MANAGERS OF VIRTUE: Public School Leadership in America, 1820-1980

by David Tyack & Elisabeth Hansot

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HOW TO SAVE PUBLIC EDUCATION WITHOUT REALLY TRYING

Reviewed by Samuel L. Blumenfeld

It was easier for the Harvard Unitarians to give up believing in the divinity of Christ than it is for Professors David Tyack and Elisabeth Hansot to give up believing in public education. Maybe it's because, as they say in their new book, Managers of Virtue, "The public-school system is probably the closest Americans have come toward creating an established church." As cardinals in that church Tyack, Professor of Education and History at Stanford, and Hansot, Professor of Political Science at the University of Nevada, have no choice but to defend an institution which appears to be in an irreversible state of decline.

There are not too many believers in the church of public education these days outside of the colleges of education, the state bureaucracies, and the National Education Association. Its "theology" has a hollow, spiritless ring, and most of the worshippers go through the motions so long as a pay check

greets them at the communion rail. But once the money stops, so will the genuflecting.

Managers of Virtue is a half-hearted attempt to keep the ideological life-support system of public education going. But it has a tough time demonstrating why the "patient," who has led a long, prosperous but checkered life, should not be permitted to die a natural death of its various incurable diseases.

"It is easy to imagine a future," the authors write, "in which community of commitment to public education atrophies, competition for scarce resources increases, and public schools endure a slow death, especially in those communities where the poor and minorities predominate." And yet, when you stop and think about it, it is the poor and minorities who would benefit most from the demise of public education, because it is they who most need contact with the affirmative value systems that only private schools seem to provide.

To the authors, rebuilding a "community of commitment" is of utmost importance if public education is to survive. But what is a community of commitment if not a body of true believers who have "faith" in what they believe?

"Many politicians," write the authors, "now seem convinced that Americans need MX missiles more than school lunches and Title I. Advocates of vouchers and tuition tax credits for private schooling suggest that family choice should reign supreme and that education is more a consumer good than a public good. And if people who have a choice believe that public education is a mess -- as the media insistently say -- why should sensible people send their children to public school at all?"

The authors chide parents for considering education "as more a consumer good than a public good." As if a public -- or government owned -- institution can do only good! If by public good the authors mean what's good for the public, then it could easily be proven that the private sector does more good for the public than does the public sector.

Nor do parents "believe" that public education is a mess. They _know_ it's a mess. Nor is it merely the media who say so. There are professors, teachers, students and researchers who say so. The media merely report what they are told, and what they are told is only a fraction of the story.

What really underlies the authors' faith in public education is not their dedication to the "public good" but a commitment to the liberal agenda of educational equity -- the newest manifestation of egalitarianism -- which, of course, cannot be carried out without massive federal intervention.

How is faith in public education to be re-established? "To achieve coherence and effectiveness in governance and program," they write, "requires rethinking what decisions should best be made at different levels of the system and how to create a productive balance -- always in tension in our federalized polity -- between local and centralized influence. And building a community of commitment to public education requires a tough-minded idealism that seeks a public good while recognizing the pluralistic values and interests of Americans."

But who are the idealists who are going to pick up the pieces

and put Humpty-Dumpty back together again? The tough-minded idealists are all on the other side, building private schools, resisting state control and oppression, resurrecting literacy. Only the opportunists, the careerists, the bureaucrats and lovers of central planning inhabit the wasteland. They don't know how to teach children to read but they do know how to impose "equity" on everyone everywhere.

"The best case for public education," the authors write, "has always been that it is a common good: that everyone, ultimately, has a stake in education." And that perhaps is why parents are deserting the public school, because they indeed have a stake in education and are finding that they cannot get it in the public school.

Actually, the authors hoped that they could inspire renewed faith in public education by reviewing the careers of some of its better known leaders. But all they really do is confirm what revisionist historians have been saying: that the purpose of public education, from the very beginning, has not been to teach but to indoctrinate. Tyack and Hansot write: "The consensus behind the creation of public education in the nineteenth century was based in large part on a belief system that John Higham has called a Protestant-republican ideology, a source of unity in a highly decentralized nation."

Why was that pan-Protestant unity so urgently needed at that time? Because of the massive influx of Catholic immigrants who, in the eyes of many Protestants, threatened to change the original cultural and religious character of the United States. Not a few of the common school crusaders saw themselves as defenders of the

Reformation. "Ministers in Oregon," state the authors, "feared that settlers would fall prey to Roman Catholics who were rapidly building schools and churches. Through their correspondence runs a common note of anti-Catholic hysteria, which was also a staple item in the fund-raising literature of the missionary societies."

Perhaps the best part of this book is that covering the years 1890-1954 during which the process of consolidation and centralization was accelerated by a new breed of professionals. These were men like Ellwood Cubberly, George Strayer and Charles Judd who, as deans of the most influential colleges of education, became "placement barons," weaving networks of influence and control throughout the system. They were known as the "education trust" and learned how to milk the sacred cow of public education with an expertise that made Tammany politicians look like amateurs.

Tyack and Hansot find much to admire in these leaders, but they woefully miss the entire point of their own research. Centralization of power took place not because America had been taken over by a dictator but because a lot of little emperors had found a very congenial place where they could build their own personal empires completely protected from public view. This is what happens when a free country adopts state monopoly education. The careerists create networks of control that strangle dissent and insure conformity.

The truth of the matter is that government-controlled education is incompatible with the values of a free society. It is a tool for despots, and the reason why it works so poorly in this country is

because there exists among Americans a deep suspicion of and resistance to state power. Behind the seemingly benign concepts of "educational equity" and "community of commitment" are the not so benign realities of compulsion and monopoly. Besides, the public schools don't teach. So why struggle to save what ought not to be saved? The end of public education will mean the end of a sham. But it will also mean the dawn of a new and tremendously exciting era in American learning -- one of freedom, diversity, enterprise, competition, and achievement.