

INTRODUCTION

The Course of Reform

Making the Past Present

Is it possible for an educational system to be conducted by a national state, and yet, for the full social ends of the educative process not be restricted, constrained, and corrupted?

—John Dewey, *Democracy and Education*

Were a definitive history possible of American public education in the last half of the twentieth century, it would at the outset have to acknowledge that California played a leading role.

The university that built the Bomb that won the war became through its 1960 Master Plan the model for higher education and the modern public research university. After the war the Golden State became like a magnet attracting millions of Americans seeking the future: a mobile suburban lifestyle made possible by a progressive state government that invested heavily in building a free state-supported public school system.

But this story is not about seeking that elusive future, the postwar myth of the California dream. It is about how this once premier public school system changed. It looks at change from the standpoint of educational policy and its enactment. The approach taken is primarily historical along the lines of contemporary study reflecting the *New Institutionalism in Education* (2006), an eclectic methodology that seeks to examine the processes of educational organizations in their complexity by situating, in this instance, the policymaking process within the sociopolitical context of a state system (Meyer and Rowan 2006; Pierson 2004).

First of all it considers educational policy as a complex set of ideas articulated and formalized into legislation. It stresses the political processes involved in its formation and implementation, and examines the political consequence of enactment. *California in a Time of Excellence* tells the story of

the 1980s' state systemic school reform movement to renew K–12 California public schools. Above all it is an institutional policy study that explores the moral power of political ideas and acts that constitute education reform, by examining the political conditions necessary for the renewal of American schools from a historical perspective. Systemic school reform was the state's answer to the imperative of education reform called for by the National Commission on Excellence in Education (NCEE).

At the center of this story is California's response to *A Nation at Risk*. This reconstruction of the political history of education reform in California during the 1980s is meant as a public account of political acts. Because the political economy of a society is determined in part by ideology, in the postwar period California public schools were deeply connected to a unique vision of the future. That makes the political context of education reform in California understandable if considered in light of the American cultural idea of progress.

On the balance sheet of history, the power of political ideas have always had the potential to exert an incalculable moral impact on the course of reform. Seen in this light the crux of this story comes into view: is reform the engine of progress, or is progress the ideal driving reform? Certainly, the narrative reconstruction presented herein turns upon the question of whether the ideal of progress still has genuine relevance for our time. Consequently, this account is directly tied to the political tradition of the early 20th-century California Progressive Movement. That tradition is an important historical antecedent for this study for it provides the political foundation of ideas upon which the events of the 1980s' state systemic school reform movement can be judged.

We begin with a brief overview of that history as it applies to the main themes of this study. In general, the education reform process is based upon institutional structures that regulate the state system of schools. For California, these principles are found in the state constitution. In 1879, the state replaced its original constitution and codified and expanded the education provisions of the 1849 document. As with its predecessor, the provisions for public education are found in Article 9. It provides the basic legal structure for all statutory and administrative law enacted under the present system. In a state the size of California with the largest system of public schools in the nation, such structures may tend to be distant and obscure. Even so the language of Article 9 is straightforward, giving direct expression to the desired end and means of education in progressive thought.

A general diffusion of knowledge and intelligence [is] essential to the preservation of the rights and liberties of the people, [and] the

Legislature shall encourage by all suitable means the promotion of intellectual, scientific, moral, and agricultural improvement. (California State Constitution)

If improvement and progress go hand in hand as common goals, the institution of public education established by the state was meant to be an engine of social reform to bring about their realization. The eminent state historian Kevin Starr (1985) recounts how this progressive ideology of reform was born “out of incipient utopian motivations.” As Americans, progressives “found it perfectly natural to dream of shaping a public polity that would more completely express its collective desire for a better life” (1985, 208). Thus progressive reform was a fusion of two philosophies: idealism and pragmatism, the latter largely an American invention that parallels the later rise of the Progressive movement.

A national network of late 19th-century American philosophers played important roles in this home-grown philosophical tradition (Menand 2001). Prominent among them was John Dewey. Starr (1985) links Dewey to other Californians who were Dewey’s students. They all shared an emerging philosophical frame of reference that William James called “pragmatism.” Among its central tenets was the belief that “Ideals-ideas, [were properly] perceived from the point of view of their ethical content, [and that they] provided the motor force behind social evolution.” In Dewey’s terms, “ideas are not imposed from above; . . . ideas are discovered in action” (Starr 1985, 239). For Dewey, discovery meant research and its “motor force” was the university. There, the “work of engaged intellectual diagnosis in the service of social reform” assumed its constitutional role (1985, 240).

By design, Article 9 shared its political lineage with the 1862 Morrill Act by which Congress established land grant colleges and universities. On March 5, 1868, twenty years after the first public school opened in San Francisco, the University of California was established across the bay in Berkeley (after first occupying a temporary site in Oakland). Like Stanford, the University of California was established as a *public* trust.

These broad historical strokes are intended to trace the progressive influences on the contemporary politics of California education reform in order to bring us to the main theme of the study. If there is one master idea having the power to make the political processes of educational change intelligible, it is the proposition that education reform may be understood as a public trust. Article 9, Section 9 created a traditional trust of conservators governed by elected state officials and an appointed board of executors. As such

The University of California shall constitute a public trust, to be administered by the existing corporation known as “The Regents of the University of California.” (California State Constitution)

The point of this study is to go beyond the conventional form of educational governance in Article 9, by suggesting that a more expansive reading of the term “public trust” be made. This reading would stress the subjective quality of trust between parties (e.g., the regents and the university, the state, and the public) rather than simply the formal legality invested in university governance. This account attempts to consider the idea of a *public trust* in two complementary ways that are both pertinent and fundamental to the political processes of public education reform. The study considers the political idea of *trust* as

- A complex set of social relations that exist between state government and the public schools;
- A common institutional resource that is conserved and shared (the K–12 system of public schools).

As the state of trust is assumed to be an ideal precondition, the actual conduct of education reform occurs in a political arena where its presence is not so easily discerned. As a consequence, the guiding assumption of this study is that the ethical content of trust may be revealed through an examination of the public character of political ideas and acts that constitute education reform as a historical process. This public character is fundamental to the expression of trust in a political setting, as it is crucial to the advancement of the reform process.

To consider the state reform process in its entirety, the study is organized chronologically along two consecutive timeframes. The initial timeframe (1966–1983) covers two decades of political events before 1983, the year that *A Nation at Risk* was released. It serves as a necessary prelude to the state systemic school reform movement in California, which also began in 1983, to complete its course two decades later (1983–2006), though 2006 is merely a point of transition in a continuing political cycle.

The main subject of this study is an examination of the systemic school reform policy model in action. The study will focus on two attributes of this innovative model as it was developed in California. One is the involvement of the university as a partner in the implementation of systemic school reform. The other is the crucial role that curriculum development played in this implementation. This makes the main theme of the study entirely appropriate since the institutional role of the university is to act as a cul-

ture of excellence to be emulated by K–12 teachers and students, as it is the principal institution established for their self-improvement (Douglass 2000). The overarching goal of systemic reform was to restore that culture of excellence to the K–12 public school system through the renewal of an academic core curriculum. The new common curriculum was designed to be a collaborative development managed by the state using the expertise and resources of the university system to support curricular innovation and drive implementation.

Curriculum is the key if we are to discover how systemic reform worked. Its development was the site where the progressive policy ideals of systemic reform were meant to take a practical instructional form. The prominent place of curriculum in the California reform leads to the central focus of this study. It provides the only element of continuity in a story of considerable political change. It is the one curricular innovation of the California experiment in systemic school reform that remains; the state-approved instructional guide for K–12 social studies. In particular, the *History-Social Science Framework for California Public Schools* was meant to embody the progressive civic vision of systemic reform to construct a twenty-first-century common culture for a multicultural state.

Embedded in the California systemic school reform movement is the history of this curriculum framework. So it is fitting that the development and implementation of the *History-Social Science Framework* be used to examine the policy and politics of state systemic school reform, for the history of one amply illustrates the history of the other. The objective of this account is to clarify the ideological currents that have shaped the history of American public education by using the systemic school reform movement in California to represent these national trends and to place educational policymaking as fully as possible within the historical context of political time (Pierson 2004).

In the systemic model, curriculum is the linchpin of the reform process that ties the state to the public school classroom. The California systemic reform may be understood through an examination of curricular policy actions made by politicians and education officials. Article 9 provides a master script of the state actors. This study deals primarily with the political relations between elected state officials: the governor, the legislature, and the state superintendent of public instruction (the only elected state office intended by the constitution to be nonpartisan). The governor with the approval of the legislature appoints the State Board of Education. The superintendent of public instruction is elected to manage the California Department of Education and sits on the state board in an advisory capacity.

Part I places the 1980s' systemic reform movement within the context of recent state political history. This account is a fitting prelude to framing state and national political trends, which culminate in 1983 with *A Nation*

at Risk and the state legislative initiatives that launched systemic reform. Nationally, the timeframe marks the political transition from liberalism to conservatism. In California that transition began with the eclipse of the political consensus for progressive state government. This change has had a profound impact on K–12 public schools and marked the entry of the policy architects of systemic reform into California state politics.

Part II uses the *History-Social Science Framework for California Public Schools* (1988) to reconstruct the political history of state systemic school reform. The twenty-year period (1985–2006), in which the development and implementation of the framework occurred, marks the high point of the curriculum-driven systemic reform model, its political apogee, and eventual reconsolidation as standards-based reform. The legislative architects of systemic reform have their necessary complement in the cadres of professional educators who were recruited by the California Department of Education and the University of California to serve in the *three* curricular areas that were essential to implementation: (1) teacher professional development, (2) the design of innovative forms of student assessment, and (3) the complementary new instructional materials (primarily textbooks). All of these were aligned with new curriculum frameworks in the core subject areas that were developed by a professional partnership of exceptional classroom teachers and university scholars.

The study concludes with a historical assessment of California public schools past and present by placing this innovative experiment in educational policymaking within the intellectual tradition of American progressivism and the continuum of public education reform history. In keeping with that heritage, these California reformers sought to create anew the civic promise that the public once held in their schools. Their reform was incomplete. We make history (by telling our stories) in order to make sense of the past and to discover how it affects the present. Change is certain. But we can't know if our ideals will be realized. No one wants to witness the long eclipse of the American dream in public education. But if education reform is the highest form of politics, then it depends upon more than just civic commemoration.