

The Rise and Fall of an Urban School System

Detroit, 1907–81

Second Edition

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Ann Arbor

THE UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN PRESS

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Published in the United States of America by

The University of Michigan Press

Manufactured in the United States of America

2007 2006 2005 2004 5 4 3 2

A CIP catalogue record of this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Mirel, Jeffrey, 1948–

The rise and fall of an urban school system : Detroit, 1907–81 /

Jeffrey Mirel. — 2nd ed.

p. cm. — (Ann Arbor paperbacks)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-472-08649-9 (pbk. : alk. paper)

1. Urban schools—Michigan—Detroit—History—20th century.

I. Title.

LC5133.D48M57 1999

370.19'348'09774'34—dc21

99-31492

CIP

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Preface

The Rise and Fall of Urban Public Education

Urban schools are the most troubled part of the American educational enterprise. Daily, the barrage of reports on staggering dropout rates, rampant violence, demoralized teaching staffs, and declining academic achievement have convinced many observers that urban public schools are the worst in the nation.¹ Adding to this perception is the continuing failure of attempts to solve urban educational problems. Regardless of how well thought-out and well intended solutions might be, their goals are rarely realized, caught between the competing demands of local school boards, state departments of education, federal agencies, federal courts, teacher unions, and community groups, to name only the most visible participants in modern urban school politics. The “organizational theorist’s nightmare” that David Tyack and Elisabeth Hansot see engulfing all of American education is at its worst in the nation’s urban systems.²

This dismal picture stands in stark contrast to the exalted position urban school systems had throughout most of American educational history. Writing in 1919, Ellwood Cubberley claimed that America’s urban systems were the best in the nation and had been for nearly half a century. The cities, he argued, “have been able to draw the keenest thinkers and the most capable administrators engaged in educational work.”³ These leaders instituted reforms that gave urban systems unrivaled reputations for administrative efficiency, innovative educational programs, and educational quality. When compared to the rural and suburban schools of the era, there is little doubt that Cubberley was correct. Indeed, as late as the 1940s, urban schools still set the standard for excellence for all of American education.

What went wrong? For a quarter-century, Americans have been pas-

sionately and often acrimoniously debating the reasons for the rise and fall of urban public education. Central to this debate is the 1966 study, *Equality of Educational Opportunity*, better known as the Coleman Report. In this massive survey, Coleman found that, in terms of available resources, black and white children essentially attended separate but equal schools and that the level of resources channeled to these schools made little difference in determining student achievement. Explaining the differences in achievement levels between these children, Coleman argued that families and peer groups had a significantly larger influence on student outcomes than did teachers or school environments.⁴ One Harvard professor succinctly summed up the report, declaring, "Guess what Coleman found? . . . Schools make no difference; families make the difference."⁵

The Coleman Report profoundly affected educational thought in the United States. Former assistant secretary of education, Chester E. Finn, Jr., described it as "probably the best known and most influential piece of educational research ever published."⁶ The report transformed the debate about educational policy in this country, greatly strengthening some points of view while diminishing, almost effacing, others. Policy analyst Henry Aaron notes that the Coleman Report severely undercut the liberal faith that equalizing educational resources would ultimately equalize educational outcomes. As a consequence, the report encouraged a thorough reanalysis of American education by critics from both the left and right.⁷

Left-wing scholars and activists used Coleman's conclusions to bolster their arguments that public schools are a tool of American capitalism. Because schools did not mitigate the importance of family factors in determining educational outcomes, these scholars argued that the actual purpose of public education was to reinforce or reproduce social and racial inequality. Denouncing most reform efforts as superficial, these intellectuals and activists challenged Americans to seek more fundamental structural changes in our society.⁸ In contrast, conservatives used the report to support their arguments that family structures, core values, and cultural norms are central to educational achievement. Conservatives also questioned the utility of many educational reforms, particularly calls for additional resources to improve public education.⁹

The Coleman Report appears to have had an equally profound effect on how educational historians have conceived of their work. Apparently convinced by Coleman that resources were, at best, a secondary factor in explaining the problems of American public schools, educational historians have pursued several lines of inquiry that roughly correspond to the larger

theoretical debates about public education. One of the most extensive analyses of public schools, generally, and urban schools, in particular, has come from a group of left-leaning, “revisionist” scholars who have tried to illuminate the mechanisms through which schools perpetuate social and racial inequality. Revisionist interpretations trace the problems of urban education to the actions of upper-class, business-oriented reformers who, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, transformed urban school systems in order to satisfy the changing nature and needs of American capitalism. Turn-of-the-century school reform, the revisionists argue, placed power in the hands of economically and socially elite school board members, reproduced social inequality through biased testing and tracking procedures, and socialized children into the norms and values of a bureaucratic, corporate society.¹⁰

As a consequence of these reforms, the very structure of urban school systems came to work against the needs of poor and minority children. Rather than being Horace Mann’s “balance wheel of the social machinery,” modern urban schools have contributed to the creation of a hopeless urban underclass. As Bowles and Gintis argue, public education has been more likely “to justify and reproduce inequality rather than correct it.” Moreover, Bowles and Gintis claim, during periods of wrenching economic and social change, schools have become an “admirable safety valve for the economic pressure cooker . . . a monument to the capacity of the advanced corporate economy to accommodate and deflect thrusts away from its foundations.”¹¹

In response to this revisionist critique of American education, another group of scholars rose, more or less, in defense of public education. As with the revisionist critique, however, this defense is situated well within the parameters that the Coleman Report defined.¹² Nonrevisionist scholars argue that, in the 1920s and 1930s, despite the elite takeover of the schools and the racial, ethnic, and class bias of many of the Progressive era reforms, urban systems still provided an avenue for upward mobility and integration into the American mainstream for large numbers of poor, immigrant children. In her study of the New York City schools, Diane Ravitch criticizes revisionist scholars for

inevitably los[ing] sight of the monumental accomplishments of the public school system of New York City. . . . The descendants of the miserably poor European immigrants of 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 have been inconceivable.¹³

The key question that these scholars ask is why, amid similar types of demographic and economic changes, were urban schools a means for mobility and equality in the 1920s and 1930s and not in the 1960s and 1970s? To answer this question, these historians focus on changes in school curricula, the shifting function and purpose of the high school, and the growing dependence on the schools to solve major social problems. In the 1920s and 1930s, they argue, urban schools had a straightforward mission, namely to transform the diverse ethnic population of our cities into American citizens. Educators had no doubt about what that mission entailed: fundamental literacy and mathematical skills, knowledge of a “core” curriculum including a strong emphasis on literature, American history, and American values, and, above all, mastery of the English language. While this approach to citizenship education often provided teachers with a self-righteous cloak for racism and the denigration of ethnic cultures, it nevertheless resulted in upward mobility for many immigrant groups.¹⁴

The modern problems of urban education, these scholars argue, developed as educators abandoned the straightforward inculcation of skills and values necessary for success in American life. Since the 1930s, Ravitch contends, American schools have become agencies of social adjustment designed to “meet the needs of youth” rather than institutions committed to providing access to a common culture. The consequence of these curricular decisions have been particularly disastrous for children in urban systems. Rather than obtaining the same high-quality education that children of immigrants received in the 1920s and 1930s, children of the new black and Hispanic urban immigrants have entered schools in which educators have softened curricula and lowered standards and expectations. Given these conditions, the massive failure of urban schools should come as no surprise.¹⁵

For the last two decades, the debate between the revisionists and their critics has dominated discussions about the history of urban schooling in America. Recently, however, a group of “postrevisionist” historians has tried to move beyond that debate by offering another perspective on the development of urban schooling. These scholars have concentrated on the one apparent flaw common to all of the previous interpretations, namely the assumption that urban minority and working-class communities have been largely passive, uncomprehending victims of vast social or educational changes.¹⁶ According to these scholars that view of minorities and the working class seriously distorts all the earlier interpretations. As Katznelson and Weir put it, “We take issue . . . with the disappearance of the working class from

educational analyses and the glib dismissals of education from the agendas of democratic and egalitarian movements and aspirations.”¹⁷

This new group of historians perceives schools as contested institutions in which working class, ethnic, and independent civic organizations have clashed with more established interests over the direction of educational policy and practice. While their studies differ in emphasis, these scholars all share a dynamic vision of the politics of twentieth-century urban education. Their main theme is that women’s groups, progressive politicians, ethnic and minority organizations, and organized labor have had a substantial, generally positive, influence on the development of urban public education.¹⁸

Of these studies, Katznelson and Weir provide the most sweeping vision of urban educational decline by linking labor activism, urban politics, and demographic change. Briefly, they contend that the rise and fall of urban education has been strongly associated with the degree of working-class involvement in school issues. Throughout the Progressive era, they note, the working class played an important role in shaping urban educational policy, but, in the 1930s, working-class interest and influence on the schools began to wane. As Katznelson and Weir put it, “Social class ceased to be a basis of mobilization in school politics in the 1930s. In the very decade when labor emerged as a mass interest group on the national level, working-class self-images, political language, and assertions of interest with regard to education contracted.” By 1950, working-class influence on urban schools had “disappeared entirely.”¹⁹

This “domestication” of organized labor occurred at roughly the same time that industrial cities began experiencing major demographic changes. As organized labor paid less attention to educational issues and as white, working-class families abandoned central cities, urban school systems began their long slide into bureaucratic stagnation and educational ruin. By the 1970s, these trends had transformed the basis of educational politics from class to race, pitting largely minority cities against white suburbs, and leaving the beleaguered civil rights movement as the last champion of the ideal of equal schooling for all.²⁰

As in many of the postrevisionist works, Katznelson and Weir are sensitive to “the politics of money,” the perennial issues of school finance, taxes, and expenditures. Yet even studies that have provided the most extensive treatment of resource issues have not conveyed the almost overwhelming obsession urban school leaders seem to have had with funding problems.²¹ “During the entire 100 years of our public school system,” the president of

the Detroit Board of Education declared in 1942, “the Board has never experienced a time in which its schools had sufficient seats for all who sought its service.” Overcrowded schools, overcrowded classes, and an almost perpetual financial crisis have dominated the history of urban education since the nineteenth century.²² Reformers and school leaders frequently campaigned for specific changes in the hope that such innovations as centralization, the junior high school, the Gary plan, age-grading, and standardized testing would enable schools to serve more children, more efficiently. School leaders fought, bitterly and repeatedly, with city councils, state legislatures, and powerful interest groups over levels of funding. Racial and ethnic groups routinely clashed over inequalities in the allocation of school resources. Yet educational historians often downplay these battles over financial issues, seeing them as secondary to more fundamental struggles over school governance or the curriculum.²³

My study of the Detroit Public Schools argues that issues of governance, curriculum, and resources are inextricably intertwined. Shifting levels of available resources have had an enormous impact on the development of urban public schools, and political battles about resources have been one of the driving forces shaping virtually every aspect of urban public education. This argument about the role of resources in the history of urban education does not deny the importance of Coleman’s and subsequent researchers’ conclusions about the relationship between resources and educational outcomes.²⁴ Nor does the argument question the profound impact that social class, race, culture, curricular change, family structure, peer groups, or values have had on education. Rather, it contends that, by downplaying the importance of resource issues, educational historians have focused on only half of a dynamic process. In a sense, we have been considering schooling as an abstraction, as an enterprise unrestrained by material demands and uninfluenced by the actual conditions in which educational policymakers, community activist groups, teachers, parents, and students must operate.

There are four main reasons for focusing on resources. First, at the most fundamental level, the amount of money available to a school system is one of the crucial material constraints on public school development. In many ways, these material constraints define educational priorities, shape the organizational plans of school districts, and even influence changes in schools’ curricula.

Second, the level of support for urban schools has rarely been steady. In modern American history, such catastrophic events as wars, depressions, and civil unrest have caused major disruptions or changes in the flow of

school resources. In every case, these events have compelled major adjustments in school life.

Third, the struggle for resources is invariably a political struggle. As such, the alignment of interest groups and the shifting balances of power among these groups play an enormous role in determining both the level of support for schools and the power these groups have to influence school policy. Urban educational politics, especially in regard to school finance, have frequently been as fierce as any political conflict in American life. It is only by downplaying the importance of these controversies that Tyack and Hansot can argue that “public education has differed from other sectors of society where competition and conflict have been taken for granted and treated as part of the natural order.”²⁵ Indeed, school politics since the 1930s may have more in common with larger national politics than historians have heretofore suspected.

Fourth, the amount of resources that school systems have is often a good indication of the level of commitment that a community or, at least, the most influential interest groups within a community, has for public schools.

Any investigation of the ebb and flow of educational resources and the ongoing struggles about them must take a long perspective that analyzes the connection between actual educational policies and practices and the social, political, and economic dynamics of a given place. Ideally, historians should research educational systems in different cities, each representing different economic and political contexts throughout the country. Unfortunately, efforts to achieve that ideal, even when aided by substantial grants and teams of research assistants, have fallen far short of the mark. The reasons for that failure are simple—the amount of material that is necessary to consider in studying the history of even one large urban system is enormous and the factors involved in the decline of any urban system are tremendously varied and complex. The sheer magnitude of available records, for example, forces even well-funded projects to concentrate on specific, important events rather than the processes and patterns of change. Yet the only way to truly understand the rise and fall of urban school systems is to identify and analyze those processes and patterns. For the time being, individual case studies may be the only feasible approach to longitudinal research on the history of twentieth-century urban education.

In many ways, Detroit is an ideal place to undertake such an investigation. For most of this century, it was the fourth largest city in the country and one of the great manufacturing centers of the world. Detroit has gone through virtually every significant economic and demographic change that Americans

associate with large industrial cities. No city felt the impact of the Flint sit-down strike more profoundly, and, in 1943 and 1967, Detroit was shaken by two of the worst race riots in American history. Few places in the country offer a better perspective on the interaction between industrial capitalism and the politics of class and race.

The history of the Detroit Public Schools also offers a unique opportunity to explore the rise and fall of a great urban school district. Virtually every major educational reform and innovation of the twentieth century took root and flourished in Detroit. In a classic example of Progressive era reform, Detroit shifted from a ward-based to an at-large form of school board elections and became a national leader in Americanization, standardized testing, and vocational education. The school system suffered severe retrenchment during the Great Depression but emerged, in the early 1940s, as the national center of wartime training and education. During the late 1940s and the 1950s, the school system struggled to accommodate the flood of baby boomers and wrestled with problems of race as the African-American community also grew substantially. By the 1960s, the city and the schools were engulfed in racial tension that ultimately led to the extensive decentralization of the school system and to two of the most important Supreme Court decisions on desegregation, *Milliken v. Bradley* (1974 and 1977).

In searching for a site to explore the history of urban education, no city is perfect because each city will have features that undercut generalizations. The rise of the Democratic political machine in Chicago in the 1930s, for example, a development that was not widely repeated, must temper conclusions that historians draw from case studies of the Windy City. Detroit also has drawbacks as a site for this research. The rise to prominence of the United Auto Workers (UAW) in the late 1930s that transformed Detroit into a bastion of industrial unionism insured organized labor an unusually important role in city and state politics. In few other cities was union power so substantial. In addition to the rise of the UAW, since the 1940s Detroit has had a large, politically sophisticated African-American community. This factor also precludes hasty generalizations one might draw from Detroit. Yet, in many ways, both these factors can be seen as strengths as well as weaknesses in focusing on the Motor City. The combination of relatively clean local politics and the fact that organized labor and the African-American community have been unusually strong in the city means that Detroit offers a superb opportunity to explore how issues of class and race have been played out in the public schools.

I attempt to describe how Detroiters struggled with the task of building

and supporting a vast urban school system amid seemingly constant change and conflict. Chapter 1 presents the battle between elite reformers and members of the ward-based board of education for control of the schools. That battle lasted from 1907 to 1916, ending with the replacement of the ward-based board with one elected at-large. Chapter 2 focuses on the political and educational implementation of the reforms that followed that change in governance, particularly the emergence of broad-based consensus in support of the expansion and improvement of the Detroit schools. In chapter 3, I discuss how the Great Depression shattered that consensus and how educational politics came to resemble the larger political configurations abroad in the land during the New Deal years. Chapter 4 focuses on the 1940s, when the political alignments of the Depression became institutionalized in state and local politics and when the Detroit Federation of Teachers and the growing African-American community began to have an impact on educational policy and politics in Detroit. Chapter 5 explores the rise to prominence of the liberal-labor-black political coalition in the city and its effort to recreate a consensus on educational issues in the 1950s and early 1960s. In chapter 6, I analyze the collapse of that coalition in the late 1960s and early 1970s, demonstrating how racial issues fragmented organized labor's support for public education, a development that nearly bankrupted the school system and left the system racially and political isolated. In the epilogue, I assess the impact these political changes had on public education in Detroit and address some policy issues that are implied by the arguments in this book.

NOTES

1. See, for example, Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, *An Imperiled Generation: Saving Urban Schools* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988); Chicago Tribune Staff, *Chicago Schools: "Worst in America"* (Chicago: Chicago Tribune, 1988).

2. David Tyack and Elisabeth Hansot, *Managers of Virtue: Public School Leadership in America, 1820–1980* (New York: Basic Books, 1982), 246.

3. Ellwood Cubberley, *Public Education in the United States* (Cambridge, MA: The Riverside Press, 1919), 465–67.

4. James S. Coleman et al., *Equality of Educational Opportunity* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1966). A good, short summary of the findings of the report can be found in James S. Coleman, "A Brief Summary of the Coleman Report," in *Equal Educational Opportunity*, ed. Harvard Educational Review (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1969), 253–59.

5. Quoted in Godfrey Hodgson, "Do Schools Make a Difference?" *Atlantic Monthly* 231 (March, 1973): 35.

6. Chester E. Finn, Jr., quoted in the introduction to U.S. Department of Education, *What*

Works: Research About Teaching and Learning (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, 1986), 3.

7. Henry J. Aaron, *Politics and the Professors: The Great Society in Perspective* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 1978), 77.

8. See, for example, Christopher Jencks et al., *Inequality: A Reassessment of the Effect of Family and Schooling in America* (New York: Harper and Row, 1972); Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis, *Schooling in Capitalist America* (New York: Basic Books, 1976).

9. Department of Education, *What Works*, 2–3; A. L. Ginsburg and S. L. Hanson, “Values and Educational Success among Disadvantaged Children,” Contract No. 300-83-0211 (U.S. Department of Education, Washington, DC, 1986, photocopy); Andrew Oldenquist, “The Decline of American Education in the ‘60s and ‘70s,” *American Education* 19 (May, 1983): 12–18.

10. In identifying revisionist scholars and key revisionist ideas, I am using the criteria established by Diane Ravitch (Ravitch, *The Revisionists Revised: A Critique of the Radical Attack on the Schools* [New York: Basic Books, 1978], 36–37). Examples of revisionist scholarship include Bowles and Gintis, *Schooling in Capitalist America*; Clarence Karier, Paul Violas, and Joel Spring, *Roots of Crisis: American Education in the Twentieth Century* (Chicago: Rand McNally, 1973); Michael Katz, *Class, Bureaucracy and Schools* (New York: Praeger, 1972); Joel Spring, *Education and the Rise of the Corporate State* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1972); Paul Violas, *The Training of the Urban Working Class* (Chicago: Rand McNally, 1978).

11. Bowles and Gintis, *Schooling in Capitalist America*, 102, 4–5.

12. David Angus, “The Politics of Progressive School Reform, Grand Rapids, 1900–1910,” *Michigan Academician* 14 (Winter, 1982), 239–58; David Angus, “Vocationalism and the Blueing of the High School, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1900–1920” (paper presented at the History of Education Society annual meeting, Pittsburgh, October 1980); Diane Ravitch, *The Great School Wars* (New York: Basic Books, 1974); Ravitch, *Revisionists Revised*.

13. Ravitch, *Great School Wars*, 403.

14. See, for example, Nathan Glazer, “Ethnicity and Education: Some Hard Questions,” *Phi Delta Kappan* (January, 1981): 387–88; Glazer, “Black English and Reluctant Judges,” *Public Interest*, no. 62 (Winter, 1981): 51–52.

15. Diane Ravitch, *The Troubled Crusade: American Education 1945–1980* (New York: Basic Books, 1983), 43–80, 155–57.

16. The works by “postrevisionist” scholars include Ronald Cohen, *Children of the Mill: Schooling and Society in Gary, Indiana 1906–60* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1990); David John Hogan, *Class and Reform: School and Society in Chicago, 1880–1930* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1985); Michael Homel, *Down from Equality: Black Chicagoans and the Public Schools, 1920–41* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1984); Paul Peterson, *The Politics of School Reform, 1870–1940* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985); William Reese, *Power and the Promise of School Reform: Grass Roots Movements During the Progressive Era* (Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1986); Julia Wrigley, *Class Politics and Public Schools: Chicago, 1900–1950* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1982); Ira Katznelson and Margaret Weir, *Schooling for All: Class, Race and the Decline of the Democratic Ideal* (New York: Basic Books, 1985); Tyack and Hansot, *Managers of Virtue*, esp. pt. 3.

17. Katznelson and Weir, *Schooling for All*, 14.

18. Many of these studies have also moved beyond the limits of the Coleman Report by paying more attention to what Tyack, Lowe, and Hansot have called “the politics of money” and the allocation of resources. Yet, because these works have other historiographic priorities, these discussions of resources invariably have been relegated to a supporting role in the unfolding drama of urban education (see David Tyack, Robert Lowe, and Elisabeth Hansot, *Public Schools*

in *Hard Times: The Great Depression and Recent Years* [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984], 42–91).

19. Katznelson and Weir, *Schooling for All*, 134, 120.

20. Katznelson and Weir, *Schooling for All*, 122–23, 178–222.

21. The works by Peterson and Homel have been the most sensitive to resource issues, yet even they focus on such issues in a very narrow way. See Peterson, *Politics of School Reform*, 72–95; Homel, *Down from Equality*, 58–87.

22. DBEP, 1942–43, 2. On the nineteenth-century fiscal crises, see David Angus, “Conflict, Class, and the Nineteenth-Century Public High School in Cities of the Midwest, 1845–1900.” *Curriculum Inquiry* 18, no. 1 (1988): 7–31.

23. See, for example, David Tyack, *The One Best System: A History of American Urban Education* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1974).

24. Eric Hanusek, for example, has argued that research over the past two decades has shown that “performance in many different educational settings provides strong and consistent evidence that expenditures are not systematically related to student achievement” (Eric A. Hanusek, “The Impact of Differential Expenditures on School Performance,” *Educational Researcher* 4 [May, 1989]: 49).

25. Tyack and Hansot, *Managers of Virtue*, 11.