted thirty elementary and middle schools for “voluntary transfers” and called for an increase in the district’s efforts to achieve “a racially balanced instructional staff.” To mitigate the effects of embedded racial isolation, it also proposed a social studies curriculum that would “focus on intercultural and interpersonal understanding.” In the past, Oakes reminded her readers,

³⁹ *Oakes Newsletter*, May/June 1983, 3, Feb. 1984, 4, May/June 1984, 2. Reflecting on her relationship with the superintendent, Oakes had this to say in 2012: “I think that we had a working relationship in the beginning that deteriorated, because she came to see me as an enemy. And so then it was—once that happened, you couldn’t work with her.” Oakes interview, 23.

⁴⁰ Oakes interview, 25–26; *Oakes Newsletter*, Feb. 1987, 4, Jan. 1989, 4.

she had not favored any such plan. Everything she had learned as a resident of the city and an observer of the SDP had taught her to believe in compulsion, not persuasion. In the mid-1970s, she had even been amenable to forced busing. But now, she said, “demographics, geography, the climate of the times, and the overwhelming necessity for tranquility dictate that desegregation decisions be left to individual parents and students.”⁴¹

There is no way to know whether Helen Oakes would have taken this pragmatic position had she not become a member of the Board of Education. But when it came to fiscal matters, she was less willing to pare her lofty expectations. The budget had always been one of her chief concerns, perhaps because it never seemed to be balanced. In the *Oakes Newsletter*'s inaugural issue, published in April 1970, she argued that the SDP and the city could not resolve the district's budget “crisis” on their own. “Local and state governments do not have adequate tax resources to support the day-to-day operations of public education,” she wrote. “All three levels of government must contribute tax funds if the public schools are to be saved.” She often revisited these ideas in subsequent years, both before and after her status changed from outsider to insider.⁴²

In the last issue of the *Oakes Newsletter* to appear before Oakes became a member of the Board of Education, she complained that the board lacked the resolve to make the necessary budget cuts while maintaining essential programs. “Only a minority,” she wrote, “are committed to placing the highest priority on serving the interests of the students and utilizing facts, reason, and logic in a search for solutions to the problem.” To counteract the effects of many years of declining enrollments, she called for the development of a “long range plan for school closings,” the elimination of waste, and a teachers' contract that “gradually reduces the strains on our resources.” Such comments may have been justified, but they were no way to build on the social capital that helped her get her position.⁴³ Instead she told her readers what she believed they deserved to hear regardless of the political consequences. She did this again in future years, for example, when she warned in 1985 that the board's behavior

⁴¹ “To Educate All Our Children: Proposed Modifications to the Desegregation Plan of the School District of Philadelphia,” Oct. 3, 1983, 32, 36, 50–51 (in author's possession); *Oakes Newsletter*, Nov./Dec. 1983, 1–4, Jan. 31, 1974, 4, Sept. 16, 1975, 3–4.

⁴² *Oakes Newsletter*, Apr. 1970, 2. See also May 1977, 3, Feb. 1978, 4, and Mar. 1978, 1, 4.

⁴³ *Oakes Newsletter*, May/June 1982, 3–4.

created uncertainty for parents and students by unnecessarily prolonging teachers' contract negotiations.⁴⁴

The balanced budget Oakes voted for at the end of her first year on the board assumed that an extra \$20 million would come from the state—money that was promised but not guaranteed at the time of its adoption. Oakes believed that the SDP had a legitimate claim because three-quarters of the district's shortfall was attributable to the state's underfunding of special education.⁴⁵ But not everyone would agree with such reasoning. Pennsylvania's share of the money spent on public education in Philadelphia had risen dramatically since the mid-1960s, and it would not be long before many in Harrisburg would begin to ask repeatedly what the commonwealth was getting for its money. The publication in 1983 of the national report known as *A Nation at Risk*, which maintained that public education in America was failing, increased pressure on school boards everywhere. Oakes cited the report in her newsletter, endorsing its conclusion that the nation's "survival and security" depends upon "our ability to reform our system of education and make a national commitment to the attainment of excellence in our schools." Oakes expressed confidence in Clayton's commitment to excellence, but in order to keep state dollars increasing, she and her colleagues on the board would have to do more than help the superintendent raise standards and reform curriculum. They would have to make alliances with people outside their established circles of communication and association, a challenge that would eventually prove to be more than daunting for all of Philadelphia's political leaders, including the members of its Board of Education.⁴⁶

Outside In and Inside Out

Citizen participation in public education is nothing new, especially for white, middle-class Americans. It has taken many forms over the years, its recruits numbering in the hundreds of thousands. Its value in a democracy has seldom been questioned, but there is an irony about it that is revealed by the career of Helen Oakes. There may not be that much of a

⁴⁴ In 1985 Oakes told her readers that after protracted negotiations, the SDP came out looking like a "loser" because it miscalculated the union's response to a "package of educational reforms which the teachers viewed as unreasonable." *Oakes Newsletter*, Oct. 1985, 3–4.

⁴⁵ *Oakes Newsletter*, May/June 1983, 4.

⁴⁶ *Oakes Newsletter*, May/June, 1983, 3, Feb. 1984, 4.

difference between what outsiders and insiders can accomplish in reforming a large urban public school system. The social capital Oakes acquired as a civic activist gave her leverage. Her newsletter gave her recognition, facilitating her appointment to the Board of Education. She joined the board hoping to make a significant difference, but once she became a public official she could not sustain the social capital she had amassed among her friends and neighbors, much less extend it to include those outside her original sphere of influence. Her advocacy sometimes alienated those whose help she needed to change the system. Nor could she make full use of her vast knowledge of public education. If she spoke out, she ran the risk of being dismissed as an apologist for the establishment or ostracized by those who wanted only “team players” inside the system.

Since the inception of public education in the mid-nineteenth century, Americans have often attributed its success to civic activism. For more than a few, this belief became an article of faith in the 1960s. But many of the civic groups of that era have disappeared, replaced in the discourse on educational reform by paid lobbyists and professional educators. Many parents have come to see public schools as part of the problem, not part of the solution, in urban education. Those who think this way often send their children to private schools or charter schools; some opt out altogether, homeschooling their children. Civic activism may never again be as important as it was in the 1960s, but the career of Helen Oakes still has something important to teach us. There may be no guarantees when it comes to citizen involvement in urban public education, but meaningful and lasting change does not happen by accident, even if it seems to take forever. Meanwhile, the civic activist can always take satisfaction from saying what needs to be said. Helen Oakes certainly did.

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