The Hornbeck legacy

by **William C. Kashatus**

David Hornbeck's six-year reign as schools superintendent was a troubled crusade, burdened by factors beyond his control.

When he resigned earlier this month, his greatest achievement had been to force Philadelphia's politicians and journalists to confront the painful reality that the city's schools did not create the institutional racism, unequal treatment of the poor or degrading environments in which so many children live, but are being asked to resolve these social injustices without the appropriate financial resources.

Few of the current funding problems are new. Nor are the reforms that have been proposed as alternatives to Children Achieving. Community control, performance contracting, vouchers and alternative schools — as well as the power struggles waged to implement them — are nothing more than new forms of past conflicts. History shows that government is rarely willing or able to fund school reform.

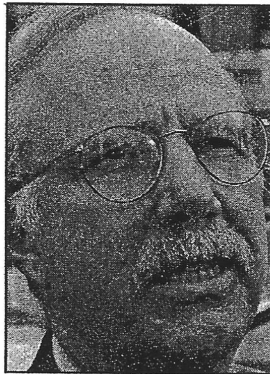
Philadelphia's earliest public schools were essentially charity institutions that ensured middle-class social control over the poor. Established in 1818 by Quaker philanthropist Roberts Vaux, the schools ran on a monitorial system, placing upwards of 300 youngsters in a large classroom, then subdividing them by subject into groups of no more than a dozen. An apprentice teacher would monitor their progress while a single master supervised from the center of the room. The system was characterized by continuous inspection and examination, allowing for the promotion of those who earned it. Every detail of the curriculum conformed to the values of competition, self-discipline, emulation and personal industry. It was cost-effective, well-regulated and plagued by the stigma of pauperism.

While state government contributed funding, it was not "public education" in the present sense of the term, which suggests "tax-supported schooling for all children, regardless of social and economic background." That did not exist until the mid-1830s, when the Legislature finally passed a law providing for tax-supported education throughout the commonwealth.

Philadelphians now had choice. They could choose between several religious-affiliated private schools and a growing number of public schools. But by the time the city's first public high school opened in 1838, education was firmly fixed along socio-economic boundaries.

Concerned about the uncertain future of small business and the growing influence of labor, the more prosperous, self-employed middle class who founded Central High School did so to create a new educational credential that would give their sons a competitive advantage over others — a high school diploma. Central was an exclusive institution. Students could gain admission only through a highly competitive entrance exam. Only 1 percent of the city's male elementary school students succeeded, the majority of them sons of middle-class businessmen. And the graduation rate was only 25 percent.

By the 1880s, Central exercised firm control over the city's elementary schools, whose curricula were designed to meet the demands of its entrance exam. It also created a demand for secondary education, which resulted in the establishment of several new public high schools, as well as the establishment of the Catholic school system. Central adopted a differentiated curriculum in order to preserve its elite status. A vocational track would prepare students for the work force, while a strictly academic curriculum would prepare the most highly motivated students for college. Together with the several private schools in the city, the public and parochial schools continued to offer Philadelphians choice, though not really any greater educational opportunity. Equity was compromised, time and again, in a decentralized system dominated by politicians and businessmen.



BEVERLY SCHAEFER / DAILY NEWS

Lesson: Officials must accept greater moral and financial responsibility for the schools

Actual authority in the district rested with the 24 local "ward boards" that built and repaired schools, hired teachers, and adapted instruction to meet the desires of the public. In theory, representatives of each of these boards coordinated the academic programs and budgets of the schools through a central board of controllers. In reality, the system was far from democratic.

A keen rivalry between the ward boards often led to an unequal allocation of funds, often based on the political influence of a school principal. There was also a conscious segregation of black and immigrant children.

Frustrated by the politics, a group of civic leaders formed the Philadelphia Public Association and waged a struggle to replace the corrupt ward system with a new model governed by professional educators. They succeeded in having James McAllister appointed Philadelphia's first superintendent of schools in 1883. But their opponents thwarted McAllister's attempts at reform, considering him and his small staff "educational cranks" intent on "imposing their own agenda" on the poor and working classes. Local muckrakers took special pleasure in exposing the fact that few of the reformers "had been educated in the public schools" or even "live in the city." As a result, the ward boards considered their proposals "preposterous" and opposed them "on principle."

Not until 1905, after several school directors and other public officials were convicted of graft, did the reformers' attempt to "rescue the schools from political degradation" prevail, breaking the power of the ward boards.

Over the next half-century, the district would enjoy its greatest successes through the widespread assimilation of immigrants' children, the professionalization of teaching and improvements in the curricula and facilities of schools. At the same time, centralization resulted in more red tape, lack of communication between the superintendent's office and the schools and the further isolation of African-Americans.

Despite the optimistic promises, raised expectations and bold experiments of educational reform in the 1960s, middle-class white flight took its toll on the schools. Well-intentioned experiments with desegregation and compensatory education either failed or were postponed by the district with the result that children of minority groups tended to fall further behind in academic achievement in each year of schooling.

When Hornbeck became superintendent in 1994, he inherited the court-ordered responsibility of implementing desegregation measures that had been put off for several years. Only by risking a jail sentence for contempt did he manage to coax $13 million out of the state budget to spare those measures. He also inherited a two-tier system of education fraught with inequity.

At one level are the public schools with a largely minority and poor or working-class enrollment. They are overcrowded, suffer from high absentee rates and continue to struggle for adequate funding and equal educational opportunity.

At the other level are the private, parochial and magnet schools, whose students come from largely white, advantaged backgrounds. They benefit from up-to-date facilities and a fairly low teacher-student ratio that offers more individual instruction.

When Hornbeck appealed to the private sector to close the funding gap between the two levels, he was accused of "checkbook democracy," or selling out to foundations like Pew, which would then impose its own, supposedly "corporate," standards on the system.

Public education was established in response to the social injustices of racism and the unequal treatment of the poor and, in the 20th century, has become the victim of them.

Until our public officials can accept greater moral and financial responsibility for the problems facing the schools, or can offer a better plan for systematic change in the district, along with changes in the distribution of wealth and political power in Philadelphia, we will have learned nothing from David Hornbeck.

Instead, our children will only continue to suffer from the very same history that ultimately doomed his tenure as schools superintendent. ■

William Kashatus is author of "A Virtuous Education: William Penn's Vision for Philadelphia's Schools" (1997).

PHILADELPHIA DAILY NEWS