

# Pa. skimps on education — again

by William C. Kashatus

**G**overnor Ridge's educational Opportunity Grant pilot program is the latest version of what has become his annual pitch for school choice. Like his previous plans, this voucher program will primarily benefit poor children already attending parochial schools. But what about those disadvantaged youths who are desperately trying to escape failing urban public schools?

This is a problem that is deeply rooted in Philadelphia's history: How to provide a quality public education to all the city's youngsters, regardless of social and economic background.

State government has always been resistant to funding the kind of reform that will result in equal educational opportunity for the poor. Before the establishment of the city's school district, the state contracted with Philadelphia's Quakers to educate significant numbers of poor children in their religiously based schools, thereby opting for the very first voucher system in the Commonwealth.

By 1810, however, the city was growing rapidly in population and commerce, and juvenile delinquency and poverty were increasing apace. Harrisburg, yielding to fierce opposition to tax-supported schooling from rural Pennsylvanians, resisted the need to create a public school system. Instead, the responsibility for education was left to the private sector.

Roberts Vaux, a Philadelphia Quaker philanthropist, persuaded wealthy businessmen that it was in the public interest to create a school system that would educate the greatest number of poor children in a cost-effective manner. He believed that individual behavior could be shaped to transform poor children into constructive citizens. To that end, he established, what amounted to a system of charity schools in the city. After waging a decade-long battle with Harrisburg to secure regular financial aid for these schools, Vaux, in 1818, finally persuaded the Legislature to create Pennsylvania's first public school district at Philadelphia.

But the quality of the education offered in the new school district continued to be blemished by the stigma of pauperism. In effect, Philadelphia's earliest public schools were "charity institutions." While there was "choice," there was no equity.

The early public schools were based on monitorial instruction, whereby upwards of 300 youngsters were placed in a large room, then subdivided by

subject into groups of no more than a dozen. The schools were largely conducted by "monitors," or "apprentice teachers" who possessed minimal training. Only the basics — reading, writing and arithmetic — were taught. Every detail of the curriculum conformed to values of self-discipline, emulation and personal industry so that students would eventually assume a subordinate position as factory workers or laborers in the market economy.

The private schools, on the other hand, were conducted by scholars who enjoyed the benefits of a higher education and were familiar with a classical curriculum. Students were being prepared to assume their roles as leaders — if not college-educated scholars — in the upper ranks of the society.

By the 1830s, Philadelphians could choose between several religiously 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 had already become fixed along socio-economic boundaries.

According to David Labaree, author of "Making of the American High School: The Credentials Market and the Central High School of Philadelphia," Central High "quickly became a vehicle for individual status attainment." Concerned about the "uncertain future of small business and the growing influence of labor," the more prosperous, self-employed middle class who founded the school wanted to create a new educational credential that would give their sons a competitive advantage over others — the high school diploma.

Central was an exclusive institution. Students could only gain admission 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. Together with the several Quaker and other private schools in the city, the public schools offered Philadelphians choice, though not really any greater educational opportunity. It is a legacy that continues to haunt school reform today. ■

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## Opinion

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