

CHAPTER ONE

PRECEPTORS, HEAD TEACHERS, AND PRINCIPAL TEACHERS

School Leadership through the Late Nineteenth Century

Before the creation of the principal's office, school leaders worked under limited organizational structures, with minimal guidelines and expectations of their work. This thin administrative framework left them largely reliant on their own individual leadership skills and directly dependent on community approval. The simplicity of the system allowed for both flexibility and constraint: With virtually no local or state administrative standards to follow, school leaders were free to lead schools by their own vision and initiative. Yet, the absence of any administrative infrastructure kept school leaders occupied with the most basic of operational tasks and completely dependent on the opinions, wealth, interest, and support of their community. The irony of the early years of American educational leadership—from the colonial period through the Civil War—is that principals' freedom to develop and institute their own educational vision was compromised by the absence of a protective administrative structure. With the creation of a more centralized public education system in the late nineteenth century, school leaders experienced more professional security, but also less independence.

This chapter surveys the history of school leaders, alternatively called preceptors, head teachers, or principal teachers, from the colonial period through the Civil War. Here we see that even though school leaders in

these days were not monitored by a guiding administrative bureaucracy, they still played a middle managerial-type role in their work with communities and governing authorities.

EARLY SCHOOL LEADERS

The first schools in America were unregulated and eclectic operations with no standard educational processes or administrative procedures. Colonial and Early Republic communities that funded local schools offered only elementary education in one- and two-room schools with no attendance requirements, no common curriculum, and no standard policies or practices. Without a set curriculum, students proceeded at their own pace and teachers taught multi-aged classrooms, basing their instruction on memorization for basic reading and mathematical literacy and relying on whatever texts were available, be it the Bible, *Webster's Dictionary*, or early reading primers such as the McGuffey Readers. Well through the American Revolution, barely half of all children in what became the United States even attended elementary school, and far fewer attended more advanced programs, variously called grammar schools or high schools. Girls enrolled in the early levels of education, but were dissuaded or excluded from more advanced education. For African American children in both the South and the North, and for the most destitute urban and most isolated rural children, education through the mid-nineteenth century was even less accessible.

In the years before the creation of state and local school systems, the administration of these early American schools followed a simple and direct hierarchy. Community school boards or trustees acted as a combined parent association, personnel office, and supervisor that hired and evaluated the teacher and examined the children. Teachers were men and women chosen not for any instructional skills or academic degree, but for their religious background, moral character, and political affinity with the community that hired them. Teachers' wages and working conditions were haphazard, based on what the community could afford. Teachers had no contract, and so could be summarily expelled from their post by a dissatisfied parent or board member, or their employment swiftly cut short when the community ran out of money.

For the most part, the teacher worked alone, under broad and vague administrative directives. In one-room schools across the rural countryside from the colonial period through much of the nineteenth century, individual teachers carried the entire weight of the school. Untrained and poorly supervised in this work, drawing on little more than their own understandings of the purposes of education and their own personal strengths, these early teachers monitored enrollment, maintained the building, disciplined chil-

dren, abided by school board regulations and expectations, and taught whatever curriculum could be gathered and approved of by the local community.

These early educators were isolated and insecure in their positions as private tutors or struggling heads of a “school” held in a church or private home. They described their work in universally dark reports of a thankless and stressful occupation. Soon after the American Revolution, Philip Freneau wrote of his experience as a private tutor as a “wretched state of meanness and servility.”¹ Other teachers recounted how their originally inspired plans of intellectual enlightenment collapsed when they faced recalcitrant students, decrepit classrooms, contemptuous employers, and social isolation. In 1788, John Trumbull described how itinerant teachers were treated at the whim of parents who annually “seek again their school to keep [a teacher] just as good, and just as cheap.”²

If the working conditions facing educators were difficult, their image in the public eye was no more appealing. Most educators were men, and they were often mocked as pathetic, unmanly creatures who did not have the physicality for farming or the gumption for the legal profession. They stood alone in their classroom in a strange community, and on a number of recorded occasions, they were attacked and chased out of their posts by rebellious students. In 1820, Washington Irving described the iconographic educator in his portrayal of Ichabod Crane, the effete, gangly, and sadistic teacher who carved out a living in rural communities. Crane was the caricature of the mean-spirited teacher who ruled his classroom with corporal punishment and dulled his students with tedious recitations, a social incompetent who tried to worm his way into the parlors of local elites in order to secure his own livelihood. Other early Americans described educators as misfits with no better opportunity in life, crippled by accident, work, or alcohol addiction and whose disability traversed from physical to mental to moral, such as this nineteenth-century report of a typical teacher as a

man who was disabled to such an extent that he could not engage in manual labor—who was lame, too fat, too feeble, had. . . . fits or was too lazy to work—well, they usually made school masters out of these, and thus got work they could out of them.³

Such was the image of educational leadership in early America.

As communities grew and stabilized, they expanded their educational opportunities enough to employ a lead administrator to help manage the school. Called a preceptor, schoolmaster, head teacher, or principal, these early school leaders were teacher and school manager combined in one who symbolized and enacted the cultural authority of the school in the way that the individual teacher could not. If the school was successful, these

leaders might become the personification of the school and its managerial engine. Yet without any administrative legal scaffold behind them, even the most successful school leader was kept in a position of continual instability and isolation. These early school leaders had no professional affiliation or authorized status, legal precedent, job description, or even an employment contract to protect them from any and all of the demands of the communities that paid their meager salary.

The professional career of Ezekiel Cheever is an example of one of these first versions of a school principal. After his arrival in Boston from England in 1637, Cheever taught for seventy years in virtually every type of educational structure across the New England colonies. He began teaching in a makeshift school in his own home, then temporary school buildings, and later, as his teaching fame spread, in school buildings donated by wealthy citizens. But even Cheever's regional prominence as a schoolmaster could not earn him permanency or status: for over thirty years, he suffered various professional indignities, including low pay, the refusal of the town to repair his school building, and the breach of his contract. Finally, at age fifty-six, Cheever became schoolmaster of the prestigious Boston Latin Grammar School, where he remained for the next thirty-eight years until his death in 1708. Founded in 1635, Boston Latin educated boys who became leading citizens of the new republic, and it continues to this day as one of the oldest public schools in the country. Originally the only teacher in the school, as the school grew in size, Cheever hired and paid for his own assistant. Only in 1699, when Cheever was eighty-five, did the Boston selectmen vote to pay for his assistant.⁴ Cheever's notoriety as a schoolmaster eventually earned him professional and economic security, but only as a result of his independent work lobbying for funding and enrollment, and serving as intellectual mentor, cultural figurehead, administrator, instructor, and institution builder. His record of preparing thousands of young men in classical languages, the requirement for acceptance to college and therefore the deciding factor in a young man's future career, earned him the loyalty and endorsement of his former students, many of whom became leading political figures. Unprotected by any form of administrative structure, Cheever was literally a self-made principal.

LEADERSHIP IN ACADEMIES

Until the development of public high schools in the late nineteenth century, the only advanced form of education for boys and girls was in private venture schools, founded with community support and fiscally reliant on endowments and tuition. Far more numerous and accessible than colleges, these seminaries, academies, or high schools often enjoyed more prestige

than the community-funded school, even though their quasi-independent status made the school's very existence unpredictable. In an era before children were legally compelled to attend school, academies rose and fell with great alacrity, subject to the economic and cultural tenors of the time, the changing character and demography of the community, and leaders' own abilities to maintain the institution.⁵

Community promoters often saw the establishment of a private venture academy as a way to build up the stature of a new town, and the hiring and naming of a preceptor, or principal, helped to promote the image of both town and gown. The organizational development of the school and the designation of a principal reinforced each other: a school with a principal indicated some institutional stability, and only an institutionally stable school would appoint a principal. Even if the principal was the only educator in the building, that title heralded the cultural status of the school.

A good example of how such community "boosterism" relied on the creation of a school with an administrative leader is the Caledonia Grammar School in Peacham, Vermont. The town was founded in 1776 and within twenty years had a population of two thousand, one of the largest in the state. In 1795, the town debated whether to fund the construction of a courthouse or a high school in order to further the town's growth. The community voted to fund the school and the hiring of a preceptor, and then debated where to locate the school. Reflecting the relative wealth of the town, the school building was the substantial size of thirty by forty feet and two stories high. Students paid tuition fees for the purchasing of firewood, a school record book, and other expenses of the classroom. A young graduate of nearby Dartmouth College was hired as preceptor and, the following year, a woman preceptor was hired to educate newly admitted girl students. As at many academies, staff turnover was high; for its first seventy years of operation, the Caledonia Grammar School had forty principals, serving an average of less than two years each, and most were recent college graduates in their early twenties. Only when Mr. Bunker took over the principalship in 1867 was there administrative stability; he served for thirty years, merging his own professional identity with that of the institution.⁶

Similarly, the first high school in Hartford, Connecticut was founded and funded by leading citizens of the community who in 1847 sought to bolster the city's development as a leading manufacturing town. Prominent Hartford men comprised the board, and they kept a close hand on the management of the school, hiring and housing teachers, directing the curriculum, and monitoring the school's progress. In spite of such care, there was a high turnover rate among teachers and principals, with the exception of Thomas Curtis, principal from 1851–1861, who played a major role in creating an institutional identity and mission. Under Curtis, the school

grew from three staff members to thirteen and became known throughout New England for its well-defined curriculum, preparatory academic work for college, and special opportunities for its male and female students including student government and a school newspaper. Curtis' educational values were enacted in the professional development of his teachers and the academic achievement of his students, many of whom went into teaching upon graduation.⁷

Some academies' founding principals embodied the school in their being so that the school and the principal became indistinguishable. Sarah Pierce, who founded and led a female seminary in Litchfield, Connecticut between 1792 and 1833 was just such a principal. Pierce started the school in her family's dining room at the age of twenty-five, challenging the social norm that young women needed little more than a primary education. Within a few years, she had gained enough respect from the local community that they raised money for a schoolhouse, and enrollment grew rapidly to the height of 169 pupils in 1816. As the school gained in national recognition, adolescent female students from across the nation enrolled, boarding in local homes. Pierce led a rigorous academic program that also encompassed social, moral, and religious education, languages, and ornamental subjects. She was the main instructor of all classes, assisted by her sisters, a brother-in-law, and eventually a nephew who shared the leadership with his elderly aunt. Sarah Pierce's commitment to her school was obvious to students, as one recalled Headmistress Pierce publicly announcing that she would lay down her life for them.⁸

So, too, did the two founders of the Round Hill School in Massachusetts commit their professional lives to preparing and shaping a unique academy for boys in the 1820s. Joseph Green Cogswell and George Bancroft spent three years in Europe visiting leading schools and studying with the major educational philosophers of the day before they returned to the United States to raise money for their boarding school. Established in 1823, the Round Hill School in Northampton, Massachusetts was noted for its emphasis on both intellectual and physical education, and its unusually relaxed approach to rewards and punishments. The founders intended to prepare students for college, but also to offer a more holistic education, "to mold children on the pattern of a more ideal type" through athletics, nature study, and community development.⁹ Cogswell was a particularly dominant force in the school. One alumni recalled that Cogswell "was the organizer, manager, and father of the community," and was especially a "moral and affectionate influence, besides which he was head farmer, builder, gardener and treasurer of the place."¹⁰

More typical was the peripatetic career of educators who moved in and out of establishing, teaching, and leading academies, their very employment dependent on student tuition and community approval. Susan Nye

Hutchison's experience as founding principal of the Salisbury School in North Carolina is an example of the instability of academy leaders' lives and careers.

In 1815, Hutchison moved from New York to South Carolina to teach in an academy. After eight years, she left teaching to marry and raise her children, but because of her husband's economic troubles and poor health, she returned to teaching to support her family. For the next twenty years, she lived a transient life, juggling family and economic crises, traveling across the South to teach and lead numerous schools. In 1837, newly widowed, Hutchison left her children with relatives to move to Salisbury, North Carolina where she boarded with a wealthy family and garnered enough community support to endow her school. But within a year, enrollments were well below what she needed to meet institutional expenses, and she closed the school, gathered her children, and moved to Charlotte to teach at an academy there, reporting to her classroom the day after her arrival.¹¹

Hutchison's motivation was economic survival, but she was also driven by a missionary zeal to influence young people in Christianity, and by her own intellectual curiosity—as principal of Salisbury School, she found time to teach herself algebra, which “delighted” her (she wrote in her diary that she “got into equations of the 8th degree and felt much rejoiced”), and self-studies of mineralogy, the Old Testament, French, and astronomy.¹²

Such intellectual energy, inspirational vision, and physical perseverance was necessary for academy principals who often acted as school founder, treasurer, development officer, and teacher. Sophia Sawyer, founder of the Fayetteville Female Seminary in Fayetteville, Arkansas in 1839 was a former student of two prominent women's academies in New England. She spent fifteen years as a missionary teacher in Cherokee Native communities in Tennessee, Georgia, and Oklahoma, during which time she became frustrated by the supervising missionary board's regulations and low expectations of Native students. Founding her own school in a frontier town allowed her to shape her institution the way she wanted to, modeling it off of the intellectually rigorous female academies that she had attended. Her strength of character earned her the support of local benefactors who endowed the new school with land and a building. But the school suffered a revolving door of teachers, due in part to Sawyer's notoriously difficult personality, what one teacher called her “spasmodic temperament.” Recalled one teacher: “Miss Sawyer was a first-class regulator, and my position with the old lady was either up in the zenith or down in the depths.”¹³ Yet Sawyer's strong personality secured the school in the end. She was, as one of her former teachers described, “a woman of indomitable energy and perseverance.”¹⁴

African American educators faced particularly difficult obstacles in their goal to establish and lead schools for their community's children. In

the antebellum South, where the education of slaves was illegal, enslaved African Americans secretly led schools, and then, upon emancipation, set up private academies to educate freed slaves in the tools of freedom—literacy and self-empowerment. In Mississippi, Lily Grandison taught her fellow slaves by “night and stealth” for many years, and then, once emancipated, she and two other black women opened up a private school for black children in Natchez, charging a monthly fee of one or two dollars. By the end of the war, there were at least six independent schools for black children in Natchez, taught by members of the community’s ex-slave and free black citizens.¹⁵ Across the South, these schools were truly community ventures, as ex-slaves collectively purchased and built school facilities, and created independent boards of directors for their goal of universal self-improvement and citizenship. African American civic and educational leaders fought to maintain the independence of these schools, rather than be brought under the controlling umbrella of white-run missionary societies that belittled black leadership and replaced local black educators with white men and women educators from the North.

After the Civil War, white and black educators from the North and South flocked to the southern states to teach in and lead schools for newly freed slaves. More than a third of all teachers who worked with freed slaves in the post-Civil War South were African American, and a large proportion of these were from the North. Many worked within the American Missionary Association, a northern abolitionist Protestant group that founded more than five hundred schools and colleges for freed slaves. Other black educators founded schools on their own. Edmonia Highgate, for example, was born and educated in Syracuse, New York and migrated south right after the South’s surrender at Appomattox to teach, found, and lead schools for freed slaves in Maryland, Louisiana, and Mississippi. Her sister, mother, and two brothers followed her, also committing themselves to educate newly freed slaves in the South and developing their own fundraising, recruitment, and promotional practices.¹⁶

The educational career of Solomon Coles in Texas is another example of this initiative. Coles was born a slave in Virginia in 1844, where he undermined laws that prohibited the education of slaves by gaining his own rudimentary education. Upon earning his freedom at the end of the Civil War, Coles attended night school while working with the Freedman’s Bureau in Norfolk, Virginia. He migrated north to Connecticut and enrolled as the first person of color at the Guilford Institute preparatory academy, where he learned the Latin and Greek that qualified him to apply to college. Coles enrolled at the African American Lincoln University in Pennsylvania, and upon graduation in 1872, he enrolled as the first student of color at Yale University’s Divinity School.

In 1877, Coles moved to Corpus Christi, Texas to pastor Freedom Congregational Church, founded in 1866 to serve newly freed slaves and black soldiers stationed along the Gulf Coast. Recognizing the lack of education for black children in the city, Coles opened a private school for black children and eventually abandoned his ministry to become a full-time teacher. In 1893, city officials appointed him principal of the city's first African American school.¹⁷

Like many other black school leaders, Coles' educational work expanded to professional development and advocacy. He helped organize and served as president of the Colored Teachers State Association in 1883, and played a role in the founding of the Texas Colored State Normal School. Coles also joined in the national discourse about race and education, publishing a series of articles in Lincoln University's alumni magazine, including a refutation of African Americans' intellectual inferiority that drew on biblical, theological, and classical references; an argument for the employment of black teachers in black schools; and a critique of white paternalism and racism in black education.¹⁸

African American school leaders faced similar challenges in the North. In northern states both before and after the Civil War, state "Black Laws" effectively limited African American participation in publicly funded schooling. Northern black communities responded by creating their own educational institutions, raising money and in-kind support to teach elementary and secondary education. Their leaders were often ministers or teachers who drew off of the collective energies of the local African American community and enhanced their educational mission with spiritual and political leadership. In 1863, African Americans in Southeastern Ohio founded Albany Enterprise Academy and hired Thomas Jefferson Ferguson as principal. Ferguson was already a notable educational leader: in 1861, he had helped to organize the Ohio Colored Teachers Association, and in 1866 he published a pamphlet, *Negro Education: The Hope of the Race*, in which he argued that the education of African Americans was more than just "preparation for life"; it was also preparation "for living as full citizens." Further, he argued that African American education would ultimately benefit the white man and the nation at large. Given the minimal supports for the school, Ferguson simultaneously served as principal, president of the school's board of trustees, and teacher. He also extended his leadership into the community, serving as the first African American member of the Albany City Council, president of the Athens County Convention of Colored Voters, and the first African American to serve on a jury in Athens County. Such efforts did not secure the school's future or Ferguson's fame: battered by the local white community's objection to a school run by African Americans, the school closed in 1886, and Ferguson, weighed down by ill-health, died the following year at age fifty-seven.¹⁹

For all independent venture schools, the absence of legal protection or a bureaucratic framework left their principals subject to the powerful pressures of public opinion. Women educators, in particular, had to conform to the social and cultural rules of the community—many women educators' employment contracts included social prohibitions against marriage or public socializing. The scrutiny on a founding principal was especially high, and a principal's leadership style and social reputation could literally make or break a school. Susan Nye Hutchison, for example, feared for the success of her school after a community member publicly complained about her children's behavior in church: "if I would not govern my own children I would not be fit to manage the children of other people."²⁰

In thousands of independent educational ventures across America, teachers, school founders, and principals struggled against economic downturns and the disapproving votes of their school boards in order to keep their schools running. Given the dependent relationships on the community, academy principals shaped their school program along the educational expectations of their local governing boards. That conformity was tested in students' annual examinations that were open to the public and were as much an evaluation of the teachers and principal as the students. In the years before a common curriculum or standardized tests, schools were held accountable to the public in these exhibitions, and an examination session that went badly could lead to the withdrawal of enough students that the school collapsed or the principal was fired. A positive examination revealed a school well managed, and not only for academic accomplishments, as a local newspaper reported on the examination of a female academy in North Carolina in 1835 by praising the principal for her "zeal, her kindness to pupils, her untiring diligence, her acquaintance with polite literature, and the [C]hristian tendency and influence of her counsels and example."²¹ Such behavior indicated effective teacher instruction, student learning, and school management and so earned continued community support.

Alternatively, community disapproval could lead to the abrupt end to a principalship and school. In 1867, the citizens of Milford, Connecticut voted to close their newly created high school because it was too expensive, and because they objected to Principal Whittemore's practice of allowing older girl students to teach the young students.²² Thomas Beecher, principal of Hartford High School in Connecticut between 1848 and 1850, was fired by the board of directors because of his rejection of rote learning and corporal punishment and his advocacy of teaching methods that the governing board found to be "peculiar . . . broad and radical."²³ The school's teachers, who had loved both Principal Beecher and his educational philosophy, effectively chased out the subsequent two principals who they found to be poorly prepared and disrespectful of teachers' values and practices. One of

the replacements was “a ninny,” scoffed one teacher, and “altogether too small potatoes,” and sadly noted that “I do not think the public care very much who heads the school—it is no such matter of life and death as it seems to us.”²⁴

Many schools were literally dependent upon their founder’s personal leadership. The nationally renowned Litchfield Female Seminary closed in 1833, soon after Sarah Pierce’s nephew, married and the father of four children, left the school for a more remunerative position. His elderly aunt could only keep the school running for another year. So too did the Round Hill School falter when Bancroft left Cogswell in charge of the school. Although beloved as the emotional force of the school—“the father of the community”—Cogswell was not a good businessman, and the school closed in 1834, after its eleventh year.²⁵

In segregated African American schooling, educational leadership was subject to more vicious political winds. Cincinnati African American educator Peter H. Clark was principal of the Western District Colored School in 1857; in 1866, he was promoted to be principal of the Gaines High School, the first African American public high school in the city. Clark remained principal for two decades, during which time he was politically active in state and national politics on behalf of African American civil rights, and in 1885 he was appointed the first African American trustee of the Ohio State University. But Clark’s prominence cost him his principalship: the following year, he was fired from his school leadership role.²⁶

The career of high school principal William Butler in Kentucky in 1853 is an extreme case of the ongoing struggle for legitimacy of a mid-nineteenth-century school founder and principal. Raised on a farm in southern Indiana, Butler graduated with honors from Hanover College in Indiana, taught in three schools, and tutored the sons of a wealthy Louisville family. In his mid-twenties, he traveled to Europe to improve his language skills and in 1853 returned to Louisville to open a high school with a colleague. The two men offered courses in English, Latin, Greek, modern languages, and civil engineering to forty sons of local professionals in a large well-equipped school building. Among the professional middle class in Louisville, Butler was respected for his intellectual achievements, entrepreneurship, and high moral character; for displaying an egalitarian and professionally courteous manner to all; and for leading a well-disciplined school, using commonly accepted corporal punishment in a fair manner. But such respect only went so far: when one boy misbehaved in class, Butler whipped him according to school rules. The boy went home, picked up a pistol, and came back and shot Butler dead. Antebellum social mores led to the assassin’s acquittal: the southern aristocratic code of honor trumped emerging codes of professional authority.²⁷

COMMON SCHOOLS, GRADED SCHOOLS,
AND SCHOOL LEADERSHIP

It was not school principals who organized to improve their lot. Rather, in the middle of the nineteenth century, a loose collection of government officials and educational reformers developed the outlines of what we now know of as the public school system, then called common schools. Common school reformers promoted a system of publicly funded schools and an administrative system to support them; they introduced the first models of standardized curriculum, teaching practices, and the organization of student learning; and they developed the first administrative guidelines that moved the managerial authority of schools from the local community to the offices of professional educators.

Of the many challenges that faced these common school reformers, one of the greatest was the absence of an organizational system to define and connect the varied educational enterprises that crossed the new nation. Mid-nineteenth-century students attended a range of educational institutions including one-room primary schools that taught basic literacy, grammar schools that taught more advanced academic subjects, and higher-level academies, high schools, and seminaries, none of which had any curricular link to the other, or any means of supervising or coordinating the instruction between institutions. Common school reformers searched for a better way of classifying students by level of instruction for the double purpose of first, standardizing paths of achievement for student learning and second, more clearly defining the organization of schools.²⁸

A particularly popular curricular and administrative classification model was the monitorial school, or Lancasterian system, an organizational scheme originating in England that was designed to organize large urban schools at minimal cost. The monitorial system used a large hall for one half of the school's students and smaller classrooms for the other half, each under the supervision of different head teachers, sometimes called principals, who monitored assistant teachers and advanced students who taught smaller sections. In the large classroom, students sat in rows on long benches, grouped roughly by age and ability, and responded en masse to drills. Each grouping followed a prescribed course of study, with advancement dependent on students' passing set examinations. The process set up a clear and standardized path for student advancement across schools and it was economically efficient. It was also socially efficient, as rigid discipline was enforced with a system of rewards and punishments, and students could follow meritocratic paths of achievement. The goal of the entire operation was system and order, which appealed to some educators in increasingly disordered American cities. As the St. Louis Board of Education described it in 1857, "The program

of one school shall be the program of all, the same grade shall recite in the same study at the same hour all over the city.”²⁹

Another attractive aspect of the monitorial school was the division and specialization of teaching labor. Educational reformers admired the organizational model of new factories, in which individuals worked in specific specialized areas. As William T. Harris, superintendent of St. Louis schools in the mid-nineteenth century described it, traditional education was comparable to “the antiquated process by which the gun was made throughout—lock, stock and barrel—by one gunsmith.” But the modern system of education relied on a division of labor “where each manipulation has a different workman to perform it.”³⁰

Inspired by the vision of the factory, mid-nineteenth-century educational reformers adopted the monitorial system into a new, American model of school organization: the graded school. In the first graded school, opened in Quincy, Massachusetts in 1847, classrooms were divided by “grades” of common age or achievement level, with one teacher assigned to each class for the year and a supervising teacher—called a head teacher, or teaching principal—assigned to act as an overarching authority to the whole, organizing the separate courses of study, administering discipline, and supervising the operation of all the classes in order to, as the common school reformer Henry Barnard wrote, “secure the harmonious action and progress of each department.”³¹ Such graded schools offered the kind of internal uniformity that reformers admired, with the additional attribute of a supervising principal who could maintain some control over the increasingly heterogeneous enrollment. The vision was a hierarchically differentiated school system in which tasks could be divided and supervised by career educators.³²

While the graded school structure addressed the problem of the internal administration of each school building, the broader management of local districts remained in the hands of locally elected community members, and this permitted continued disunity between schools. To address this problem, reformers promoted a centralized district administrative structure, whereby all local decisions about schooling would be addressed not by elected local parents, teachers, and community members, but by appointed professional school administrators. This organizational change moved the locus of school management from the individual community to the local district office where professional personnel trained in management would deliver policy directives down to the principal at the head of the local school.

An example of how this district structure developed in one district can be seen in the case of Boston, Massachusetts. In 1850, Boston schools were managed by two school committees of one hundred citizens and there was no formal method of teacher supervision; by 1876, the governing committee had been reduced to a twenty-four-member school board that appointed a

superintendent, a six-member board of supervisors, and forty-eight principals of grammar schools who supervised both their own schools and the local primary schools. In the twenty-six intervening years, the number of schools had not increased significantly, but the size of those schools and the number of teachers had more than tripled. And, notably, the control of the school system had centralized into a central office, an internal hierarchy had developed with different gradations and salaries for different positions, and the legal authority of the school system had moved from amateur lay citizens to career educators.³³

The appointment of a principal also addressed a critical problem identified by educational reformers: the need for the supervision of teachers. In 1865, Boston superintendent John Philbrick, himself a former principal of one of the first graded schools in Quincy, appointed grammar school principals as supervising principals over primary schools. The superintendent's rationale was that primary schools had an increasing number of teachers with minimal experience, stationed in different classrooms and teaching largely as they wished. What was needed, argued the superintendent, was a "master mind" who could connect all these disparate parts. The supervising principal would be "vested with sufficient authority" to manage school planning and to "keep all subordinates in their proper place and at their assigned tasks."³⁴

The design of a new school building in Memphis, Tennessee in 1872 symbolized the new authority and responsibility of the school principal in the graded school. Memphis had established its school system in 1848, but the schools struggled for many years with poorly equipped rental school buildings and a weak administrative infrastructure that was further undercut by the financial and human losses of the Civil War. The opening of the Market Street School in 1872 was heralded as the beginning of a new future for the city. The three-story coeducational graded school had eleven separate classrooms, running water, washrooms for men and women teachers, a library, and a lecture hall that could be divided into classrooms with sliding doors. There was also a principal's office built on the first landing off the staircase, so that while seated at his desk, the principal could "command a full view" of the hallways and playground. A speaking tube led from the office to each classroom, offering the principal regular oversight and communication with teachers.³⁵

The concern with the supervision of teachers was all the more pressing because of the changed character of the nation's teaching force. In the early nineteenth century, school reformers identified women as the best candidates to teach in the new common schools because, first and foremost, women were a readily available and cheap labor force. Educated in the new common schools and academies and freed from the most primitive demands

of the household by technical modernization, young white women were an ideal employee pool for low-pay work with children. Women teachers also aligned with the new vision of education as a humane and caring institution since women, it was believed, had a “natural” affinity for children. Caring and cost were happily linked in the eyes of frugal school boards. As Horace Mann, superintendent of Massachusetts schools and one of the most prominent advocates for the reform of American education argued, the fully mature woman had such “a preponderance of affection over intellect” that she would not search for a teaching post for the money or the fame.³⁶ By 1888, women constituted 63 percent of the nation’s teaching force, and over 90 percent of the urban teaching force.³⁷ Almost all of these women were unmarried, following legal and cultural proscriptions against working women having “two masters”—a husband and an employer.

Women might be more “endowed by nature with stronger parental impulses,” as the Boston School Board claimed in 1841, but their expertise and abilities were still questioned by male educators who argued that women teachers needed close supervision.³⁸ School reformers found an easy and cost-effective solution: women were already accustomed to obeying the commands of men, and since they could be paid less than men teachers, the appointment of a male supervisor over a group of female teachers was efficient in both practice and economics. The quality of education would improve, as the cost would be reduced. Accordingly, when Boston superintendent Philbrick identified candidates for the grammar school principalship who would supervise the largely female primary teacher force, he intentionally appointed “men of large culture and wide practical experience” who could be offered the reward of promotion, recognition, and more compensation.³⁹ The principal would thus be transformed from a “head teacher”—a teacher with additional administrative responsibilities—to a professional principal—an administrator with authority over teachers.

Philbrick’s reform was controversial, in part because grammar school principals were poorly prepared to supervise the teachers of small children, and the additional workload was burdensome. Furthermore, critics charged that the grammar school principals’ expanded role gave them too much power, allowing them to act like “a little king” over all teachers.⁴⁰ But the point that professional principals, and not untrained lay school board members, should be in charge of teachers’ work had been introduced, and superintendents, whose own jobs had increased in size and responsibility, increasingly assigned principals to closely monitor the work of new teachers and to act as virtual on-the-job teacher educators. In 1869, Cleveland’s superintendent estimated that no more than a dozen of the 170 teachers in his district had any professional training, and that only the regular

supervision of the principal would help those teachers in their work.⁴¹ In St. Louis, Superintendent William Torrey Harris reported in 1871 that good principals could lift “teachers of average ability” through close daily supervision. The goal was efficiency and order: the principal needed to create a corps of teachers that were “uniform in their degree of excellence.”⁴²

The quest for uniformity extended to the curriculum. Through much of the nineteenth century, there was no common agreement on students’ appropriate subjects of study or sequencing. The closest thing to a common textbook was the McGuffey Reader and other reading primers. Given the interest in systematic order and meritocratic development through the grading system, educational reformers called for a common course of study on which to evaluate the accomplishments of students in different grades. Superintendents and school boards developed programs of study that guided children through specific subjects in specific grades, with specific teaching methods in common textbooks. School principals were directed to apply the system to their school and to supervise teachers in their proper instruction.

Individual superintendents took up the charge. William Harvey Wells, Chicago’s superintendent between 1856 and 1864, reorganized his city’s school system into grades within a primary and secondary grouping and then instituted his own uniform course of study that included both the subjects to study and the specific plan for teachers’ methods. Wells published his curriculum text in 1862, and it was widely adopted by other city districts.⁴³ Portland, Oregon’s first superintendent, Samuel King, was equally vigorous in his design and implementation of a uniform curriculum in the 1870s. Like Wells’ curriculum, King’s curriculum was built around an understanding of sequenced knowledge, both within the curriculum content and in its delivery. Principals were the intermediate inspectors and disciplinarians, instructed by the superintendent to monitor day-to-day behaviors, including both student and teacher behavior. Superintendent King demanded that principals follow his strict guidelines in their supervision of teachers in everything from when to open the windows to what temperature to maintain in classrooms to the number of professional readings to study. Principals were also advised to “cheerfully cooperate with the City Superintendent in executing the prescribed work of the grades.”⁴⁴ As in other districts, Superintendent King’s interest in hierarchy of authority drew on gendered norms: by 1905, all of Portland’s elementary teachers were women and twenty-three of the twenty-seven elementary school principals were men. This sex differential, coupled with the low pay, low prestige, and inadequate education of elementary school teachers helped to reinforce the hierarchical structure of the bureaucracy and the central role of the principal in enacting that bureaucracy.

DEFINING THE NEW PRINCIPAL

The new administrative structure of the graded school in mid-nineteenth-century America created a hierarchical relationship between district and school leadership as each accomplished its own cleanly defined tasks. The newly authorized position of the principal thus served the goal of both the internal and external reorganization of schools: the principal was a stabilizing ballast to a school building filled with multiple teachers and classrooms and acted as an administrative agent to a centralized office. The new principal stood between and connected the two, acting as the local implementer of the educational vision as articulated by the superintendent and school reformers.

The vision was clean, but the reality was not. The principal's office in the middle of the new school organization experienced great growing pains across the nineteenth century, primarily because superintendents and boards of education were unclear about how to distribute their authority. Although the principal's job was to coordinate the different classrooms of the graded school into "one system of government," that job was originally quite limited in scope and centered primarily on tasks of maintaining order and discipline.⁴⁵ For example, in 1841, school trustees in Cincinnati, Ohio, one of the first cities to appoint principals to their schools, gave the principal the responsibility of monitoring examinations and seeing that the bell was rung for school to begin; seven years later the principal's authority had expanded only to the ringing of the bell for recess, the suspension of pupils for profane language, and the monitoring of students' attendance record.⁴⁶ School district leaders in Providence, Rhode Island gave principals similarly limited authority in 1845: they could enroll new pupils, keep the daily attendance rosters, eject students for "gross misbehavior," employ a person to make the school fire, sweep and clean the school house, report on tardiness or absences of teachers, and keep track of books and supplies.⁴⁷ In 1854, during his first year as superintendent of Chicago schools, John Dore glumly described the role of that city's principals as little more than governing "the filing in and out of classes."⁴⁸ There was virtually no conception of the principal's role as a community or intellectual leader; the principal served as a functional manager only, with specific responsibilities only for addressing student registration and discipline.

Furthermore, through the nineteenth century, there was continued duplication of principals' and superintendents' responsibilities, and there was ongoing conflict between the two positions as they both jostled for professional authority over their different pieces of the educational enterprise. Nineteenth-century district office and school building administrators argued over jurisdiction of the transfer and appointment of teachers, what

books and how many to purchase, and the examination and promotion of students. In New York City in 1859, for example, principals accused the superintendent of enforcing an examination that intruded into the daily curriculum and that gave the superintendent “despotic power” to rate a class on the basis of a mechanical test.⁴⁹ From superintendents’ perspective, such complaints were evidence that principals were unprofessionally wedded to their own authority and were resistant to the enlightened reform ideas of the district.

A notorious example of such a conflict occurred in 1840 in Massachusetts over the topic of corporal punishment. Horace Mann, the state superintendent of education, was newly returned from a trip to Europe where he had observed the progressive educational practices of Prussian schools where teachers encouraged students’ curiosity about learning rather than enforced memorization and recitation. Also notable among Prussian schools was the replacement of corporal punishment with more nurturing and developmental processes of discipline. When Mann ordered the institution of such practices, Boston school principals protested, arguing that student learning only happened with disciplined memorization. “Duty should come first and pleasure should grow out of the discharge of it,” the principals argued in a lengthy response to Mann’s call for reform. Mann responded by charging the principals with privileged self-interest, and when advocates of the new philosophy of education gained the majority on the Boston school committee, the principals who advocated their traditionalist practices were dismissed or transferred out of the district.⁵⁰

More common than this face-off between opposing offices were the blurred reporting lines of overlapping administrative positions. In smaller towns and rural communities there was often little distinction between the principal and the superintendent and few consistencies in job description. In mid-nineteenth-century Iowa, for example, the town of Muscatine had a “principal” of the city schools, while nearby Tipton’s lead administrator was called a “superintendent.” Dubuque had ward principals only, with no central superintendent; and Des Moines had a “supervisor” although the entire school system consisted of only a single building with four teachers. In Iowa City, the superintendent was also the high school principal whose functions included meeting parents and examining pupils every Saturday afternoon in his office. In Clinton, a superintendent supervised a single teacher in the city’s sole school. In addition to this confusion, there was high turnover of administrators and irregular growth and demise of schools. Between 1897 and 1903, alone, three quarters of the school administrators of Iowa’s county seat towns changed jobs.⁵¹ Because it was not immediately clear to taxpayers what a principal did, or where the role’s function began or ended, many school boards simply bypassed the hiring of a school principal

and assigned a teacher the title of “head teacher” or “principal teacher.” Nor was there a systematic process to the authorization of these first school principals. Particularly in rural communities, increased enrollment might lead to the addition of classrooms and the appointment of a head teacher, if the community decided to allocate the funding. The appointed head teacher might be the longest-serving teacher, or the teacher most liked by the school board, or the only teacher willing to take on extra responsibilities.⁵²

Although principals in the nineteenth century were slightly more secure in their employment than in earlier years when a disapproving parent could simply fire the local school head, there was no common system of professional development or job security. Different districts set different requirements for a school head, including a high school or college degree, teaching experience, and examinations that might cover a wide variety of topics, although not necessarily the topics of teaching method, curriculum, or administration. In mid-century San Francisco, the principal’s certificate was valid for only one year, and renewal was not permitted. The principal’s examination was more of an endurance test than an evaluation of educational leadership skills or philosophy. The geography component of the exam included naming all the bays, gulfs, seas, lakes, and other bodies of water on the globe; all the cities in the world; and all the countries in the world. The time set for answering the questions was one hour. In one exam period, by the end of the hour, one candidate had quit, one had reached the fifth question, and one had reached the fourth question. Nonetheless, all candidates were marked exactly the same: 60 percent.⁵³

Chester Dodge’s and John Swett’s experiences exemplify the erratic and makeshift character of the mid-nineteenth-century school principal. Dodge was first hired as principal in 1873 in a district outside of Chicago on the recommendation of the head of the local teachers’ college from which he had just graduated. At age twenty-one with only two weeks’ experience teaching, he became principal of a school with seven teachers in the main building and three teachers in two branch schools. Within a year, Dodge was offered a principalship at another school with a 20 percent increase in salary (from \$800 to \$1,000). The following year, he lost that position due to his promotion of a new method of reading that community members objected to. Dodge’s third school was in a community that was divided in half by a railroad, poor on one side, wealthy on the other, and a deep tradition of conflict between the two sides, which contributed to Dodge’s removal at the end of the year. In ten years, Dodge had led seven different schools, including rural, urban, elementary, and high school.⁵⁴

John Swett’s experience as a teacher and principal in mid-nineteenth-century California is another example of the irregular processes of principal appointment and work. Newly arrived in San Francisco in 1853, Swett

applied for a job as a teacher in the new city school system, but was instead appointed principal to replace a school head who had resigned after only sixty days because of discipline problems with students. Swett's school enrolled sixty boys and girls, half of whom were in the primary division, headed by a woman teacher. School was held in a small rented house, what Swett called a "shanty" with a "shed-like addition" for the primary children. There were no blackboards, maps, or curriculum, and furniture consisted of one water pail, a small table for the teacher, and one rickety chair. Children brought their own ink, pens, and paper to school. Swett gained control at the school by expelling the misbehaving students and by organizing parents to fund the construction of new school facilities, including a principal's office. Indeed, a large part of Swett's success as principal, which later led to his promotion to state superintendent of schools, was his ability to motivate the community to support education. Principal Swett adapted the traditional public examination sessions into a community event where students exhibited their knowledge in academic competitions with awards. The examination was followed by a festival that doubled as a school fundraising drive. Adopting new educational ideas, Swett took students out on walks in the hills, promoted athletics, and gave lectures on discipline, honor, courage, politeness, and other virtues. His pedagogical and community strategies echoed his educational vision that education was the mechanism that would unify the rapidly expanding west into a common civic body. As administrator, Swett recalled his struggles with "overbearing and conceited men" on his board who "played the part of petty tyrants over school teachers," but he also downplayed his work as a school principal as very similar to that of "the routine work common to all teachers," including "the monotony of school life."⁵⁵

Community support, of course, only worked when communities approved of local educational efforts. The history of the African American school in late nineteenth-century Oxford, Ohio highlights the ongoing public debate over new educational laws and policies that disrupted community norms and power relations. Black laws in the state required racially segregated schools until 1887 when the Ohio legislature repealed the separate school provision to allow for racially mixed schooling—a decision made primarily to cut the expenses of local districts that complained about the cost of even their minimal support of black schools in addition to white schools. In some districts, primarily in northern Ohio, integration occurred quickly and peacefully, but there was violent resistance in other districts where white parents and educators physically prevented black children from entering local schools, closed schools to prevent integration, and gerrymandered school districts to create racially distinct districts.

In 1887, the small university town of Oxford in southern Ohio had a newly constructed white school and an old and overcrowded black school.