MERITOCRACY AND EFFICIENT MANAGEMENT

Meritocracy is a concept of society based on the idea that each individual's social and occupational position is determined by individual merit, not political or economic influence. Scientific management of both human capital and organizations is a central idea in the meritocracy concept. For the schools, meritocracy was both a social goal and a method of internal organization. To achieve meritocracy as a social goal, the schools were to create a society based on merit by objectively selecting and preparing students for their ideal places in the social order. As a method of internal organization, meritocracy meant the creation of an administrative structure in which the positions held by professionals depended on their training and abilities as opposed to their political influence and power.

The attempt to create a meritocracy in the organization of the schools was concurrent with the establishment of small school boards. In fact, several related changes in the administrative and political structure of American schools occurred at the same time as the concept of meritocracy gained prominence. Of major importance was the establishment of small school boards and the resultant increase in the number of duties and, consequently, the power of school administrators. As this occurred, school administrators adopted techniques of scientific business management for use in the administration of the schools.

Three important sets of ideas were used to justify these political and administrative changes. The first was the concept that the school should be kept out of politics. In most cases, this meant putting the major power and control of the schools into the hands of administrators serving the interests of the children, not into the hands of politicians serving special interests. This argument justified the increasing power of school administrators in relation to boards of education.

The second set of ideas centered on the concept of democratic elitism and was used to justify the creation of small school boards. What is meant here by elitism is control of the schools by local civic elites composed primarily of people who exercise power over local public policy without, in most cases, holding offices in government. They usually work through informal networks and civic organizations such as a local chamber of commerce or service club. The civic elites involved in school administration in the early twentieth century viewed themselves not as conspiratorial groups working behind the scenes for their own self-interest, but as enlightened leaders working for the good of the entire community. One recent study of the occupations of civic elites found that over 50 percent were bankers, industrialists, and heads of local businesses, while the remainder included heads of local utilities, newspaper people, civic association executives, clergy, university administrators, and professionals (lawyers, doctors, and the like).[1]

In the rhetoric of democratic elitism, only the "best"—the elite—should determine important public matters, because they have proved themselves successful

and possess superior knowledge of public affairs. For instance, it was argued that a factory worker would have less ability than a banker to make correct decisions about the public interest regarding schooling. Following this line of reasoning, reformers argued that the schools should be governed only by the "best" members of the community and, therefore, that school board elections should be organized so that only the "best" could be elected.

The third set of ideas dealt with the proper relationship between the school board and the school administration. As the rhetoric of school administration developed in the early twentieth century, it became common to argue that the proper role of the administrators was to administer policy without interference from the board of education. These distinctions between roles helped to increase and justify the power of school administrators.

These changes in the administration and political control of the schools and the justifications accompanying the changes were caused by a complex and interwoven set of historical changes. No single factor explains all the changes, but all the factors were closely related. The establishment of small school boards sometimes resulted from the fear of local elite groups that their control over the schools would be lost to the political machines gaining ascendancy in urban politics at that time. In this case, local elites sought the restructuring of school board elections to ensure that their own control over the system would continue. In other cases, new elites composed of professionals viewed small school boards as a means of wresting power from the control of traditional elites.

The reduction in size of school boards was one factor that contributed to increasing administrative power. As school boards declined in power and ability to function in the schools, their traditional activities were passed on to the school administration. Also, the growth in size of school districts, particularly urban ones, required more administration and coordination. In turn, school administrators welcomed these changes because they increased their power, status, and income. School administrators championed ideas such as keeping the schools out of politics and maintaining clear lines between the functions of the school board and those of the administration. Administrators willingly adopted the principles of scientific management because it gave them status comparable to that of members of the business community.

The close relationship between local elites and school administrators became an important factor in the politics of education in the twentieth century. This relationship can be traced in the history of early school board reforms. One historical study of these changes is Joseph M. Cronin's *Control of Urban Schools: Perspectives on the Power of Educational Reformers.* Cronin argues that the major concern of reformers in urban schools in the 1890s was to reduce the power of local ward bosses, whose influence encompassed the appointment of teachers and members of the board of education. Within the context of this argument, the influence of ward bosses was a threat to the power of middle- and upper-class reformers.[2]

The way to destroy the influence that ward bosses had over urban schools was to centralize control, reduce the size of school boards, and make elections nonpartisan and at large. Middle- and upper-class reformers also hoped that the social composition of boards of education would change by eliminating the

of the social sciences, of all that is included in the fields of history, sociology, economics, psychology, political science. . . .' The educational leader, [Newlon] said, 'must be a reader and a student.'"[21]

In his history of the professionalization of educational administration, Callahan bemoans the fact that educational administration took the route of business rather than that of scholarship. From another perspective, in *The One Best System: A History of American Urban Education*, David Tyack labels this new breed of school executive as "administrative progressives" who "(1) were a movement with identifiable actors and coalitions; (2) had a common ideology and platform; and (3) gained substantive power over urban education."[22]

Tyack stresses that an interlocking set of interests, values, and purposes existed among civic elites, reform groups, and the new breed of administrative progressives. From Tyack's perspective, the actions of this informal network shaped the modern school system. Therefore, educational reform took place from the top down.

Within Tyack's framework, it is logical that the new form of school board dominated by civic elites appointed administrators who reflected their business values and interests. Of course, it cannot be determined whether the administrative progressives adopted these values in response to the civic elites or, given the spirit of the period, whether they actually had a common culture. Whatever the reason, between 1890 and the Depression years of the 1930s, business dominated in the control of the schools, and business values dominated the management of the schools. Tyack states, "Educational administrators drew elaborate comparisons between the roles of business leaders and superintendents." He gives as an example Professor Franklin Bobbit of the University of Chicago, who in 1916 contrasted a manufacturing company of 1,200 people with a school system of similar size. After comparing citizens to stockholders and superintendents to corporate managers, Bobbit concluded, "When it is asserted that educational management must in its general outlines be different from good business management, it can be shown from such a parallel study that there is absolutely no validity to the contention." Bobbit's comparison was used verbatim by the U.S. commissioner of education.[23]

An almost symbiotic relationship developed between the new breed of school administrators and the elite school boards. The smaller school boards required increased administrative assistance and welcomed a sharing of business values. In turn, the administrative progressives depended on elite school boards for their appointments as school superintendents. For instance, in Cincinnati a system of mutual support was established between the Citizens School Committee (the organization of civic leaders that had gained control of school board elections) and the superintendent. In the 1921 school board election, Superintendent Ralph Condon actively campaigned for the candidates of the Citizens School Committee. When, at the September 26, 1921, board meeting, a resolution was introduced condemning his actions, Condon responded: "I want to repeat . . . that it was my duty . . . to advocate election of candidates who represented the non-partisan control of education, for, to my mind, there is no greater issue involved in the administration of education than this: Keep the schools out of politics; keep politics out of the schools." In this context, keeping the schools out of politics simply meant keeping the schools within the control of the local civic elite.[24]

With the professionalization and increase in duties of educational administrators and the decrease in functions of boards of education, clear definitions of proper roles developed. In the rhetoric of the times, school boards were to establish general education policies and administrators were to administer those policies without interference from the boards. In part, self-interest and self-protection prompted school administrators to support these clear distinctions in roles. They wanted freedom from the school board and the resultant increase in power.

For example, in a report to the board of education made in 1923, after a trip across the country to inspect other school systems, Superintendent Condon of Cincinnati gave expression to this ideal relationship between a school board and administrators. In his report, he identified characteristics he believed made one school system superior to another: "The best schools are likely to be found where there is the clearest recognition of what constitutes executive and administrative responsibility, with the Superintendent and his staff in charge of the administration of educational policies clearly and distinctly responsible to the Board of Education . . . but unhampered in the execution of educational plans and policies which have been approved." Condon told the board that where he had seen this relationship between the board and superintendent, there was "peace, harmony, good understanding . . . and good results. Where this relationship did not exist there was controversy, misunderstanding and a general level of distrust."[25]

The concerns of the new educational administrators and elite school boards matched the general educational rhetoric about social efficiency and the development of human capital. In one sense, the administrative progressives became the new social engineers, organizing and directing a school system that would produce measured and standardized workers for the labor market, much the same as factories standardized products. The business attitudes and cost-consciousness of the school administrators pleased the businesspeople who dominated the boards of education. These professional and businesspeople were happy to relinquish functions to an administration that promised to provide more education at less expense and to graduate students who would meet the occupational requirements of American business. Of course, this was not the entire story—other political forces also played a role in shaping American schools.

MEASUREMENT, DEMOCRACY, AND THE SUPERIORITY OF ANGLO-AMERICANS

"Great will be our good fortune," wrote Robert Yerkes, head of the U.S. Army psychology team, "if the lesson in human engineering which the war has taught is carried over directly and effectively into our civil institutions and activities." The decisive point in the development of the science of measurement was World War I and the organization of the modern American army. Psychologists involved in constructing intelligence tests for the classification of army personnel, which later became models for tests used in the public schools, considered the army the ideal form of modern social organization because it embodied what was considered the proper classification of labor power. Expressing great hope for the future,

Yerkes stated, "Before the war mental engineering was a dream; today it exists and its effective development is amply assured."[26]

One reason for the popularity of the new intelligence tests among some Americans was that they seemed to confirm the racial superiority of the English and Germans. Also, they seemed to confirm to Anglo-Americans that Native Americans and African Americans were inferior races. Using the results of intelligence tests, many Anglo-Americans protested not only the immigration of nonwhite peoples but also the immigration of southern and eastern Europeans. Whereas the "Founding Fathers" wanted to restrict immigration to whites, the new cry among Anglo-Americans was to restrict the immigration of whites from southern and eastern Europe.

The vision of a society in which scientific measurement would be used for organizing society and racial classification raised basic questions about the meaning of democracy. The fundamental problem for social scientists was to resolve the conflict between a belief that only those of high intelligence should rule and the concept of a democratic society in which people with low intelligence are allowed to vote. In addition, during the post–World War I period, most psychologists believed that intelligence is inherited and can be controlled through selective breeding. For many, this meant that eugenics and the elimination of defective forms of intelligence were the major hopes for the improvement of civilization.

For many psychologists, the concept that intelligence is inherited also meant that intelligence levels vary among different ethnic groups. A major result of the army tests developed during World War I was allegedly proof that ethnic groups from southern and eastern Europe had lower levels of intelligence than those from northern Europe. This finding led many psychologists to argue that the new wave of immigration from southern and eastern Europe was reducing the general level of intelligence of the American people. These findings played a major role in the passage of legislation restricting immigration into the United States.

Psychologists saw the schools as playing a major role in the realization of a society in which intelligence would rule and students would be scientifically selected and educated for their proper places in the social organism. It was hoped that testing in the schools would enable schools to fulfill the dream of providing fair and objective equality of opportunity through scientific selection. Tests were considered the key to a socially efficient society.

Henry Herbert Goddard captured this vision in a lecture given in 1920: "[It] is not so much a question of the absolute numbers of persons of high and low intelligence as it is whether each grade of intelligence is assigned a part, in the whole organization, that is within its capacity." Goddard went on to suggest that humans could learn from the busy bee how to achieve "the perfect organization of the hive." "Perhaps," he stated, "it would be wiser for us to emulate the bee's social organization more and his supposed industry less."[27]

The most significant analysis of the implications of this testing is made by historian Clarence Karier in *Shaping the American Educational State: 1900 to the Present.* Karier's book is both an analysis of the movement and an anthology of original articles. Karier argues that the use of intelligence testing as a means of establishing a meritocracy became another method of justifying social-class differences and

racial discrimination. Now the wealth of the rich could be justified on the grounds of innate levels of intelligence. Indeed, psychologists at the time argued that the rich deserved to be rich because they were more intelligent than the poor. In Karier's words: "The hierarchical social class system was effectively maintained then as it is today, not so much by the sheer force of power and violence, but by the ideological beliefs of people within the system." One method of getting people to accept their position in society was to convince them that the particular position they held reflected their individual merit. The measurement of intelligence was one method of convincing a person of his or her particular social worth. Karier states, "There is, perhaps, no stronger social class stabilizer, if not tranquilizer, within a hierarchically ordered social class system than the belief, on the part of the lower class, that their place in life is really not arbitrarily determined by privilege, status, wealth and power, but is a consequence of merit, fairly derived."[28]

The army intelligence tests were developed by a team of psychologists who met at Henry Herbert Goddard's Vineland Institute in New Jersey. Goddard founded the Vineland Institute in the late 1880s as a training school for the feeble-minded. He later translated and introduced into the United States the writings and intelligence tests of French psychologist Alfred Binet, who, at the request of the French minister of public instruction, had developed tests to separate mentally retarded children from normal children. Binet's intelligence test became a model for the development of intelligence tests in the United States.

In the 1890s, Goddard argued that many of the social problems of urban and industrial society would be solved through classification of intelligence and institutionalization of individuals with lower levels of intelligence. He believed that the major problem in modern society was that people of lower intelligence, who were suitable for agricultural and rural societies, had migrated to urban areas, where they were unable to deal with the complexities of living. He contended that this situation was responsible for the increase in urban crime. For Goddard, the social importance of intelligence testing was its ability to identify persons of lower intelligence before they committed crimes and were institutionalized.

As was mentioned previously, lurking behind the early discussions of intelligence were assumptions about the relative intelligence of different ethnic groups and social classes. Because the definition of the term *intelligence* was often vague, psychologists tended to build their own personal prejudices into tests. For instance, underlying Binet's test was a definition of intelligence that was both vague and relative. On the one hand, Binet defined native intelligence as "judgment, otherwise called good sense, practical sense, initiative, the faculty of adapting one's self to circumstances"; on the other hand, he claimed that intelligence is relative to the individual's social situation. Thus "an attorney's son who is reduced by his intelligence to the condition of a menial employee is a moron . . . likewise a peasant, normal in ordinary surroundings of the fields, may be considered a moron in the city." While admitting that important differences in language ability between social classes might affect test results, he stated that social-class differences added validity to the test: "That this difference exists one might suspect, because our personal investigations, as well as those of many others, have demonstrated that children of the poorer class are shorter, weigh less, have smaller