

POLITICS OF EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

In this paper we will point out how politics has influenced education, mainly in a bad way. We will indicate how our educational systems have been adversely affected by ill-advised political actions.

INTRODUCTION

The Tenth Amendment of the United States Constitution provides what is referred to as “states rights.” The Tenth Amendment basically says that all rights not provided to the federal government are reserved to several states. If we were to read the Constitution, we would find no reference to education. Not because the founders did not believe that education was important, but because it was a complex issue that would have delayed ratification. So, by default, in America education is a duty for each state.

We believe that the system has worked well and will continue to work, in spite of the criticisms that we hear from policy makers. The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), which was advocated for, strongly by those two public school gurus Ted Kennedy and President Bush, is considered by many (especially conservatives) as an infringement on state rights.

In this paper we will point out how politics has influenced education, mainly in a bad way. We will indicate how our educational systems have been adversely affected by ill-advised political actions.

THE GARY PLAN

U.S. Steel was organized in 1901, when financial giant J.P. Morgan bought out Andrew Carnegie’s steel interests and joined them with his own. The new corporation combined 213 previously independent manufacturing and transportation companies and, at the time of its formation, “represented the greatest aggregation of business properties ever brought together.” U.S. Steel enjoyed one of its most prosperous years in 1905. But expanding demand for steel and steel products, especially in the Midwest, outran the company’s

productive capacity. Ironically, the company lost a substantial percentage of the growing steel market to competitors in its best year. The lesson was not lost on company officials particularly the chairman of the board, Elbert H. Gary. Officials of the United States Steel Corporation sought a site in 1905 for a large, new complex of industrial plants in the Midwest; they selected an unpopulated area of swamps and sand dunes along the southern shore of Lake Michigan about thirty miles east of Chicago.¹

Elbert H. Gary was a hardworking businessman who grew up on a small farm. He was a promoter of industrial efficiency and modernization. He believed in total control of all aspects of industry from raw materials to finished products. By 1905, Gary supervised an industrial empire that owned iron mines in Minnesota, Michigan, and Wisconsin, and coal mines in Pennsylvania, West Virginia, and Illinois, also a fleet of freightliners and numerous railroads to carry these raw materials to the steel plants located mostly in Pennsylvania, Ohio, and Illinois. Gary also knew that most of the steel competitors had outdated equipment and put this to his advantage.²

In 1905, the United States Steel Corporation wanted to gain a better position on the production of pig iron and steel ingots in comparison to its competitors. These goals would not be met with their inadequate mills in Chicago. Establishing a new market became the company's main focus. Growth was in the Midwest at the time, and executives sought a sight in this location. Cities close to Chicago were initially considered but decided against due to escalated land prices, high taxes, and political concerns. Steel executives decided their second choice, Indiana, made more sense.³

A bargain price was the largest factor. Indiana met the requirement. U.S. Steel executives were familiar with Indiana and the area of Gary, because one of their subsidiary companies was nearby. The site was on Lake Michigan and almost uninhabited. It consisted of sand, dunes, marsh grass and sparse oak trees. "Space was plentiful for future expansion of mills and subsidiary plants. Lake transportation made Minnesota's iron ore easily accessible, and Lake Michigan was deep enough at Gary to provide an adequate harbor for ore freighters. In addition, both the Lake and the Grand Calumet River would provide an inexhaustible water supply for industrial use. Excellent rail connections enhanced the value of Gary location. Steel markets to the east and the west could be tapped. Attorney and former mayor of Hammond, Indiana, Armanis F. Knotts was hired by the United States Steel Corporation to purchase the approximately 9000 acres. He was to act as the mediator between the buyer and the sellers in most cases so that price gouging would not occur.⁴

The next step was to name the territory. The executives of U.S. Steel initially considered "Corey" after the companies' president William Ellis Corey. However, several other executives nominated "Gary" after the chairman of the

board of directors, Judge Elbert H. Gary. Upon his approval, the town Gary, Indiana was born.⁵

In 1906, U.S. Steel Corporation organized The Indiana Steel Company to build and operate the mills and The Gary Land Company to develop the city of Gary. U.S. Steel had prior experience with urban development and relied upon their previous success for direction.⁶ U.S. Steel would develop a company town that would build upon the needs of manufacturing. Hearing of United States Steel Corporations plans to build and develop in Indiana excited many of the state's residents. One resident who was particularly interested was Mr. William A. Wirt a school superintendent and a former student of John Dewey at the University of Chicago.

John Dewey was an American philosopher and educator whose writings and teachings have had profound influences on education in the United States. Dewey's original philosophy of education and instrumentalism, focused on learning-by-doing rather than repetitive learning and instruction. Instrumentalism stated that human activities change to solve problems. Problems are constantly changing so the activities of humans must also change. Students are naturally social beings and learn best through problem solving with other people. Education must stress individual differences, unique interests and provide constant opportunities for experimentation. Dewey was an advocate of Progressive Education, meaning simply that schools should reflect the life of society. Schools were instrumental in combining all races, creeds, and colors. Dewey considered education as a tool that would enable the citizen to integrate culture and vocation effectively and usefully.

William Wirt expressed the same feeling towards life as that of his educator. Although he felt instrumentalism was the key to learning, as superintendent of a small Indiana town, he was losing his enthusiasm for public education. "In his opinion, it was not accomplishing the ends for which it had been established; it was not thoroughly training boys and girls for intelligent American citizenship."⁷

Intrigued by the industrial achievements and change that was occurring in Gary, and to fulfill his curiosity, he ventured to the site. The development of a town overnight appealed to him. While walking along the sand hills, he met another observer. They started talking about what was happening and the topic of schools arose. Of course, this was an immediate interest for Wirt. "As soon as he began talking about schools," says Mr. Wirt's new friend, "I shut right up. I never got so many new ideas about education in my life."⁸

Gary was truly a city designed, developed and run by steel corporations. The Gary Land Company had built an entire city including all utilities. They had even built a conventional schoolhouse, named the Jefferson School. This typical American school was exactly the opposite of what Mr. Wirt wanted. He felt that

these schools were only used for about half of the day. Wirt called attention to the steel plants themselves for explanation. "When they built their twelve miles of steel mills, did they propose to have the plants lie idle for half the time? Yet the Jefferson School was utilized to only one half of its capacity." This idea stressed efficiency, which was exactly how corporations operated. They wanted to make the best use of materials, eliminate waste, and become as efficient as possible.⁹

PERFORMANCED CONTRACTING

Federal failures in education are legendary. Performanced Contracting and the Edison Project will be discussed in order to indicate just how bad federal involvement can be, in terms of both money wasted and children hurt.

In Texarkana, AK an interesting experiment was conducted that best demonstrates the fallacy of the reform. This "reform" could perhaps give us some insights into how successful current reforms might be.¹⁰ Dorsett Education Systems (DES), which was a start-up company in Oklahoma, was employed in 1969 by the Texarkana School District to solve the problems associated with merging a number of black and white schools. DES's profits were to be related to how successfully it remediated black and other non-white children in reading and math. The company parked trailers outside of schools and called them Rapid Learning Centers (RLC). Remediation goals were to be achieved by having the targeted students work for two hours each day in the RLCs. The primary "instructional materials" used were learning machines. The students sat at the machines and advanced through the content/skills development at their own pace. "Individualized instruction" was the term applied to the process. It was an innovation gaining popularity at the time.¹¹

At the conclusion of the project's first year, the students scored higher than a control group in some tests. When the federal auditors investigated, they found that the students had practiced most of the test questions. At the time it was referred to "teaching to the test." It should have been called what it was: teaching the test. The Texarkana officials were then faced with the issue of how much to pay DES. As it turns out, DES was paid according to the contract stipulation because the contract failed to spell out the testing guidelines or procedures. The ethical and legal issues raised by DES's testing procedures should serve as a permanent stigma on the privatization movement.¹²

Not to be deterred by this exciting unsucess, Texarkana School District continued the privatization experiment for three more years with a new company. The company, Educational Development Laboratories (EDL), contracted to provide a one-year achievement gain for all students, but the tests would be designed and administered by the Educational Testing Service. Test results indicated that only 41% of the students made the gain in reading, and only 31% made the gain in math. The company established more modest goals for the next year. The objectives included decreasing the dropout rate, improving attendance

data, and raising achievement to the extent that 75% of the students would make a full year gain in reading and math. The company failed to make the nut on any of the four objectives. The next year's results were similar and the experiment ended.¹³

THE EDISON PROJECT

The conservative agenda reared its ugly head in what might be labeled the Edison School fiasco. Edison Schools, Inc., which was founded by Christopher Whittle, was a for-profit organization with an ambitious plan to create a system of private schools. Whittle estimated it would cost three billion dollars to make the plan work on a national scale. In 1991, after the Gulf War, Bush I. was on a roll and appeared unbeatable. He and his Secretary of Education, Lamar Alexander, continued Reagan's efforts to move voucher legislation through Congress. If successful, students would be able to use the vouchers to attend Edison schools. Remember performance contracting in Texarkana?

But the express train was derailed. The economy turned sour, Bush I and Alexander packed-up and left town to make room for Bill Clinton. Whittle and Edison now had to be content with managing a few public schools wherever they could grab them.¹⁴

In 2001, it appeared that Edison had a lock on a profitable contract with New York City. But, Harold Levy, then Chancellor of New York's public schools, who stipulated the specifications to favor Edison, made a serious mistake. Levy allowed parents in the schools slated for takeover to vote on the issue. The original plan called for Edison to conduct the vote, but after the community organizations became enraged, Levy pulled the monitoring position of the vote from Edison. The parents voted 4-1 against Edison. And the value of Edison's stock fell.¹⁵

In August 2001, Tom Ridge, then Governor of Pennsylvania, gave Edison a great contract. They were given a no-bid \$2.7 million contract to study the Philadelphia system and recommend strategies for fixing it. After reviewing Edison's report to Governor Ridge, the Council of Great City Schools observed that it had a number of factual errors. It also noted, very critically, that the conclusions appear to have been drawn before the data were analyzed or interviews were conducted. Edison's study indicated that 55 of Philadelphia's top administrators be replaced with Edison people, and that Edison should operate 45 schools. Governor Ridge and Mayor Street gave Edison only 20 schools. And the value of Edison's stock fell.¹⁶

As the Philadelphia enterprise was unfolding, Edison was losing contracts in Massachusetts, Connecticut, and Michigan. And the Dallas, Texas school board concluded that its seven Edison schools were not keeping pace with traditional city schools having similar demographics. Wichita, Kansas, because of declining test scores, high teacher turnover, dropouts, and possible cheating on tests,

canceled two of Edison's four contracts. Clarke County, Nevada and Dade County, Florida canceled contracts because of unfulfilled contract obligations. And the value of Edison's stocks fell.¹⁷

In the summer of 2002, Edison suffered more setbacks. The corporation finally disclosed that it had been silent about a Security and Exchange Commission (SEC) investigation into its practices for three months. In its bookkeeping, Edison recorded as revenue teachers' salaries that were paid directly by school districts. Edison finally conceded that the SEC was correct, but class action suits had already begun. The suits charged Edison officers with making materially false and misleading statements.

Shortly before the start of school in fall, 2002, Edison was confronted with two more serious investigations. Bob Casey, Pennsylvania's Auditor General, announced that he was seeking an audit of how the original contract between Pennsylvania and then Governor Tom Ridge (now Secretary of Homeland Security) was consummated in circumvention of the competitive bidding law. And, Casey also wants to know how the money was spent. He has accused Charles Zogby, then the Pennsylvania Secretary of Education (and a friend of Edison), of blocking the investigation. Shortly after the Casey situation developed, the U.S. Department of Education's Inspector General announced he would investigate to determine if Edison conspired with state officials to corrupt the corporation's contract negotiations with the state. And, again, before the school year began, Bibb County (Georgia) and Rochester (New York) canceled contracts. And the value of Edison's stock fell to 27 cents a share from a one-time high of \$38.

CAREER EDUCATION

In the September, 2005 Phi Delta Kappan, Thomas C. Hunt provides some lessons from history regarding education reform. His analysis of the career education movement is insightful and challenging. According to Hunt, career education was advertised as a curriculum program that included "all students, all occupations, all subjects." It was, as Hunt cites, "the apotheosis of an education panacea."¹⁸

The cause of career education was championed by Sidney Marland, Jr., the U.S. Commissioner of Education. At this time, education was not a cabinet-level position. In order to advance his "discretionary funds" to support districts that were revising their curricula and instructional methods in line with career education.¹⁹ Sound familiar? Was he using the bully pulpit and money similar to what President Bush is doing? There were some critics, but most could not be heard over the noise of the bully pulpit, the money, and the bandwagon jumpers.

Marland's career education took on the look of many failed education policies. It was advocated as a panacea. There are no panaceas in public education. Those touted as panaceas usually fail. That is probably the most

important reason education policies fail: advocates become apostles and advocate the policy as a panacea; and, they do not listen to critics.

THE GARY PLAN AGAIN

The Gary Plan was also referred to as a platoon system because it involved having two sections of each kindergarten through eighth grade class.²⁰ Wirt developed a system in Gary that boasted full utilization of the school plant. Pupils were divided into two platoons, X and Y. While Platoon X filled all the classrooms studying academic subjects, Platoon Y was divided into smaller groups for a succession of specialized activities.²¹

In the Gary Plan, “the city’s schools relied on their auditoriums for a range of academically and socially challenging activities almost around the clock.” In 1906, the Gary Plan schools ranging from first to eighth grade spent at least an hour a day in the auditorium. The older students were allowed to take the class as an elective. This class would include singing, giving lectures, presentations, plays, films, and poetry.²² A questionable aspect of the Gary Plan allowed students to leave their schools to attend religious education at the churches of their choice. They were allowed to attend their local church or synagogue twice a week. This caused some concern with the Constitutional issues about the separation of church and state.²³

Outside of the auditorium, “students learned arithmetic, spelling, and other academic subjects; practiced their skills in shops and laboratories; and played in swimming pools and gymnasiums – experiencing work, study and play every school day. The Gary schools had adjacent parks, zoos, and for a while a farm where youngsters harvested crops.” During the day, students were taught how to sew type and cook. The cafeteria housed young chefs and homemakers just beginning to apply their knowledge. The other students learning printing skills actually produced many of the school materials. These students even produced a 1928 pamphlet describing the work-study-play approach to prospective teachers.²⁴

Wirt even opened the schools on Saturdays for remedial work or for play periods. During the summer nearly 65% of students attended school for make-up work or in order to advance their studies.²⁵ “The demise of the Gary Plan began in New York and then slowly in other locales throughout the nation that introduced it. It raised questions as to what might have been.” “New York City at the turn of the 20th Century was growing and dynamic place, full of economic and industrial energy, as well as an influx of new immigrants.”²⁶ According to Bonner (1978), over seventy percent were classified as foreign-born, with Jewish, Italians, and Irish Catholics making up most of the population.

In 1913, John Purroy Mitchel was elected mayor and brought a “progressive passion for business-like efficiency” to city government.²⁷ “Mitchel

was sympathetic to reform and progressive efforts in education.” “Before Mitchel’s election as mayor, Alice Barrows led the *Vocational Guidance Survey* under the Public Education Association (PEA) of New York City.” Barrows studied under Dewey at Columbia University like Wirt and was greatly influenced by Dewey’s philosophy. PEA advised the Board of Education on matters while promoting progressive educational reform. “With advocates like Mitchel and Barrows supporting Wirt’s program, the plan was introduced in 1914 into two elementary public schools (P.S.) – P.S. 89 in Brooklyn and P.S. 45 in the Bronx.”²⁸

“For Mayor Mitchel and his Fusion party’s progressive enthusiasm for efficiency, the plan was viewed as having enormous economic benefits, as it could reduce the physical overcrowding of schools and demand for new buildings.” “For social progressives like Barrows, the plan provided a natural environment in which children learned by doing.” Bonner (1978) described the situation at the time: “For critics, the Gary Plan was an issue; for advocates, the Gary Plan was a cause. While the former took illogical and even misleading positions in the Gary debates, the latter occupied a high-minded political stance.” One leader of the rising criticism was William Ettinger, the associate superintendent of schools. At first, he viewed the plan with enthusiasm, “but soon became disillusioned with it as he felt the curriculum changes and costs for equipment were too great.”²⁹

The controversial Gary Plan had many groups taking sides. “For example, the New York City Teacher’s Association urged a ‘go-slow’ attitude on implementation, as they were not convinced of the benefits.”³⁰ “For more selfish reasons, teachers generally objected to the one more hour of work the plan required each day.” Trade unions were also against the plan. Some saw it as being a plan devised by Elbert H. Gary or John D. Rockefeller. “Thus, it was not surprising that unions felt the entire system was designed to train the children of steel workers to be efficient cogs in the industrial machine.” According to Volk, “unions perceived the Gary plan for New York schools as being designed to stifle mobility and turn out ‘wage slaves’ for American capitalism.”³¹

For nearly four years, the public debate about the Gary plan raged. In the end the organization and voice of the parents and students abruptly ended the plan. The parents’ group in favor of the Gary Plan was called the Gary School League, organized in 1916.³² This group consisted of reform-minded women elites; among them was the Mrs. John Dewey. Another group formed in September 1917 to promote the plan was called the Committee on Public Education. This group was labeled by the press as being part of Mayor Mitchel’s Fusion campaign committee for his upcoming re-election.

Groups opposing the Gary Plan formed. Mothers of students attending a Garyized school in Brooklyn formed the Mothers’ Anti-Gary League. The mothers in this group saw a problem with the neglect of academic work. Over 400

mothers signed a petition opposing the Gary Plan. Tammany politicians and school principals were the force behind many of these “anti-gary” groups. “With opposition groups such as Federation of Parent’s Association, Mother’s Council of the City of New York, School Welfare Association, Bronx Anti-Gary League, Conference of Organized Labor on Industrial Education, and parents’ associations from over ten schools present, the three groups in favor of the plan, including the Gary School League, were vastly outnumbered.”³³

During the autumn of 1917, with municipal elections scheduled in November, the students actually helped settle the debate in a very quick manner. “Mayor Mitchel was running again as the Fusion candidate, John F. Hylan as the Tammany candidate, and Morris Hillquit from the Socialist party.” “Hylan was against the plan, while Hillquit was more neutral and even questioned why many of the best features of the plan were never implemented.”³⁴

On October 16, 1917, the headline in the *Globe* was “1,000 Pupils Riot Against Gary System.” The previous day, a large group of boys refused to go to their school where the Gary Plan was just implemented. “Police quickly rounded up the malcontents and dragooned them into the building.” It was not until after school that the actual riots began with “windows broken and students arrested.” The unsatisfactory operation of the plan and Rockefeller’s influence upon the public school system spread to several other schools. “The press immediately placed blame on the Socialists, as signs were waved supporting Hillquit, as well as chanting of slogans against Mayor Mitchel.” The riots escalated throughout October, ceasing at an estimated 10,000 students taking part.³⁵

“The riots caused serious damage to the candidacy of John Purroy Mitchel.” In the election, “Mitchel lost the election in a Tammany landslide, with Hylan receiving twice as many votes.” Soon after his inauguration, Hylan “began to remove any superintendents who favored the plan in order to expedite the elimination of the Gary Plan from schools.”³⁶

The Gary Plan had been a great influence on education. “Based on social progressive philosophy that influenced early manual and industrial arts, it featured many aspects that would be in technology education programs.” “It also embodied education ideals that centered learning on social conditions and needs through experiential, hands-on activities.” “While the Gary Plan did not last long, some features of the plan remain in many of today’s schools, such as departmentalized teaching in upper elementary grades and an end-of-day activity period for students to attend specialized areas.”³⁷

NATIONAL STANDARDS AND NATIONAL TESTS

Many in the profession of education believe that a national curriculum would not be appropriate for America’s schools, precisely because of the reasons cited above and others. For example, our schools have the flexibility to allow children

to grow at their own individual pace. A recent publication shows how close we are to serious deliberations about a national curriculum.³⁸ The publication by Finn and others indicates that “respected” professionals can foresee the possibility of one of four approaches to national standards. These scenarios are:

1. The Whole Enchilada. The feds will create and enforce national standards and tests for all students in all states. We would then have a national accountability system for all students K (or pre-k) to grade 12.
2. If you build it, they will come. This one would be voluntary. Washington would develop standards, tests, and accountability measures, and then provide incentives (such as money) to states that opted in.
3. Lets All Hold Hands. States would join together in order to develop standards and tests, and the Feds might provide incentives for the collaboration efforts.
4. Sunshine and Shame. This is the least ambitious model. It would make state standards and tests more transparent. This would make the tests easier to compare with other tests.

The importance of these four models is not which one will be adopted. The importance is that a national curriculum is being given serious consideration. A national curriculum would be disastrous for our nation’s schools as witnessed by the Gary, Indiana/New York City situation.³⁹

NO CHILD LEFT BEHIND

The No Child Left Behind act is under-funded, and every school will eventually fall short of the arbitrary improvement requirements. It narrows the curriculum, forcing students and teachers on memorizing isolated facts. The No Child Left Behind Act will cause fewer students to be prepared to be successful citizens in our society. It sets up disabled and limited English students and their teacher’s for failure. The act is based on false assumptions and offers false remedies. It endangers both students and schools. No Child Left Behind causes many students to be scape-goated for dragging down average test scores, which tempts schools to drive the students out. It will also cause poor districts to cut down on the staff and resources the students need most. This causes the act to leave many children “left behind.” The main goal of the act is to take all public schools and turn them into government-funded public schools.

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