

Society's ills must figure into true education reform

By William C. Kashatus

David W. Hornbeck may not prove to be the savior of Philadelphia's schools, but it won't be for lack of effort. He has spent his first two years reforming the school bureaucracy, reorganizing curricula, setting new teaching standards and raising money for his Children Achieving initiative.

Perhaps his finest hour came this summer when he managed to coax \$13 million out of the state budget to spare the court-ordered desegregation programs by risking a jail sentence for contempt.

In so doing, Hornbeck forced the city's politicians to confront the painful reality that Philadelphia's schools did not create the institutional racism, unequal treatment of the poor or degrading environments in which many children live, but are being asked to resolve these social injustices without the appropriate financial resources.

Now, City Council President John Street proposes an education summit in hope of finding a better, less expensive alternative to Children Achieving. I wish him the best of luck. Odds are such a summit will only validate Hornbeck's efforts.

Until now, it has been convenient for Hornbeck's critics to use him as a scapegoat for a dangerous but growing marriage between a culture of poverty and the City of Philadelphia. It is much easier to impugn the motives of a reformer than to expose and correct the injustices of the society in which he operates.

But if the grassroots leaders conducting the yearlong summit make a determined effort to go beyond politics and the rhetoric of self-esteem, they will discover that a solution can only occur through a redistribution of power and wealth in society.

The last major school-reform effort in Philadelphia at the turn of the 19th century is a case in point.

In the 1880s, Philadelphia's Public Education Association allied with a group of civic leaders to replace a decentralized educational system dominated by politicians and businessmen with a new bureaucratic model governed by professional educators.

It was no easy task.

Philadelphians had a fierce allegiance to local decision-making when it came to their

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 from each of these boards coordinated the academic program and budgetary needs of the schools through a central board of controllers. But 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. Students were thus cheated of equal educational opportunity. There was also a conscious segregation of black and immigrant children, whose learning abilities were considered inferior to those of white, Protestant children.

When James McAllister was appointed as the city's first superintendent of schools in 1883, opponents of centralization considered him and his small staff "educational cranks" intent on "imposing their own agenda" on the poor and working classes.

The 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."

It wasn't until 1905, after several school directors and other public officials were convicted of graft, that the reformers' attempt to "rescue the schools from political degradation" prevailed and the power of the ward boards was broken.

Few of the current problems are new. To suggest, as the critics have, that the schools should shoulder the burden of solving society's problems is simplistic and won't provide a solution for a vastly complicated situation.

Unless the upcoming education summit can convince our political leaders to accept greater moral and financial responsibility for the schools and chronic social problems, or can offer a better plan, we would all do better to listen to Hornbeck. Perhaps we would actually learn something.

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Solving the schools' problems means addressing poverty and power.

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