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THE GREAT
SCHOOL WARS

NEW YORK CITY, 1805-1973

*A History of the Public Schools
as Battlefield of Social Change*

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The Search for Community

SOME OF NEW YORK'S PROBLEMS are peculiar to the metropolis, partly because of its size and partly because of the shifting nature of its population. As people move in and out of the city, neighborhoods change within a brief period from residential to commercial (and even, as happened on the Lower East Side, from commercial to residential); overutilized schools become underutilized schools and vice versa. In a city with almost 1,000 schools, the need for replacement and renovation is constant, placing a steady drain on public resources.

One solution to this problem which was pressed by school reformers at the turn of the century was to build huge schools which drew students from a large area, as a way of minimizing the impact of population shifts. Efficiency experts admired this strategy, though it saddled the city with heavy investments in big school buildings; the size of these buildings made it more appropriate to call them school plants rather than schools. Not until the 1960s did reformers point out that a school for 5,000 students has the environment of an impersonal factory rather than that of a school, where personal relationships are important.

But not all of New York's problems are specific to the city. Its mixed record in educating first- and second-generation immigrant youth is shared by other school systems. The social dislocations of the mid-twentieth-century migrations from Puerto Rico and the American South were in many ways similar to the earlier transatlantic migrations; the difficulties of adjusting to urban life have been inevitably reflected in school statistics. Still, the situations were not identical; there was a component of racism in the schools' hiring practices and attitudes toward

dark-skinned children which diminished their opportunity to utilize the school to escape from poverty. The public schools have been almost as slow as other major institutions to eradicate racist practices.

The poor performance of large numbers of black and Puerto Rican children was the chief cause of criticism of the school system in the 1960s. It was not providing basic literacy to a sizable proportion of its students; it was not abating crime and poverty; it was not molding good citizens; it was not preparing young people for useful work; it was not eliminating social and economic inequity; it was not spearheading the reform of society; it was not producing happy, fulfilled human beings. Reformers did not realize that the same charges had been leveled periodically over the previous 150 years, or that the schools had never fully accomplished any of these ends. But by the 1960s, an almost mystical belief in the power of the public school to change society and to save individuals had become so ingrained that the system was certain to disappoint even the gentlest of critics.

Attacks on the schools, as in the past, were aimed at the system of governance. In the 1890s, the reformers said, "If the *experts* ran the system instead of petty ward politicians, then the problems could be solved." In the 1960s, the reformers said, "If the *people* controlled the schools instead of the bureaucrats, then the problems could be solved." In both instances, the schools were an easy target. In the 1890s, the reformers could point to blatant examples of inefficiency and arbitrariness under the ward system. In the 1960s, the reformers could justly complain of the inefficiency and cumbersomeness of the system's massive central bureaucracy.

One of the persistent (ironies) of reform is the impossibility of predicting the full consequences of change; every school war has had outcomes which were unintended, and, in many cases, unwanted. Nicholas Murray Butler, for example, imagined that centralization would remove capriciousness and error; he expected his reforms to empower visionary experts, not bureaucratic functionaries.

The controversy over black control of black schools recalled the Catholic campaign against the Public School Society in the 1840s. In neither case did those who began the struggle get what they wanted. Catholics had wanted either public subsidy of Catholic schools or the possibility that Catholic neighborhoods could control their local school boards. The resolution of the issue established community control, but barred the introduction of any teachings specific to a particular religion. As in 1842, the settlement of the school controversy in 1969 created elected local boards, but on terms that did not permit the inculcation of

a particular ideology. Though this determination was not made explicit in the law, it was implicit in the legislature's rejection of total community control and in its elimination of the three demonstration districts.

The history of the public schools in New York City is inextricably related to the city's social and political history. Each major controversy was resolved politically, but *resolution* has not been *solution*. Every important issue remains and recurs:

The question of separation of church and state continues to be a lively and unsettled dispute. What once appeared to be absolute separation has been gradually abandoned in favor of limited public support for parochial schools. In the 1970s, parochial schools, feeling the pressure of rising costs, renewed their pursuit of greater or even full public subsidy; despite an adverse ruling by the United States Supreme Court in 1973, New York State and several other states continued to search for ways to assist parochial schools.

Neither centralization nor local control has solved the problems of the school system. Each has its advantages and disadvantages, which cause a pendulum movement over the years from one form to the other. When school officials have known what they wanted to do and how to do it, then faith in centralization was strong, as in the early nineteenth century and in the 1890s. But when both the means and the ends of schooling seemed confused and uncertain, and when the political legitimacy of the educational authorities appeared doubtful, there has been a trend to decentralize control of the schools, as in the 1840s and 1960s.

The education of lower-class children has been from 1805 until the present the most vexing dilemma of the New York public schools. New York, like other major metropolises, attracts low-income people with the lure of economic advancement. In the course of a generation or two, those who succeed move away from the slum to the outer reaches of the city, then to the suburbs, as members of the middle class. Thus, New York has a constantly replenished low-income population and a steady middle-income exodus. The proportion of poor children in the public schools is greater than the proportion of poor people in the city, because of the large number of private schools, a condition which is characteristic of many other large cities and which was true of New York in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. A journalist in 1905, for example, complained that the public schools in New York were handicapped by "the lack of active interest and support on the part of our well-to-do citizens, who do not send their children to the public schools and therefore have no immediate and vital stake in them."¹

THE CITY'S RICH MELANGE of classes, races, religions, and ethnic groups guarantees an ever-present potential for conflict over the distribution of power. It is not accidental that each major school war coincided with the arrival in the city of a large new immigration. The thrust of public school history has been to reject different manifestations of separatism—whether religious or racial—and to evolve, however fitfully, in the direction of pluralistic, multi-cultural participation and control.

The common school idea, for all the buffeting it has taken in the past 150 years, has survived because it is appropriate to a democratic, heterogeneous society. It presumes that children should be taught those values which are basic to a free and just society, including respect for the individual's rights, a sense of social responsibility, and above all, perhaps, a devotion to comity, that precious value of a democratic society which grants the legitimacy of opposing views and permits groups to compete without seeking to crush one another. It presumes that schooling is a learning process, not an indoctrination process—a time for debate and discussion, not a time for instilling received opinion; it presumes that society needs and wants men and women who are capable of voting, deciding, and acting as free agents. As Robert M. Hutchins recently wrote, the public schools are "the common schools of the commonwealth, the political community. They may do many things for the young . . . but they are not public schools unless they start their pupils toward an understanding of what it means to be a self-governing citizen of a self-governing political community."² However good or poor any individual public school may be, and whatever its ethnic composition may be, this notion of community has always been central to its purpose.

The public school operates on behalf of the community, but how "community" is defined is the source of political and ideological controversy. A child lives simultaneously in many communities: his neighborhood, city, state, and nation; his ethnic group, race, and/or religion; his parents' occupation and interests may place his family in other communities as well. To suggest that the school serve one community and reject others is to create a partial vision, to limit children's potentialities instead of expanding them. The school that exalts only one race or class or locality denies the common humanity of its pupils, denies the diversity and mobility that is characteristic of democratic society. Respecting common values and common humanity need not imply the pursuit of homogeneity; no one wants to be a faceless figure in a mass society. The school can applaud individual and cultural diversity without resorting to the extremes of separatism and chauvinism.

The child's nonschool education begins in the family and continues while he is in school, through exposure to religion, television, comic books, movies, voluntary organizations, summer camps, and numerous other institutions and influences. Recognizing the importance of these informal educational networks, some contemporary writers on education would disband the school or limit it strictly to skill-training. But to do so would strip the school of the unique role that it can play in a mass society where sophisticated propaganda bombards the average citizen. For the school is the one educating institution whose purpose it is systematically to equip its students with the analytical tools of reasoning and judgment, in order that they may evaluate, criticize, and make choices.

Critics of the public schools in each generation have emphasized failure and inefficiency. What is inevitably lost sight of is the monumental accomplishments of the public school system of New York City. It has provided free, unlimited educational opportunities for millions, regardless of language, race, class, or religion. It has pioneered in the creation of programs for children with special gifts or special handicaps. It has willingly accepted the responsibility for solving problems which were national in scope, the result of major demographic shifts. The descendants of the miserably poor European immigrants who overflowed the city schools in the nineteenth and early twentieth century are today the prosperous middle class of the city and its suburbs. Without the public schools, despite their obvious faults, this unprecedented social and economic mobility would be inconceivable.

The introduction in 1970 of a non-competitive "open admissions" policy, guaranteeing all city high school graduates the right to a tuition-free college education at the City University of New York, was intended to boost sharply and quickly the educational qualifications of large numbers of blacks and Puerto Ricans, as well as children of white working-class background. The steady rise in educational level among blacks and Puerto Ricans in the sixties and seventies has been accompanied by the growth of an ambitious and energetic middle class—managers, professionals, artists, and businessmen—who are making their own contributions to the life of the city.

Whether control is centralized or decentralized, the problems of managing a school system for one million children are staggering. Other areas of the public sector are as crisis-prone as the schools, but none is as vulnerable to political struggle, particularly at the local level. The school is the principal public institution, beyond the government itself, intentionally designed to influence the values, habits, and behavior of

the rising generation. Since people do not agree on which values, habits, and behaviors should be encouraged, school policy will always be controversial, especially when traditional attitudes are undergoing change. But what makes the public school unusually vulnerable to attack is that it is directly subject to—and ideally responsive to—public control. Child-rearing practices or television programming may have more impact on children than how they learn to read, but neither families nor the mass media are publicly controlled. Because of the American conception of lay control of public education, the school is likely to remain at the center of social conflict. Struggles for control of education will shift in emphasis as different groups seek to influence the schools for their own purposes; the politics of education is as valid as any other kind of politics and involves as many participants.

While the language of school wars relates to educational issues, the underlying contest will continue to reflect fundamental value clashes among discordant ethnic, cultural, racial, and religious groups. And this very fact underlines the importance of comity in the politics of education—comity, that basic recognition of differences in values and interests and of the desirability of reconciling those differences peacefully which the school itself aims to teach. The effort to advance comity, in educational affairs and in the affairs of the larger society, has always been at the heart of public education. Whatever their failings, whatever their accomplishments, the public schools have been and will be inescapably involved in the American search for a viable definition of community.