

# **Parent Involvement in American Public Schools: A Historical Perspective**

## **1642–2000**

*Diana Hiatt-Michael*

### **Local Control and Parental Choice in Education**

Historically, a child's education has always been seen by parents, and perhaps by society as a whole, as the purview of the child's parents. Parental education included, and still includes, activities related to discipline, basic skills, work skills, ethics, and value inculcation. These educational activities were carried out privately within the family, rather than publicly through the use of public institutions (Berger, 1981). A child's secondary education was typically acquired through trade apprenticeships arranged by the child's parents rather than through extensive public education in secondary schools.

During the early years in America, the colonies were granted local control of education (Pulliam, 1987). The first schools were created by religious leaders and later placed under governance of townships. Under townships, boards were comprised of lay citizens, who were parents in the community. As many immigrants had left Europe in order to openly practice their religious beliefs, these schools represented the religious beliefs of the community. Religion, reading, and writing comprised the curriculum for these schools. Since each colony was founded by a different religious sect and most colonies soon had more than one sect, colonial America was dotted with many small schools representing the religious view of the parental lay board.

Updated from an article originally published in the *School Community Journal*,  
Vol. 4, No. 2, Fall/Winter 1994

Many schools were also organized along social class; this was especially so for the plantation states which attempted to emulate the class structure of Britain. The upper class and growing middle class created schools which catered to the social demands of these parents. These schools were supported by fees paid by parents. In response to concerns of philanthropists, charity schools were organized to provide rudimentary education to children who could not afford fees. In brief, the American scene in elementary education was one of local parental control of school governance, parental support of curriculum, parental choice of teachers, and parental support of religious teachings of the school.

However, as public education developed in America, parent involvement in education changed. To many, it seems parents have lost control over their children's education. Public educational institutions usurped and supplanted this parental function, some say, to the detriment of the children and the family. Recognizing this during the late twentieth century, many parents, as well as businessmen, politicians, and educators, began to express renewed concern about choice and parent involvement in public education as a possible option to what many see as an outmoded and ineffective public education system. A spate of national task force reports, epitomized by *A Nation at Risk* (Gardener, 1983), reiterated the rising need to connect the child's home life with school expectations. These reports expressed the importance of parent involvement in a child's school life.

What caused the apparent separation between the child's parents and schooling? Answering this question is the focus of this historical examination of parent involvement in American public schooling.

## The Emergence of American Public Education

The late sixteenth and early seventeenth century was a fertile period of exploration of ideas concerning the social contract and public education as espoused by Locke, Rousseau, and others (Spring, 1986). Perhaps as a result, the shift from parent education to public education occurred first in Europe and then was transmitted to America.

During this period, in the North American colonies under British rule, local colonial authorities had jurisdiction over education. Separated from their mother country, the new colonies responded directly to local needs. For example, as early as 1642, Massachusetts colony, the leading colony regarding educational issues, passed a law which required all parents to provide their children with education in reading, religion, and a trade. When local leaders observed that some parents were not teaching their children to read, they pressed for a law which mandated that all towns of 50 inhabitants or more hire a teacher who could be paid out of local funds.

However, it was not until the Revolutionary War era that the sustained support for tax-supported universal education is reported (Pulliam, 1987). In the eighteenth century many American leaders, such as Benjamin Rush and George Washington, advocated national elementary education supported by federal or state taxes. In particular, Thomas Jefferson (1779/1961) eloquently argued for public education for all children in the Commonwealth of Virginia. His argument was that America's citizens required certain basic skills in order to function in a democratic society. These skills included reading, writing, and rhetoric. Because most of America's European immigrants did not possess such skills, and were, therefore, incapable of properly educating their own children in them, Jefferson stated that Virginia should provide public schooling for every child. He believed that citizens required the ability to read the printed word and communicate clearly in both oral and written form in order to be free to make rational decisions in the community and nation. He feared that uninformed citizens could easily become pawns of political activists. His bill supported three years of public schooling under local control. However, his notion of universal public elementary education was not supported by the legislators of Virginia. They preferred to allow parents individual choice of private and religious schools rather than support public schools.

In nineteenth century America, Jefferson's view of universal public education with equal educational opportunity for every child regardless of ability to pay captured the sentiment of the American public and polity. DeTocqueville (1835/1946) noted after a nineteenth century visit to America, "There reigns an unbelievable outward equality in America." This apparent value placed on equality among the classes noted during the late colonial period continued as the nation developed. The eloquent voices of educational reformers were heard throughout the nineteenth and twentieth century in support of public education and equality of opportunity. In the mid-1800s, the leadership of Horace Mann and Henry Barnard was notable. Mann's vision of the common school led to the development of a public school system in almost every state by 1860.

However, as analyzed by noted historian Lawrence Cremin in *Transformation of the American School*, it was the public school administrators who crafted the public school system of the twentieth century. Their work rested on the belief that public schooling provided the forum in which all the diverse elements of America's native and immigrant society acquired a common culture. Their efforts were exemplified by William Torrey Harris, Superintendent of St. Louis Public Schools and later U. S. Commissioner of Education. Faced with ever-increasing student enrollments, he met this rising demand for schools with scientifically-managed, graded elementary and secondary schools. John Dewey, an early twentieth century

## THE COMMUNITY OF THE SCHOOL

philosopher, captured continuing interest in his “progressive” community schools, a concept which rested on public schooling. His beliefs were modified by Ralph W. Tyler, who fervently expounded free universal public schooling, providing the major influence on all students throughout the 1900s. As late as the mid-twentieth century, many supported the egalitarian Jeffersonian model as one that would serve the educational desires of *all parents* for their children, not only that of the poor, minority, and immigrant population of the United States. By the second half of the nineteenth century, only a percentage of elementary children were educated in private schools. Most parents of lower, middle, and upper middle classes considered the graded public school to be the educational choice. Because children from all ethnic groups and social backgrounds attended the public schools, it appeared that public schools were providing the “melting pot” for the diverse cultures of America.

However, the opposing view, differential educational opportunity or public school choice, appears in recent years to have attracted a strong following. Supporters of this view believe that choice relates to greater parent involvement in the kind of education their children receive. These proponents support differential education not only among America’s moneyed intellectual and business elite, who have always preferred private education for their children, but also increasingly among the rising middle class who are the product of what is now seen by many as an outmoded and ineffective public education system. Therein lies the source of the tension and friction between the advocates of free universal public education and the proponents for parental school choice.

## The Press for Compulsory Education and Child Labor Laws

Pre-Revolutionary educational practices and trends tended to be on a state-by-state basis during the Revolutionary period under the Articles of Confederation and along the lines of colonial Massachusetts where, for example, educational practices continued to evolve along new and broader patterns of public instruction. Under the Constitution of the post-Revolutionary United States, the responsibility for the education of each state’s citizens has been reserved to the individual state or to the people.

The watershed year 1852 marks the passage of America’s first compulsory education law in Massachusetts. Gradually, other states followed Massachusetts’ lead. However, as late as 1885, only sixteen out of the then 38 states had similar compulsory education laws.

During the nineteenth century, hordes of unemployed immigrant children were pressed by their parents into the mines, mills, and factories

of the industrial revolution in order to supplement the family's subsistence wages (Rippa, 1988). The family needed the money to survive. Likewise on the family farm, parents needed child labor for planting and harvesting crops, tending the farm animals, and a host of other survival chores. Consequently, parents had little or no motivation and could ill afford economically to send their children to school.

As a result of this exploitation of low-wage child labor, the labor market was glutted with cheap labor. The primary political pressure to change this situation came from the working men who formed labor unions and went on strike for higher wages. In order for such strikes to be successful, labor unions enlisted politicians to enact child labor laws. These laws limited an industrialist's ability to exploit the labor of children.

However, these laws alone proved insufficient to keep children out of the workplace and gangs of unemployed urban children ran the city streets creating havoc. Compulsory school attendance and truancy laws were needed in addition to force parents to relinquish their children's wages. By 1918, all states had passed such legislation (Rippa, 1988). These laws made it illegal for a parent to keep a child out of school without the permission of school authorities and carried stiff fines for noncompliance. To further assure compliance, names of new immigrants were reported to school authorities by immigration authorities. Such laws spelled the death knell for parent involvement and control over their children's education.

Children were required to attend public schools for increasingly longer periods of time. This lengthy institutionalization of children was camouflaged by reformers who argued the advantages of public education for the betterment of society. To this end, coercion of students into classrooms was condoned. Others supported the compulsory education and truancy laws because of fear of large numbers of unsupervised, unemployed immigrant children who roamed the streets. This fear is exemplified in this district superintendent's comment:

Citizens should support compulsory education to save themselves from the rapidly increasing herds of non-producers... to save themselves from the wretches who prey upon society like wild beasts. For such children, the state should establish labor schools so that children can be taught not only how to read but how to work (Tyack, 1974).

## The Development of School Bureaucratization and Professionalization of Teachers

The bureaucratization of the American educational system emerged as a result of four combined forces—the growing American population, the

## THE COMMUNITY OF THE SCHOOL

growth of the industrial centers, the urbanization of the nation, and the utilization of scientific management techniques in business and industry. Bureaucratization is commonly defined as the formation of a hierarchical organization of an institution with defined procedures, roles, and functions of personnel. The early American schools were generally large single-room, multi-age schoolhouses organized and operated by the locally hired teacher. In 1848, the first graded elementary school was opened in Massachusetts. This new organization represented the factory model of schooling and utilized a graded curriculum. The teacher in each classroom focused on content assigned to that grade. Children were classified by grade. The haphazard individualized instruction of early schooling was replaced with an efficient systems approach to specialized curriculum for each grade. The graded school concept spread across states where it was quickly adopted in all modern schools in response to the increasing numbers of children in urban areas (Cremin, 1961).

In conjunction with the graded school plan, many teachers were required to staff each school and the office of principal was added for efficient management of the school's operation. The increased numbers of schools within a town led to the formation of the superintendent's position, a role developed to assure uniformity across schools.

Mann and Barnard were instrumental leaders in the mid-1800s for the bureaucratization of public schools and the professionalization of faculty. Their intent was to bring the scientific management of the industrial age to the education of children. They recommended processes of standardization and systemization so that the growing public schools could operate effectively in the industrialized society. Mann promoted professional education of teachers in normal schools. Both men supported the notion that education of children should be in the hands of the professional teacher and administrator. Their belief was that parents did not possess the time, knowledge, or talents necessary for a child to meet the challenges of the emerging technology. Therefore, the parent should turn over the process of education to professionals hired by the state.

Barnard argued for the reduction of lay control of public schools. Instead of schools directly reporting to financial boards, Barnard felt that there should be general state financial support for public schooling. As Commissioner of Education in the states of Rhode Island and Connecticut, Barnard worked with evangelical fervor to increase state control and reduce local control of schools.

The developing bureaucratization of schools was intended to make the operation more equitable. For example, teachers and administrators would be hired on professional qualifications rather than on personal favoritism or nepotism. However, the stress on equity and systems management increased layers of bureaucracy. These layers separated the parents from the

daily decision-making operations of the educational process. The control of schools by lay parent boards was subsumed by school superintendents. Boards of Education evolved into figureheads who were manipulated by the professional superintendent. Davies (1992) commented that the "Professionalism of administrators and teachers led to keeping parents out of power influence." Michael Katz (1975), as part of his analysis of control of education, stated:

Development of more elaborate and specific written regulations was intended to make the operation of the school system more routine, that is, more impartial and equitable, and the removal of the school board from ward politics was designed to remove the schools from partisanship as well as to foster increased coordination through centralization. It offered specific advantages to practicing schoolmen in their quest for professionalism.

Professionalization may be defined as the process by which the administrators of the bureaucracy credential themselves and those practitioners who might seek a license to practice under the bureaucracy. During the twentieth century the requirements to become a teacher changed from graduation from a secondary school to graduation from a five-year approved college program (Tyler, 1992). The normal schools, considered quality professional education in the 1800s, were gradually absorbed by colleges. By 1900, one-quarter of four-year colleges offered professional training in education. States began to require licensing of teachers to assure quality control. Teachers were required to be part of the best educated. In this professional education of teachers, teachers acquired shared standards of professional practice. The continued press for more education for teachers separated the social and cultural level of the teacher from that of the school's parents in many communities and urban centers. Shipman (1987) reported that lower class parents were hesitant to enter schools because schools belonged to the middle and upper class professionals.

From the above, it is apparent that the educational system in the United States has gone through the process of bureaucratization and professionalization. However, bureaucratization of the educational system and increased professionalization of teachers have reduced parental influence in public schooling. The bureaucracy controls the schools, and parents feel powerless over this overwhelming system. The system controls governance, daily administration, curriculum content, and hiring faculty. In addition, the professionalization of faculty separates the teacher from the parent, placing the role of "expert" upon the teacher and administrator.

## Parental Challenges to Public School Bureaucracy

### The Development of the Parent/Teacher Association

The increasing separation between parent control and public school was perceived by parents. Mothers sought intervention and formed the National Congress of Mothers (NCM) in 1897. This group, comprised of middle and upper class mothers, met with teachers on Saturdays and expressed their concerns to the school principal through petitions. These mothers studied school curricula, became informed about child growth and development, and encouraged other parents to be active in the school. They were particularly active in securing public school kindergarten programs and health programs. The NCM worked for children and youth programs through national, state, and local volunteer units. The influence of this group spread rapidly and formed the basis of the Parent/Teacher Association (PTA) which is active on almost every American school site today. Butts and Cremin (1953) stated:

Parent-Teacher Associations grew by leaps and bounds, and in a few communities even the student began to be listened to with more appreciation and respect as the notion of a "community school" began to capture the imagination and loyalty of those members of the professional and the public who were genuinely devoted to improving the school.

The PTA helped to "Americanize newcomers to the country and to teach middle class parenting" (Davies, 1992). This group connected the home and school during the first part of the twentieth century. By the 1940s, parents of all social classes considered the monthly PTA meeting a mandatory community event.

### Court Challenges

During the last three decades of the twentieth century, parents increasingly have resorted to courts in order to effect changes within the bureaucracy of the public schools. These parents began to hammer at the public school monolith, created by a century of increasing school bureaucracy. They were joined by social reformers. Their concerted efforts were loud and demanding. Rivlin (1964) remarked that:

As parents became more enlightened with more education they became more vocal in their demands as to what schools should offer. The parents of American school children are

increasingly vocal. It is to be expected that parents who hear the spectacular charges that are made by critics of education should wonder why changes are not made in the way schools are run.

Parents became involved in legal battles which focused on equality of educational opportunities (Wirt & Kirst, 1975). In a landmark court case, *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*, the court ruled that separate schools for black and white children were not providing equality of educational opportunity. This ruling led to several desegregation cases in major cities such as Boston, Detroit, and Los Angeles, which forced public schools to reorganize student populations to reflect ethnic diversity. *Serrano v. Priest*, a suit involving Serrano, a public school parent, resulted in a decision ordering state-wide equalization of school funding. *Lau v. Nichols* promoted bilingual education programs so that non-English speaking students equally benefited from public education. The ruling on *Pennsylvania Association for Retarded Children v. Commonwealth of Pennsylvania* led to legislation for equal access for handicapped children.

### **Development of Parent Involvement Programs**

In conjunction with court rulings, parent involvement was assisted by the diligent labors of educational researchers whose studies pointed out the positive influence parent involvement and parent education had upon student achievement in schools. This knowledge was incorporated into educational legislation, which mandated parent involvement components. The first federally funded legislation, namely Project Head Start in 1964 for disadvantaged children in the inner cities and the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, required that parents serve on school advisory boards and participate in classroom activities. Education for All Handicapped Act in 1974 required parents be an active partner in determining their child's educational program. Each handicapped student was to have an individually developed program. This program was to be developed by teacher, parent, child, and specialists. Parents had to initiate the child's entrance and exit from the program.

Following the development of Head Start programs, there was increased growth in early childhood education programs for all social classes. This increase was directly related to increased numbers of mothers, single and married, participating in the workforce outside the home while their children were still very young. Information generated by Head Start and other federally funded research studies promoted parent involvement in these programs. Forms of parent involvement included serving on advisory boards, acting as a teacher assistant in the classroom, participating in school

events, working in the school office and other related school activities, and participating in parent education classes. The early childhood programs encouraged an open dialogue between the professional teacher and the parent. Many policymakers of the 1990s advocate that the model of parent involvement developed in early childhood programs be emulated in the elementary and secondary schools (Tyler, 1992).

### **Home Schooling**

In response to desegregation rulings, school districts created plans publicly to transport children from neighborhood schools in order to create ethnically diverse schools. Many parents became so enraged with this situation that they removed their children from public schools and enrolled them in private schools, created new schools, or began home schooling. Home schooling, ardently advocated by John Holt in the 1970s, has become a powerful parental involvement outcome of the desegregation movement (Fantini, 1987). Armed with knowledge of court cases and parents' rights over their child's education, these parents are teaching their children at home (Millard, 1989). In many states, the parents work under the auspices of a licensed public school teacher. Although the number of home schoolers is small in comparison to public school students, federal reports indicate that their numbers are rapidly increasing (Davies, 2000).

### **School Restructuring and Site-based Management**

School restructuring, a major movement expressed in educational literature and professional addresses, commenced in the mid-1980s. This movement may open the doors of all public schools to increased parent involvement. School restructuring advocates site-based management, in which school districts return control to school sites. Each school is to have a governing board whose membership must include a majority of local school parents. This governing board would determine curriculum, create budgets, hire faculty, and organize the school facilities, students, and faculty. This movement holds promise to restore local parental control. Funds to support the development of school restructuring have been provided by many states.

### **Summary**

The pendulum has swung from strong parent involvement in the home and community based schools of the agrarian seventeenth century to the bureaucratic factory model schools of the industrial revolution. The pendulum appears to be swinging back again, slowly at first, but gathering momentum, towards schooling which increasingly involves parents.

This movement will reflect the effects of the emerging culture based on information technology and telecommunications on the lives of children, parents, and schools. Parent involvement has emerged in the 1900's as a major issue in public schooling and one that affects the diverse aspects of American education such as school organization, governance, school finance, curriculum, and teacher education. Goals 2000 (1994) included parent involvement as one of eight national goals and includes research funding for Family, School, Community Partnerships at John Hopkins University and at the Office for Educational Research.

At present a tension often exists between professionals, on the one hand, who espouse the concept that they alone are qualified to make complex decisions affecting the education of our nation's children, and parents, on the other hand, who believe that they should have a voice in their children's compensatory public education. Cutler (2000) reported that between 1991 and 1999, thirty-five states passed laws approving charter schools, schools that involve parents in all aspects of school decision-making. In addition, three states have supported parental choice in the form of voucher plans and others are considering various forms of school vouchers. The 1990s witnessed other open forums for dialogue between the two groups, such as site-based management meetings, development of school-based parent centers and home-schooling contracts. Such forums will provide opportunities to bridge the gap between the two groups and create new ways for parents and public school professionals to interact. Collaboration among the various constituencies is critical to mutual understanding and support between the school and home, as interdependent not independent entities.

## References

- Berger, E. H. (1981). *Parents as partners in education*. St. Louis: The C. V. Mosby Co.
- Butts, F. R. & Cremin, L. A. (1953). *A history of education in American culture*. New York: Henry Holt and Company.
- Cremin, L. (1961). *The transformation of the school*. New York: Vintage Books.
- Cutler, W. W. III. (2000). *Parents and schools: The 150-year struggle for control in American education*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Davies, D. (April, 2000). Interview with author. Institute of Responsive Education, Marblehead, MA.
- Fantini, M. (1986-89). Interviews with author. University of Massachusetts.
- Jefferson, T. & Lee, G. C. (1961). *Crusade against ignorance: Thomas Jefferson on education*. New York: Teachers College Press. (Original work published 1779).
- Katz, M. B. (1975). *Class bureaucracy and schools*. New York: Praeger Publishers.
- Mann, H. (1957). *The republic and the school*. L. Fremin (Ed.). New York: Bureau of Publications, Teachers College, Columbia University.
- Millard, A. W. (1989). *Home schools and the law*. Unpublished manuscript, Pepperdine University.
- National Commission on Excellence in Education. (1983). *A nation at risk: The imperative for educational reform*. Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office.

## THE COMMUNITY OF THE SCHOOL

- Pulliam, J. D. (1987). *History of education in America* (4<sup>th</sup> ed.). Columbus: Merrill Publishing Company.
- Rippa, S. A. (1988). *Education in a free society: An American history* (6<sup>th</sup> ed.). New York: Longman.
- Rivlin, H. N. (1964). *The professional responsibility for educational change. Changes in teacher education: An appraisal report*. Washington, D.C.: National Commission on Teacher Education and Professional Standards, Columbus Conference, National Education Association of the U.S.
- Shipman, V. (1987). Interview with author. Department of Family Studies, University of New Mexico.
- Spring, J. (1986). *The American school 1642-1985*. New York: Longman.
- Tocqueville, A. de (1946). *Democracy in America*. (H. Reeve, Trans.). London: Oxford University Press, Inc. (Original work published in 1835).
- Tyack, D. B. (1974). *The one best system: A history of American urban education*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Tyler, R. W. (1979-1993). Interviews with author. University of Chicago.
- U.S. Department of Education (1994). *National education goals*. Washington, DC: Author.
- Wirt, F. M. & Kirst, M. W. (1975). *Political and social foundations of education*. Berkeley, CA: McCutcheon Publishing Corp.

---

Diana Hiatt-Michael is a professor of education at Pepperdine University in Los Angeles, California.