

## Youth, Work, and Schooling in the Great Depression

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“Whenever one turns, said the boy in the room, whichever way one turns, one faces the same blank wall and the same blank ceiling . . . I can’t sleep, he said. There’s nothing to hold up my dreams. Everything’s fallen out. I haven’t anything to rest on. If I close my eyes, I’ll go under” (in Hatcher, 1936, p. 662). William Saroyan’s character from a 1936 short story spoke for a generation. “[H]arder hit by unemployment than . . . all other sectors of the population” young people came to maturity in the 1930s with a profound sense that the American dream was dying (Rawick, 1957, p. 18). As early as 1932 between 200,000 to 300,000 teenage tramps roamed the countryside seeking work, food, and a warm place to stay (Minehan, 1934; Schlesinger, 1956). Some out of rage and frustration openly rebelled against the system that had “betrayed” them.<sup>1</sup> Millions more crowded into schools hoping to gain some employable skills or knowledge, or merely to put off the inevitable period of idleness.

The staggering rates of youth unemployment, estimated nationally at 40% of the eligible 16 – 24-year-olds during the years 1933 – 1936, raised serious doubts that the schools were adequate for dealing with what was increasingly called the youth problem (Rainey, 1938). Many believed that the Depression was to be a permanent

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<sup>1</sup>See Chamberlain (1939); Hayes (1967); Leighton & Hellman (1935); Lowitt & Beasley (1981).

part of American life and that opportunities for youth employment had vanished forever (e.g., American Youth Commission, 1942). From that perspective the major agencies for dealing with the youth problem were not the schools, but the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) and the National Youth Administration (NYA). These agencies eased the transition from adolescence to adulthood by providing young people with training, guidance, and most importantly, a job (Reeves, 1939).

Our thesis is that the decade of the 1930s witnessed a profound and permanent shift in the basic relationships between youth, schools, and employment. This shift was so important that for the first and perhaps last time, national leaders seriously debated whether the schools should continue to be the primary tax-supported agency to serve youth during the transition to adulthood. We will trace this shift in three of its contexts: (1) in the transformation of the youth problem from child labor to youth unemployment; (2) in the jurisdictional dispute which arose between the youth-serving New Deal agencies and the public schools; (3) and in the high school curriculum reform efforts sparked by both the influx of students and a changing definition of the purposes of schooling.

#### FROM CHILD LABOR TO YOUTH UNEMPLOYMENT

In the first few years of the Depression, community leaders across the country were so overwhelmed by the problems of relief and retrenchment that few even noticed the particular devastation that the Depression had brought to the lives of young people. The young themselves, however, particularly those between the ages of 15 and 17, quickly felt the impact of the economic crash. In Detroit, for example, school-issued work permits in 1929 averaged 86 per month to 15-year-olds and 334 per month to 16-year-olds. Two years later the averages were 19 and 105, respectively, and by 1933 they fell to 4 and 30 (Detroit Board of Education, 1929 – 30, 1930 – 31, 1932 – 33, 1933 – 34).

Prior to the depression nearly half of the nation's 14- to 17-year-olds dropped out of school to seek work. But, as the economic collapse worsened many of the nation's teenagers remained in or returned to school, pushing national high school enrollments up by 29.8% between 1930 and 1934. The greatest increases were in the upper grades; 37.5% in the eleventh and 43.4% in the twelfth (Angus, 1965).

Some simply left home and joined the ranks of teenage vagabonds. By early 1933, reports on the huge numbers of homeless youth had captured the nation's attention (Baker, 1932). In Washington, hearings on Senator James Couzen's bill to provide shelter on army bases for the young tramps and debate about the creation of the Civilian Conservation Corps proved to be a catalyst for awakening the country to the magnitude of the youth crisis (Rawick, 1957). Politicians, educators, and concerned citizens began to realize that for every young person "riding the rails" a dozen more were aimlessly wandering the streets at home. Why had the nation's child welfare agencies, such as the U.S. Children's Bureau, failed to call attention to these problems?

From the opening of the 20th century two agencies, one public, the other private, had spearheaded child welfare efforts. The United States Children's Bureau pursued a broad range of issues, such as nutrition, infant and child mortality, family law, and juvenile delinquency, but its main concern was to document the extent and conditions of child labor and to advocate new and improved legislation. The National Child Labor Committee (NCLC) focused exclusively on child labor and was freer to work through muckraking journalism and lobbying. It did what it could to pressure state legislatures through a system of state committees and it organized the various phases of the struggle for federal legislation, from the Keating-Owen Act of 1916, declared unconstitutional in 1917, through the never-ratified Child Labor Amendment of 1924 to the Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938.

While from one vantage point, the efforts of the NCLC to achieve workable and lasting federal legislation might be seen as thirty years of frustration, there can be little doubt that their efforts contributed in a major way to the reduction of child labor particularly in state legislation and in public awareness campaigns. At the opening of the century, nearly one in five of the nation's 10- to 15-year-olds was employed. On the eve of the Depression, this had fallen to one in twenty-one, and 90% of these were 14 or 15. But one result of such success was to shift the very definition of child labor. By 1930, both the Children's Bureau and the NCLC were studying and advocating standards for "children" aged 14 to 18 (Fuller, 1927; Wolley, 1926).

As portrayed by Walter Trattner, the historian of these child labor crusaders, the decade of the 1930s was like a ride on a roller coaster. For the first few years, as unemployment deepened, child labor continued to decline. But during 1932, falling prices caused some employers to replace adult workers with child workers, especially in eastern textile mills. "By Spring 1933 the employment of children under sweatshop conditions was again widespread . . ." (Trattner, 1970, p. 185). The passage of the National Recovery Act (NRA) and the acceptance of its codes by textile and other child-employing industries brought a sharp reversal. The claim was that over 100,000 children under age 16 were removed from industry between July and December, 1933. Courtney Dinwiddie, general secretary of the NCLC, wrote that "We have done more to eliminate child labor in the last three or four months than we were able to do in the preceding ten years" (Trattner, 1970, p. 183). President Roosevelt in his message to Congress in 1934 declared that "child labor is abolished" (in Trattner, 1970, p. 196). This assessment was sharply undercut in May 1935 when the Supreme Court struck down the NRA codes, and the child employment curve shot upward again (Trattner, 1970). Redoubling its efforts, the NCLC played a critical role in getting Congress to include strong child labor provisions in the Fair Labor Standards Act of June, 1938. Since only about 6% of the estimated 850,000 children under 16 who were gainfully employed in 1938 were affected by the act, the child labor reformers' efforts for the remainder of the decade and into the 1940s continued to be directed toward the ratification by the states of the 1924 Child Labor Amendment and the strengthening of state laws.

Meanwhile, a new reform agency had emerged which would promote a quite different definition of America's youth problem. In 1935, the prestigious American Council on Education created the American Youth Commission (AYC) to study and focus attention to the "thousands of youth [who] were roaming the country as destitute young tramps" and on the thousands more flooding into the high schools "at a time when school taxes remained unpaid and school budgets were being drastically cut" (American Youth Commission, 1942, p. ix). The Commission launched a series of youth studies that soon set the standard for all youth-serving agencies, including a number on the problem of the Negro youth that, even today, are considered classics.<sup>2</sup>

The most important of these studies in shaping the outlook and agenda of the American Youth Commission was the Maryland Youth Study by Howard M. Bell, published in 1938 as *Youth Tell Their Story*. Bell's survey of a carefully constructed sample of over 13,000 Maryland youth was the first study to suggest that the number of unemployed youth might be as high as four million, a figure later confirmed by the 1937 federal census of unemployment. The study focused on a prolonged period of enforced idleness between the time teens left school and the time they were able to find work as the central feature of the youth problem (Bell, 1938).

Even more serious, Bell discovered what he called a "circle of economic determinism." The children of low-status, low-income fathers had more siblings, dropped out of school earlier, took low-skilled jobs, low-paying jobs, married early, and had large families, thus beginning the "circle" all over again (Bell, 1938). To Bell, the most unjust component of America's "youth problem" was inequality of educational opportunity; yet he only partly blamed the school and its "outdated curriculum" for this inequity. More important was the need for financial support to families and/or students so they could remain in school longer.

As educators, the AYC commissioners were "startled and shocked" by what this and other studies revealed.

. . . as we shifted our attention from one aspect of youth to another, taking up questions in the fields of secondary education, use of leisure time, marriage and the home, health and fitness, juvenile delinquency, citizenship, and the special problems of rural youth and of minority groups, we found ourselves meeting the economic situation at every turn. . . . Through this process it became apparent that major attention must be given to the problem of employment opportunity for youth in all of its manifold ramifications (American Youth Commission, 1942, p. xii).

Here, then, were two competing views of America's youth problem. For the older child labor reform organizations the problem was the employment of children, and the solution lay in the passage of ever more stringent state and federal laws which would gradually force all youth of school age out of the labor market and into

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<sup>2</sup>These include Davis and Dollard (1940) and Frazier (1940). For a complete list of AYC publications, see American Youth Commission (1942).

the schools. This agenda suited the interests of the nation's secondary educators, who were the traditional allies of these reform groups. For the new American Youth Commission, the problem was more complex and centered on the period of enforced idleness between school-leaving and work entry which the Depression had either caused or revealed. The commission was convinced that work experience was a vital part of the education of young people, at least from about 16 years of age, that all aspects of a healthy transition from youth to adult life depended on it, and that the nation's secondary schools were not particularly effective in providing the conditions for this transition for large number of youth. The AYC argued that most of the reduction in child labor in America had resulted from changes in the economy, and that these very changes now called for a new national policy, one of publically provided jobs for youth during periods when the private sector of the economy could not put youth to work.

Perhaps this conflict of vision was only apparent. By the late 1930s, the NCLC's position was to permit the employment of 16-year-olds in all but hazardous jobs and to bar completely the work of 14- and 15-year-olds, still permitted in the majority of states. The AYC held that employment under public auspices should be provided to all young persons who did not desire to continue in school after 16, and that all those under 16 should be "required and enabled to attend full-time schools . . ." (American Youth Commission, 1942, p. xii, xiii). Their emphases were clearly different; the former concentrating on ending the employment of children, the latter on creating jobs for youth. Despite these differences, or perhaps because of a temporary compatibility, the two groups were not publicly critical of one another until 1940.

The open rift came in the 1940 White House Conference on Children in a Democracy. The position of the traditionalist child labor reformers was that this and all succeeding conferences would "recommend successively higher ages up to which youth should be held in school and out of employment" (David, 1942, p. 62). Those delegates who had been dealing first-hand with unemployed youth, however, had grown impatient with laws, regulations and attitudes which made it difficult to find jobs for young people. The conference came to quick agreement that 16 should be the minimum age for *full-time* employment and that 16- and 17-year-olds should be protected from employment in hazardous or injurious occupations (riding in trucks was considered hazardous by the Children's Bureau). When the NCLC forces proposed a flat ban on the employment, inside or outside of school hours, of those under 16, a "very large majority of the delegates were opposed." A second NCLC proposal, that all those between 16 and 18 who were not at work in private or public employment be required to attend school, was also voted down at the conference.

In effect, the conference adopted the basic age standards then embodied in the Fair Labor Standards Act rather than extend those standards to higher ages as promoted by the traditionalists. But the differences opened up by the conference were even greater than this implies. Paul T. David, the AYC's associate director and chief economist, in describing the "double-ended" problem of child labor regulation, granted that the oppressive labor of young children was a "blight" that

should be removed, but pointed out the equally obvious fact that at some point young people must move into employment and that few obstacles should stand in their way.

Moreover, it has become evident that young people will move more easily into full-time employment at a proper age if they have opportunity to gain some preliminary work experience during the years of late childhood and especially during the formative years of adolescence. It is not easy to keep open the opportunities for desirable preliminary work experience in private employment while at the same time preventing undesirable types of gainful employment which tend to oppress and exploit children and youth. The conflict of objectives is especially acute between the ages of 14 and 18 (David, 1942, pp. 61–62).

Clearly, here was a major conflict between two conceptions of the proper relationship between youth, work, and schooling, both focusing on those between the ages of 14 and 18. One was represented by the NCLC and the other by the AYC. Over the course of the decade, a few reformers switched sides. Newton D. Baker served as chairman of the National Consumer's League, a child labor reform organization that was smaller but even more militant than the NCLC. Then as Secretary of the Army during World War I, he used the powers of his offices to prevent the labor of children. In 1935, Baker became the first chairman of the AYC, serving until his death in 1937. Dorothy Canfield Fisher, an indefatigable writer on the horrors of child labor in the pre-Depression period, was an original appointee to the AYC and wrote the concluding chapters of the Commission's summary report, representing a "refinement of her thinking over a period of years" (American Youth Commission, 1942, p. vii; Fisher, 1943; Flack, 1969).

Except for a brief flurry of activities during the World War II years, the era of the traditionalist child labor reformers was over with the White House Conference of 1940. But if the AYC was successful in redirecting the nation's attention from child labor to youth unemployment, it was considerably less so in defending the depression-era youth employment agencies against the onslaught of the nation's secondary education establishment.

#### WHO SHALL SERVE YOUTH?: THE NYA VERSUS THE NEA

The National Youth Administration was at the center of the controversy over what institution should assume primary responsibility for dealing with the youth problem. Created by a Presidential order in late June, 1935, the NYA immediately met a storm of protest from the nation's educators who saw it as a federal invasion of areas traditionally reserved for the public schools. "The President has not only deliberately ignored the Office of Education . . ." declared George Strayer of Columbia Teachers College at the National Education Association (NEA) convention in July, 1935, "but he has gone against the best interests of the young people involved, he has denied the competence of the school people with their years of experience and has set up a dual administration dealing with youth guidance" (Rawick, 1957, p. 192). Most galling to the educators, as Strayer intimated, was the

President's rejection of a proposal by U.S. Commissioner of Education, John Studebaker, to make the new youth agency an adjunct of the public schools. The Studebaker plan would have given federal aid to local school districts which, in turn, would have provided vocational guidance, training, and placement services to young people. But the President, who had little faith in the ability of the schools to deal creatively with the youth problem and who disliked Studebaker, opted for a program of direct relief for youth under the auspices of Harry Hopkins and the Works Project Administration. Aubrey Williams, a trusted Hopkins advisor, was appointed to head the NYA.

Unlike the agency envisioned by Studebaker, the primary function of the NYA was to supply funds for youth employment rather than for youth services. Young people between the ages of 16 to 24 whose families were on relief were eligible for the NYA jobs. NYA employment fell into two broad categories. The first were "work-study" positions within high schools, colleges, and universities. This component was designed to directly address the concern that Bell's study was to articulate, to cut the high rate of school leaving by young people from poverty stricken families. The \$6.00 per month paid by the NYA to high school youth was hardly equal to wages from a full-time job, but it was an income and it enabled many poor families to have something of a choice about their children's future (National Youth Administration, 1935).

The second category consisted of jobs for youth who had already left school and were unable to find work in the private sector. As one official described it, this aspect of the NYA was "[t]o help utilize constructively the extended period between school and a permanent job, that otherwise might be wasted in idleness . . ." (National Youth Administration, 1943, p. 2). These NYA jobs were generally co-sponsored with state governments, local municipalities, or with public service institutions such as hospitals. The wages paid (averaging \$15 – 22 per month) were substantially lower than those received by regular employees but were better than wages earned by the "work-study" youth (Zeitlan, 1958, p. 219).

In many ways the NYA was a direct response to problems identified in the youth surveys: poor youth leaving school prematurely, the limited job opportunities for all youth once they left school, the lack of guidance and placement services for out-of-school youth, and the AYC became one of the NYA's key supporters. Schoolmen, too, favored the work-study aspect of the program, but they worried when the NYA began adding such services as vocational training, guidance and placement—activities which were traditionally in the hands of the public schools. That encroachment into the public schools' domain kicked off the lengthy jurisdictional dispute between school leaders and the NYA.

We can best trace this jurisdictional dispute by following what happened in a single city. For the first few years, none of the passions aroused by the creation of the NYA were evidenced in Detroit. The public schools and the agency were closely linked. School Superintendent Frank Cody was named to chair the Detroit Council on Youth Services (DCYS), which would control NYA activity in Wayne County. His Director of Research, Paul T. Rankin, served on its executive committee and the DCYS executive secretary was given an office in the Board of Education

Building. Applications for NYA jobs were channeled through the public schools' Division of Guidance and Placement and the division's head, Warren K. Layton, briefly ran the NYA in Detroit. When a regular Director was named, the post was given to B. F. Comfort, the recently retired principal of Detroit's Cass Technical High School (Cody, 1935).

The program was an immediate benefit to Detroit youth. Within the first year over 1,100 young people were working on out-of-school NYA projects and another 3,200 youth were employed in the schools. The out-of-school youth worked as clerks in cultural institutions and in the tax assessor's office, as nurses' aides, and as assistants to group leaders in recreation agencies. Some were employed by the Detroit Junior Players. Others learned carpentry or worked in landscaping at the state fairground.<sup>3</sup>

The agency was equally important for those Detroit youth from relief families who wanted to stay in school. These NYA student workers served as messengers for the principals, aides to science and shop teachers, assistants to librarians, and file clerks in central offices. At Northern High School some were paid for constructing scenery for the school plays, repairing furniture, or typing mimeographs for the teachers. While critics saw these as "make-work, dead-end" jobs, the program was extremely popular with both students and teachers. In the city and throughout the state, the program received very favorable press coverage during the late 1930s. Even papers which bitterly attacked the New Deal in general and Aubrey Williams in particular editorialized favorably on the youth program.<sup>4</sup>

Up to 1940, relations between school people and NYA officials were quite cordial. While the agency's publicity releases often spoke of the program as a "bulwark of democracy" and a defense against the radicalism of youth, they also stressed that the relief agency posed no threat to existing institutions. On the educators' side, warm endorsements were always forthcoming, particularly in the fall of 1937 when a cut in the agency's budget was being debated in Congress (Farnsworth, 1937; Stoll, 1937).

Yet, there was a dark cloud on the horizon. NYA officials noted that it was the in-school program that received the heartiest support. When a Junior Placement Service was created in Detroit to find jobs for school drop-outs, Layton, the school's guidance director, expressed doubts that the federal government should be involved in such an activity (Layton, 1937). On their side NYA leaders sensed that the schools were less than enthusiastic in helping to provide training and guidance to those who had dropped out of full-time attendance.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup>See, for example, National Youth Administration, (1935 – 1938); Detroit News (1938).

<sup>4</sup>The interested reader should consult McGrath (1939); Detroit News (1935); Detroit Free Press (1936, 1937).

<sup>5</sup>In a 1942 defense of the federal youth program, Judd asked, "[d]id the schools show in 1933 and 1935 the slightest insight into the youth problem or any disposition to take care of young people who were out of school and out of work?" (Judd, 1942, p. 31).



Trouble erupted in 1940 when a plan to reorganize the Junior Placement Service was criticized by NYA field representative, Roswell Ward, because it was based on the premise that the schools should bear "the major responsibility" for dealing with out-of-school youth. The dispute was quieted when the DCYS reworded the proposal to assign such responsibility to the community at large, though in a confidential memo, Ward indicated that he was willing to go along with this only to avoid an all out confrontation with Layton (Ward, 1940).

In 1941, when unemployment dropped as a result of the military buildup, NEA officials and conservative political figures alike began to question the need for the continuation of the youth programs (Zeitlan, 1958). Amid the growing controversy, Ward returned to Detroit in no mood to make further concessions to the school people. After reviewing the reorganized placement service, he angrily reported, "This service has persisted in deviating from our recommendations concerning the concentration of its efforts on occupational adjustment of out-of-school youth and has been taking on a number of problems which should be handled by other types of youth agencies. Furthermore, it is operated as an adjunct of the school system, and its only contact with placement work is with the school placement office which is somewhat limited in its coverage of junior placement activities in Detroit" (Ward, 1941). Ward saw that the school people had used the close association between the two groups as a way to further their own goals rather than those of the NYA. He called for a split from the public schools so that the NYA could return to its original purposes.

Expressing more directly the shift in the attitudes of public school officials which Ward recognized and reacted to was Paul Rankin's participation in the NEA's Educational Policy Commission (EPC) which led the attack on the NYA and CCC in 1941. As a member of the DCYS executive committee, Rankin had been more closely associated with the NYA than any other school leader in Detroit. Yet, in 1942 he wrote a substantial section of the EPC's strongest condemnation of the federal youth programs, *Education for All American Youth*. In the final battle between the educators and the NYA, Rankin was clearly allied with the public school forces in spite of what had been a generally excellent NYA/public school relationship in Detroit.

No direct evidence has been found to determine whether the collapse of the cooperation between the two parties in Detroit, was a reaction to the victory of the AYC position in the White House conference or reflected simply the opportunism of school leaders with respect to the youth programs. School officials accepted and even supported the NYA as long as it was politically and financially expedient to do so. But there was always a fundamental ideological disagreement, and as the NYA and CCC became increasingly vulnerable and apparently irrelevant during the war years, the educators jumped at the chance to end the jurisdictional contest once and for all. In July 1943, NEA leaders congratulated themselves as congress voted to cut off funds for the program. However, if school people were to make a plausible case for the restoration of their monopoly position, educators had to show that high

schools could, through curriculum reform, meet the needs of “all American youth” (Educational Policies Commission, 1944; Rawick, 1957).

### CURRICULUM REFORM AS A RESPONSE TO THE DEPRESSION

Most of the nation’s educators disagreed sharply with Howard M. Bell’s contention that young people left high school out of financial necessity. They had argued for years that it was students’ lack of interest in the high school curriculum that pushed them out before completing their education, and for years this argument had spearheaded curriculum reform efforts in the larger high schools (Angus, 1965). After 1895, more and more urban high schools altered their purposes and curricula to include preparation for jobs alongside the traditional preparation for college. With the passage of the Smith-Hughes Act in 1917, even small and rural high schools could and did follow this trend.

Given the vast expansion of high school enrollments reported by the U.S. Commissioner of Education between 1890 and 1930, who was prepared to argue that the educators were wrong?<sup>6</sup> By the 1920s most high schools of respectable size were multi-purpose institutions offering dozens of courses in numerous departments and preparing youngsters for a broad range of occupational fields. The NEA had given sanction to all this in its report, *Cardinal Principles of Secondary Education*, in 1918 by calling for still more reform and setting out the goals of the high school in what would become well known as the Seven Cardinal Principles (U.S. Bureau of Education, 1918).

On the eve of the Depression, then, high school curriculum reform and high school expansion had proceeded apace for nearly four decades. Yet, within the next decade, curriculum reform was to take on a new urgency, and more important, a major ideological shift would occur. First, many educational leaders lost faith in the efficacy of vocational training as the primary means of attaining universal secondary school attendance. Second, many began to view the high school as a custodial institution and to try to focus its curriculum on the present needs of adolescents rather than on the future requirements of adult employment. Third, though this argument was by no means new, many felt that the new students, those forced to remain in or return to school by depression conditions, were low-ability students and that new curriculum offerings should be tailored to their incapacities.

Exemplifying the shift in the attitudes and ideas of vocational educators was Charles M. Prosser. He had been an early and effective advocate of vocational preparation at the secondary level and had become executive secretary of the

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<sup>6</sup>The U.S. Office of Education did not present useful statistics of public high school enrollments until 1890. From that time on, the prevailing opinion was that national aggregated enrollments were doubling every decade. In actual fact, carefully collected figures on specific cities and states suggest that they probably doubled every decade from 1860; thus, the curriculum reforms of the Progressive era probably had little to do with enrollment increases (Angus, 1985).

National Society for the Promotion of Industrial Education in 1912. He was credited by many as almost singlehandedly bringing about the compromise between the American Federation of Labor and the National Association of Manufacturers which resulted in the passage of the Smith-Hughes Act. During the 1930s he began to speak of what he called life-education subjects, and though he never directly attacked vocational programs in the high school, he argued for a strictly utilitarian standard of value that did not look much beyond the immediate present. In his 1939 Inglis lecture at Harvard, he sketched an outline for a life-education curriculum in which vocational education played a diminished role to such courses as Civic Problems of Youth, Economic History of Youth in the United States, and Social Amenities and Manners (Prosser, 1939).

What had brought about this shift in emphasis? Three factors can be suggested. First, vocational educators had underestimated the great growth in semi-skilled employment with extremely low training requirements. Second, no one could have foreseen the high rates of teenage unemployment brought on in the Depression years. Third, and most tellingly, the youth surveys had shown that those with high school vocational training were no better off than those without it. As if to rub salt in these wounds, many high schools were forced to drop vocational programs during the period of retrenchment (1931–1935); yet students came on in droves, belying the educator's belief that it was the vocational programs that attracted the students (Angus, 1965; Tyack, Lowe & Hansot, 1984).

But there was an ideological shift that was even more fundamental. During the New Deal years educational leaders, along with other public figures, came to believe that the nation's future would be sharply different from its past, that "the age of individualism and laissez faire in economics and government is closing and that a new age of collectivism is emerging (American Historical Association, 1934, p. 16). The NEA, believing that their earlier report, *Cardinal Principles of Secondary Education* reflected the discredited philosophy of individualism, prepared a new report *Issues Of Secondary Education* to guide further curriculum reform (Committee on the Orientation of Secondary Education, 1934). Arguing that the age of entrepreneurship and a growing economy was over, the report assumed that unemployment would continue to be a permanent feature of young people's lives and called for educators to accept the responsibility of planning for youth. When the findings of the youth surveys that early school dropouts were threatening to become a permanent underclass were added to this, the conclusion seemed inescapable that the high school had to enroll and retain all students at all costs. The high schools would be forced to play an increasingly custodial role.

As if to make their task still more difficult, educators did not have a high regard for the academic abilities of these pupils. A widely cited article by E. W. Butterfield expressed the view that "the new 50% that has come into the secondary schools varies greatly in scholarly ability but, as a whole, is not characterized by high psychological intelligence" (Butterfield, 1934, p. 267). The NEA report, *Issues of Secondary Education*, claimed that ". . . a very considerable proportion of the new enrollment is comprised of pupils of a different sort—boys and girls who are almost

mature physically, who are normal mentally, but who are unable or unwilling to deal successfully with continued study under the type of program which the secondary school is accustomed to provide” (Committee on the Orientation of Secondary Education, 1934, p. 64).

To illustrate more precisely the high school curriculum changes that resulted from these ideas and beliefs we draw our examples once again from Detroit. By late 1934, Detroit’s educational leaders were gearing up for a major curriculum reform. Enrollments in the city’s high schools had grown by more than 11,000 students (43%) between 1929 and 1934. One Detroit youth study had shown clearly the need to retain these students as long as possible (Stutsman, 1935). Yet here as elsewhere, they were not seen as highly capable students. As the reform effort got under way, the principal of Northwestern High School, head of the main curriculum reform committee, wrote, “One of the important problems of the secondary school in the next decade will be to formulate curricula and reorganize subject matter for those pupils who have not the ability to master subjects in the college preparatory and commercial curricula. The chief reason for this immediate problem is the economic situation which has forced into the secondary schools thousands of young people who formerly left school at the age of 16 or 17 to go to work. There are no jobs for them now and there will not be for some time to come” (Rivet, 1934, p. 502).

Throughout the remainder of the decade a host of changes were made in the high school curriculum. Yet, it is instructive that the vast majority of these were revisions of the General Curriculum, rather than the College Preparatory or the various vocational curricula. In the widely accepted Butterfield model, 25% of the students would profit from a college preparatory sequence, another 25% would be well-served by vocational training, but the remaining 50% needed a new “needs-oriented” curriculum which would prepare them for life. This seems precisely the model that guided curriculum reform in Detroit (Rivet, 1934).

While high school graduation requirements appeared to remain much the same, the courses which could be used to meet those requirements were altered. For example, in 1930 all students were required to take one year of laboratory science, biology, chemistry, or physics. By 1936, students in the General program could satisfy this requirement with descriptive biology, chemistry, or physics, large lecture classes with demonstrations taking the place of hands-on experiences. In social studies, there was an early response to the Depression in that the state mandated a course in Civics for all students in 1931 and the Detroit Board of Education insisted on a course in economics in 1934. Yet, later in the decade, General program students were permitted to meet these requirements with the course *Problems in American Life* which included units on juvenile delinquency, finding a job, traffic safety, how to make a personal budget, buy insurance, and rent an apartment (Detroit Board of Education, 1937).

The changes in English and in the foreign languages were quite modest. The foreign language requirement had already been dropped from all curricula in 1927, and by the 1930s only 13% of the city’s high school students were studying any foreign language. In English, a number of the high schools began offering general language courses for low-ability students as early as 1932. These were remedial and

did not meet graduation requirements, although many English teachers saw them as laying the groundwork for success in the regular English courses. For example, a tenth grade general language course used Lamb's *Tales From Shakespeare* as a preparation for later study of *Julius Caesar*. Marquis Shattuck, director of Language Education in Detroit, felt that "[l]anguage is a mode of social behavior, a type of group activity." The most important language skills are "conversation, discussion, story-telling, explaining, arguing, speech-making, letter-writing, and the making of reports both oral and written." He urged his English teachers to emphasize these activities and to downplay composition and reading classic literature, and he reserved his highest praise for those teachers who used such current materials as newspapers and magazines while disdaining older literature (see Detroit Education News, 1938; Rivet, 1934; Shattuck & Barnes, 1936, pp. 5–6).

Yet none of these changes was as symbolic of the new principles of secondary education as was the Personal Service or Standards class. Such classes began appearing in some high schools as early as 1935, and were designed as electives for juniors and seniors in the General Curriculum. In the young men's section of the Personal Service course at Northwestern High School, the students studied the "problems of diet, dress, etiquette, jobs, relations with girls, [and] personal hygiene" (Rivet, 1934, p. 455). The courses for young women, which appear to have been elected more frequently throughout the system, contained units on "appearing to advantage," homemaking, the use of leisure time, family finance, interior decorating, bride and trousseau, and "the American woman as citizen." Teachers reported that such courses were extremely popular (see Cameron, 1940; Detroit Board of Education, 1937, p. 273; Rivet, 1934).

Did these curriculum changes accomplish the task that educators set for themselves as the Depression impacted on their lives and on their values? We know that, in the short run, while high school enrollments rose in Detroit by 61% from 1929 to 1939, the number of graduates increased by 237%. Were these curriculum changes typical of what occurred in the nation as a whole? Perhaps only the larger and wealthier school districts were able to expand their curricula in these ways in the 1930s while pressure on the smaller districts to adapt was deferred until the post-war Life-Adjustment Movement.<sup>7</sup> Nonetheless, it is clear that it was in the era of the Great Depression that the custodial function of the high school was developed as a necessary adjunct to its two older functions, college preparatory and vocational.

## SUMMARY

On the eve of the Great Depression, about half the nation's 14- to 17-year-olds were in school preparing for their life's work; the other half were already working,

<sup>7</sup>See Ravitch (1984). She argues that curriculum change such as we have found in Detroit occurred in many other places, but the exact timing and extent is left unclear.

many of them contributing to their family's living standard. Secondary educators strove to increase the reach of the high school by expanding still further its vocational programs, secure in the belief that, with a little help from more stringent child labor laws, they could prevail in their decades old struggle with employers and low-income families for the allegiance of the young.

On the eve of World War II, these same educators found themselves locked in a new struggle, this time with agencies of the federal government which they perceived as threatening their historic monopoly over the welfare of the nation's youth. In the meantime, they had shifted the purpose of their institutions away from college and vocational preparation and toward a custodianship of the young based on the conviction that there were no meaningful jobs for them and that their task was to adjust youth to that state of affairs. Committed to this universal "holding action," yet obsessed with the incapacities of these students, now risen to 75% of the age group, they had trivialized their curriculum and set the stage for those cycles of reaction and reform which have dominated the nation's schools for the past four decades. If our high schools lack clarity of purpose<sup>8</sup>, it is in this depression-era shift of the youth-work-schooling relationship that our confusions are rooted.

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<sup>8</sup>Many of the "national" reports on the state of the schools issued in 1983 mentioned the lack of clear goals. See Education Commission of the States (1983).

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