HISTORY

THE NEW YORK STATE HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION

SUMMER 2005

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12,000 Little Republics:
Civic Apprenticeship and the Cult of Efficiency

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Effective democratic education requires an apprenticeship. Local governance of our schools provides a unique opportunity for adults to serve a civic apprenticeship and to model democracy for our children. At the beginning of the twentieth century there were 150,000 school districts in the United States, and 11,000 in New York State. Most towns had many neighborhood districts, and each district had at least three school-board members. Nationally, more than 450,000 adults at a time (more than 33,000 in New York) served in elected positions governing affairs that directly affected the entire community profoundly; the education of the young. Today, there are fewer than 15,000 school districts nationally and about 700 in New York. These districts cover much larger areas and populations, and their governance is substantially constrained by state and federal regulation and oversight. This change was brought about through the massive consolidation of rural schools.

This article documents the development and consolidation of rural schools in New York State, which undermined a major component of local control necessary for civic apprenticeship. The accomplishments of school consolidation and centralization are numerous; it helps to ensure an equitably financed system of schools providing a comprehensive educational program and co-curricular activities for all students from kindergarten through twelfth grade. Children with special needs or talents generally have access to programs designed to meet those needs or advance those talents. The gifted and the challenged are ostensibly provided for. School buildings tend to be large, well-built structures designed to offer modern conveniences and to meet numerous state health and safety standards. Teachers are certified by the state and
receive credentials only after successfully completing an extended course of study. School and district personnel are supervised by professional administrators, who also manage school and district affairs. The education of children is largely under the direction of credentialed experts, the activities of which, in turn, are controlled by policies, regulations, laws, and monitoring agencies which derive their authority from the State government. Despite the need for improvements in all these areas, what we have today surpasses, on these criteria, what we had 150 years ago. What was lost?

I. CIVIC APPRENTICESHIP

For the first half of the nineteenth century, the rhetoric and structure of schooling in New York State recognized both the civic apprenticeship role of schools and the primacy of democratic ends as an important goal of schooling.

It is essential to the good of the schools that their administration should be under the continual stimulus of local interest. Local self-government, the distinguishing feature of that liberty we derive from our Saxon or Teutonic ancestors, is carried to its minutest subdivisions in our school districts. Nearly 12,000 little republics find, in the discussions relating to the taxation of their inhabitants, and to the executive administration of the funds entrusted to their agents, a training in the art of self-government, which is not less important for adult citizens, than is elementary instruction to the generation under tutelage.

—New York State Superintendent for Public Instruction Victor M. Rice, 1854

Superintendent Rice’s language citing a Saxon or Teutonic legacy of self-government echoes the language Thomas Jefferson used eighty years earlier in his 1774 “A Summary View of the Rights of British North America.” The legacy both Rice and Jefferson invoke refers to allodium, a form of landholding in which absolute possession and right is held by the owner. In this view, all legitimate governance and regulation stems from a specified or implied grant of authority from the landholder or citizen to larger political units. While the emphasis on landholding diminished, the primacy of the citizen remained strong.

The idea of rights stemming from the individual is important for understanding the support for local control invoked against coercive or compulsory school or school-district consolidation and centralization. This legacy is particularly powerful in rural areas where landholding assumes symbolic if not practical political importance. However, Jefferson and those who followed recognized that individuals needed an education in democracy in order to make them effective citizens. They needed direct experience and skills in moving from defending their individual interests and land to working collectively to defend the interests and land of all. Civic education was critical to the maintenance of a democratic society.

Thomas Jefferson’s model of civic education, contained in his 1779 and 1817 bills before the Virginia legislature for the more general diffusion of knowledge, had three goals. The first was to educate the broad mass of the population in literacy, history, and government so that they could make wise decisions at the ballot box. This within-school civic education would qualify citizens “to understand their rights, to maintain them, and to exercise with intelligence their parts in self-government.” The second goal of this general system of public education was to select for and promote a natural aristocracy of talent. The most promising students (all explicitly male in Jefferson’s proposal and implicitly white) would be selected at each level of schooling and promoted to the next level to be educated at public expense. Of course, those who could afford it could pay to send their children to these higher levels of schooling. But, by selecting for talent indiscriminate of ability to buy education, Jefferson hoped that, “By this means . . . the best geniuses will be raked from the rubbish annually.” These “geniuses” would become political leaders at state and national levels.


The third goal is the focus of this article. It is the civic apprenticeship that Victor Rice refers to in the quotation above.

His goal in allocating maximum powers to the smallest local bodies is not merely to frustrate schemes for tyranny but to change the lives of individuals, involving all citizens in public affairs and so expand their lives and visions. Thus Jefferson’s schools bills are designed to serve a double purpose: teaching literacy and history to the children through the schools and teaching civic-mindedness and collective self-reliance to the adults through the [school] wards.4

The decentralization of government provides an opportunity for the civic apprenticeship of the population. People do not become competent democratic citizens solely through their formal education, which is necessary but insufficient.

In Jefferson’s vision, democratic citizens only become truly competent through practice in being both subject and ruler. The very local school district, or ward in Jefferson’s terms, provides that civic apprenticeship. It serves as the bridge from self-interest focused on the self, family, and farm to a civic-mindedness necessary to realize and sustain a truly democratic society. People gain their civic education through holding public office, meeting with their neighbors to decide public affairs, through being raised up in the tradition of these meetings, and through being subject to the rule of their neighbors. In this concept of civic apprenticeship, Jefferson glimpsed the soul of a democratic republic.

Until the last half of the nineteenth century, both the organizational structure of the elementary educational system in New York State and the rhetoric of its leaders were consistent with Jefferson’s democratic vision. By the turn of the twentieth century, however, that organizational structure and rhetoric had been replaced by an emphasis on administrative efficiency, equity of access, and academic excellence that eclipsed the democratic vision. Civic education was transformed in its narrowest sense into a small part of the social studies curriculum and in a broader sense into the universal diffusion of basic academic competencies.

What did Civic Apprenticeship Look Like?

Wayne Fuller does an excellent job describing the impact of small-scale community governance of schools in the Midwest. His description holds true in New York. First, it created a community. “[T]hese small school districts . . ., brought scattered families together in a common effort, provided a community where none existed, and gave the people who lived among the empty stretches of hills and plains a sense of belonging to a place.”5

Second, it provided a civic apprenticeship. Small, rural schools “were invaluable laboratories of democracy in which rural Americans learned the importance of their vote, how to make laws, and how to govern themselves. Here many Americans learned parliamentary procedures - how to make motions, how to reconsider actions already taken, and how to support their motions with arguments. They wrestled with such intricacies as bond issues, taxes, and contingency funds . . . In their school districts they learned that their vote made a difference, that they could change what they did not like, and that democracy actually worked.”6

Democracy was not an abstraction to those who participated in the governance of their own schools. And, given the size of these districts, most adults participated. All was not harmony, of course. People debated whether they should operate their own school or tuition students to a neighboring school, and who should teach their children and how. The voting was often close and the arguments heated. Such disagreements, of course, are compatible with democratic governance. Some forms of division are more troubling, however.

In There Goes the Neighborhood, David Reynolds describes how a group of Methodists in an Iowa county used mastery of democratic processes to split a community along religious lines in order to promote congregational renewal at the expense of their Catholic neighbors. Recognizing the importance of the school in identifying and cohering a community, the Methodists successfully promoted a school district con-

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solidation proposal that created a central school near their church and carefully arranged district boundaries to ensure Methodist control.7

Paul Theobald's study of settlement patterns in the Midwest also finds substantial use of local control to exclude some, while protecting the interests of others. He finds that those who settled early and acquired substantial land holdings used their control of local institutions, most notably the school, to protect their interests and control access to land and networks of mutual assistance. Local control of schools was thus an instrument of exclusion and an important means of consolidating power. Resistance to consolidation should be attributed, at least in part, to the threat it posed to the power of a landed minority.8

Civic apprenticeship, then, is no sure-fire recipe for realizing anything so simple as “the good of the community.” Rather, it is a valuable mechanism for developing citizens skilled in democratic means. However, as Nancy Beadie so eloquently puts it, the resulting community is “only a collection of flawed characters who in their relationships with each other have the potential for both good and evil on any given day.”9 What follows is an account of how the schools in New York State shifted from being the creations of neighborhoods providing a civic apprenticeship function to adults to being part of a professionally run state system.

II. SCHOOLING IN NEW YORK 1795–1853: THE DEMOCRATIC EXPERIMENT

I call 1795–1853 the period of the democratic experiment for several reasons. First, the public rhetoric of school officials during the first half of the nineteenth century was laden with democratic-republican imagery. Legislative proposals were justified and school practices were condemned on the basis of whether they fostered or retarded the development of competent democratic citizens, and defended and nurtured a delicate experiment in republican governance. Second, the state legislative and local policy decisions relating to schools during this period were circumscribed by a strong fear of rejection by a citizenry steeped in an ethos of local, democratic control. Third, the prevailing leadership tactic adopted by state officials was that of persuasion, example, and promotion. Exhortation was the policy technique most often employed. Lastly, this is the period during the development of the education system when schools were truly left to local control. In hindsight, though surely unrecognizable to the participants, this seems to have been a period of experimentation in which “the people”—however exclusionary the term with regard to race, religion, gender, and wealth—had direct, immediate, and substantial control over a public institution and state funds at the aggregation level of neighborhoods. I chose 1853 as the close of this period, because 1855 marks the introduction of the public high school and the creation of a distinct state-level office with oversight responsibilities for general education.

The common schools that emerged in the nineteenth century had their origins in neighborhoods and congregations. They were not created by the state. The state first intervened in the provision of elementary schooling with Chapter 75 of the Laws of 1795, “An act for the establishment of common schools,” which called for the annual appropriation of a sum of money to be disbursed to each town “for the purpose of encouraging and maintaining schools . . . in which the children of the inhabitants . . . shall be instructed in the English language or be taught English grammar, arithmetic, mathematics and such other branches of knowledge as are most useful and necessary to complete a good English education.” To receive the funds, towns had to raise by tax “a sum equal to one half of the sum allotted to the same town,” elect school commissioners, elect or appoint two or more trustees for each school, and make an annual report. The 1795 law did not cause schools to be created, though many existing schools availed themselves of the funds. The law’s expiration in 1800 did not close schools.

In 1805 the legislature appropriated 500,000 acres of land as the basis
of a school fund, to be allocated when the interest earned on this land reached $50,000, which it did in 1815. Of course, such a sum of money needed to be managed and dispersed, and recipients had to be held accountable for how they spent it. The Regents, having been incorporated in 1784 to found, endow, and oversee academies and colleges, was a likely body to perform such oversight functions. However, the Regents were mistrusted as an anti-democratic group. The non-renewal of state appropriations for schools in 1800 was due at least in part to public fear that, because of the lifetime appointment and the specific makeup of the members, the Regents constituted an aristocratic body that would control the fund without being responsible to the public. Therefore the Regents were explicitly excluded from having any influence or authority over common schools, and the legislature created the office of superintendent of common schools to oversee the disbursement of school funds. Provisions for disbursing school funds were similar to that of the 1795 law.

Article VII, section 10 of the 1821 Constitution established the school fund as permanent. The stage was set for a struggle for control over the emerging school system, a system of schools that had been created independent of state government and was now partly funded by and thus accountable to state government.

In 1821 the duties of the superintendent of public instruction were incorporated into those of the secretary of state and the independent office abolished. Successive secretaries of state were frustrated by the decentralized nature of the system of schools. From 1813 until 1843 the administrative structure of the common school districts (CSDs) consisted of the school trustees, locally elected town commissioners and inspectors, and the state superintendent. In his 1841 report, Secretary of State J. C. Spencer lamented that “The schools were languishing for want of systematic, constant and vigilant supervision.” Reports from appointed boards of visitors were unanimous: “The schools did not afford the kind or degree of education essential either to the perpetuity or safety of the State.”

In response to these reports, and Secretary Spencer’s lobbying, the legislature created the office of deputy superintendent for each county. The deputy superintendents were supposed to have the geographic and demographic distance that local officials lacked and that was necessary in order to provide greater objectivity and zeal in securing the provision of quality education. The deputy superintendents, sometimes called county superintendents, were appointed by the county board of supervisors. Four counties—Putnam, Lewis, Richmond, and Wyoming—refused to appoint superintendents. Wyoming County’s board of supervisors informed the secretary of state that “in their judgment the interest of the county did not require the appointment of that officer.” The tension was set between state officials interested in securing educational oversight through interventions directed by Albany and local officials seeking to protect their authority, whether through electing and controlling deputy superintendents as buffers between local districts and the state superintendent or by refusing to cooperate at all.

When he took office in 1842, Secretary of State Young wanted to repeal the law creating the office of county superintendents. After reading their reports, he changed his mind. The reports described such a horrible state of affairs in the schools that he concluded that the state must do everything in its power to enforce a quality of education, if local citizens would not. If money were the state’s stick and carrot, then money must be used extensively. “Love of money must be substituted for a lack of parental affection.” If the members of those 12,000 little republics could not or would not elect officials and raise funds dedicated to producing quality schools, then the state would have to intervene on behalf of the children in order to protect its interest in having an informed and competent electorate.

However, local reaction to the emerging system of oversight was less positive. On November 13, 1847, after lobbying by constituents displeased with what they considered frivolous expense, abuses of office, and anti-democratic practices, the legislature abolished the appointed office of county superintendent and created the at-large, elected office

10. Annual Report of the Secretary of State as Superintendent of the Common Schools, 1841, 11.
of town superintendents. Supporters of local control thought it easier to protect local interest at the town level of election than at the county.

An 1853 law had complicated and expanded the responsibility of the superintendent of common schools. It allowed CSDs to join together to form a union free school district (union district). A union district included an "academical department," and was the forerunner of the modern school district with its high school. This legislation was entirely permissive and served to recognize the relationship many CSDs had established with existing academies. Again, like the 1812 law, the 1853 law did not create high schools, private academies having already become well established throughout the state, but through the union districts it did incorporate them into the state system. It also created a confused administrative structure where the Regents had oversight of some aspects of academies and post-elementary school education, and first the superintendent of common schools and then the superintendent of public instruction had oversight over other aspects.

State superintendents continued to praise the administrative system of county superintendents and argue for its return long after the office ceased to exist. In order to effectively reform schools they needed data and they needed field agents, which the county superintendents had provided. In 1854 the legislature abolished the office of superintendent of common schools, removing it from the portfolio of the secretary of state, and created an independent office to oversee and regulate the CSDs and CSD components of the union free districts: the superintendent of public instruction.

The new office did not satisfy the desires of state educational leaders to have a hand in local educational affairs. Victor M. Rice, the first state superintendent for public instruction, argued repeatedly for the return of the county superintendent. "It is by no means going too far to say, that in the continued absence of some instrumentality of this nature [county superintendents], it will be utterly impracticable to lay before the legislature, and the people, that information in relation to the condition and administration of our school systems, which is so indispensably requisite to its efficiency and advancement." 15

Mr. Rice thought thorough supervision of schools would provide the following benefits:

1. Uncomfortable, ill-arranged, and badly ventilated school houses are made beautiful, convenient, and healthful.

2. The operations of a complex and extended school system are made known, and the defects therein pointed out, so that more effectual remedies may be applied. Legislation is no longer based upon uncertain data.

3. The people better appreciate the necessity of frequent visits to schools, to stimulate and encourage pupils and teachers; Normal classes and teachers' institutes are multiplied, in consequence of the increasing demand for better instruction; the most approved plans for developing and guiding the minds of the young are disseminated till they become common property; in fine, vitality and enthusiasm are infused into every department of public instruction. 16

According to Mr. Rice, in order for there to be improvement, there needed to be thorough supervision; and in order for there to be thorough supervision, there must be a class of people with sufficient competence, interest, and time dedicated to the improvement of common schools. Town superintendents were too numerous, thus watering down the quality; were too poorly compensated, thus tending to be distracted by concerns of personal business; and were too vested in local interests to be effective. However, any form of supervision would only work so long as it had the support of the populace. Superintendent Rice embodied in one person the tension between commitment to a Jeffersonian ideal of local control, his 12,000 republics of this essay's title, and an administrator's concern for efficient oversight and responsiveness to a central authority.

The creation of a state office devoted solely to CSDs created a bully pulpit. Combined with increased political support for improving teacher-education programs and creating free schools, the state superintendent acquired legislative influence. The legislature took note of Mr. Rice's arguments. In 1856 the legislature replaced the town super-

15. As quoted by V.M. Rice in his 1854 Annual Report, 40.

intendents with a system of at-large elected school commissioners whose districts were roughly coterminous with a New York State assembly district. Moreover, future state superintendents moved increasingly away from Rice’s split commitment to both local control and administrative efficiency and emphasized the latter, and system coherence, almost exclusively.

III. 1854-1903: The Experiment Reassessed

During the period 1854–1903, motivated in part by the poor conditions of many rural schools and the low quality of the education they offered, educational policy-makers at the state level moved consistently and systematically to centralize oversight of the public school system and to regulate critical functions. Public justification of these efforts relied on a rhetoric of efficiency and reference to the compelling interests of the state in ensuring a universal and high quality education for all children. The language of civic apprenticeship disappeared at the state level, and the highly decentralized local control of educational functions that existed, such as the certification of teachers, school attendance policies and access, and the maintenance of neighborhood schools came to be seen by educational policy-makers as obstacles to the creation of an efficient system of high-quality schools. Those advocating centralization realized some improvements in educational quality, significantly advanced the centralization of the system, and set the stage for coercive state policies after the turn of the century.

With the creation of the independent office of superintendent of public instruction and the intermediate administrative level of school commissioners, there was finally a personnel structure not only to occupy a bully pulpit, both locally and at the state level, but also to collect data and pressure the legislature for significant reforms. Many schools had dilapidated buildings without adequate heat, light, or ventilation. A large number lacked both drinking water and an outhouse. Books and supplies were scarce. Teachers often had a poor grasp of their subjects and little if any effective pedagogical training. Reliance on rate bills, variable term lengths, and locally peculiar arrangements for schooling created inequities. For many, schools were intolerably local. Reflecting the can-do spirit of a nation triumphant in war (after 1865); infused with enthusiasms for standardization, large-system building, and professionalization emerging with the industrial revolution; and disturbed by the evident failings of local control of education, state-level educational reformers in their rhetoric increasingly emphasized administrative and economic efficiency, academic excellence, and equitable access. The conditions which supported civic apprenticeship were increasingly seen as obstacles to securing the state’s interest in education.

Four reforms dominated at the state level. (1) Teacher preparation and certification had to be standardized, increased in rigor, and responsive to oversight by the state superintendent. (2) Rate bills, a form of tuition charged to students after the state and local tax dollars available for paying a teacher’s salary were exhausted, had to be replaced by completely tax-supported schooling for all children. This became known as the free school movement. (3) To prevent the largesse of free schooling from being wasted, and to promote the state’s interests that such schooling sought to secure, children would be compelled to attend school. (4) In order to ensure appropriate accountability for the expenditure of public funds, the state superintendent needed the authority to organize the system of schools, i.e., to close and consolidate schools and districts. Each of these reforms impinged on traditions of local control of schools. Concern with the academic competence of youth, in accord with an emerging consensus among policy elites of purposes, content, and procedures of schooling, displaced any concern with the civic apprenticeship of adults.

Teacher Certification

Between 1815 and 1894, the authority to certify teachers passed from local elected officials into the exclusive hands of the superintendent, and a state-wide examination system was instituted. Prior to 1843, only local school officials had the authority to certify teachers. From 1843 to 1864 teachers could get certified through three avenues, with the first the most used: (1) a local administrator could “examine” a teacher (actual examinations of content knowledge or pedagogy were virtually non-existent); (2) the state superintendent could issue a certificate valid
 Superintendent Andrew Draper, later to become the first commissioner of education and a champion of central control, lobbied the legislature for the power to regulate local certificates. Superintendent Draper was concerned that: (1) Requirements to obtain certificates varied from place to place. (2) The local official was susceptible to appeals for sympathy. (3) Often no examination was even conducted. (4) Local officials faced political pressures and could not afford to antagonize the electorate. (5) The low qualifications attracted low-end workers who kept wages low and thereby forced out of the market those who had gone to some expense to educate themselves. In general, “There is reason to believe that the power to grant certificates is frequently abused and . . . used corruptly.” 13

In 1885 Mr. Draper was given, to a limited extent, the authority he sought, though he met stiff local resistance in implementing it, particularly from the county superintendents whose authority was threatened. By 1888, he had established model written examinations for all local certification levels and urged the county superintendents to use them. The result was a four-tiered certification system. At the top level was the state test and normal school certificate good for life and valid state-wide. The first grade local certificate was a five-year renewable, without need for reexamination by the commissioner to be renewed. The second grade local was a two-year certificate which required reexamination for renewal. The third grade was a six-month certificate which could only be issued once. Finally there was a six-week temporary certificate. In 1888, 21,156 people took these examinations in the respective commissioner districts. Of these, 645 achieved a first grade, 6,068 a second, and 9,469 a third; 5,612 failed the examination. Of those taking the state examination that same year, 64 of 379, or 17 percent, passed. 19

The loophole in the new system was that local certification continued. Frustrated that teachers could get certified locally though they failed state examinations and that local examinations were haphazardly implemented, the state superintendent sought greater regulatory authority. In 1894 the legislature declared all power to issue a certificate to teach to reside with the state superintendent of public instruction. First

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and second grade local certificates were eliminated. All permanent and renewable certificates had to be issued by the office of the superintendent. In the space of fifty-one years, the authority to issue a teaching certificate went from residing exclusively in local elected officials to residing almost exclusively in the appointed office of state superintendent.

The migration of the authority to certify teachers is important. First, prior to 1843 it was assumed that only those immediately associated with a local school should have a voice in deciding who was fit to teach there. The gradual challenge to and change in this assumption was part of a general shift to putting responsibility into the hands of more distant officeholders with claims to both objectivity and expertise. In the process, the regulatory power and interventionist role of state government was increased. Second, to the extent that citizens learned from the consequences of the actions of their representatives, voiced their concerns in public fora, and took an interest in ensuring the quality of those instructors who were hired, some civic education resulted from keeping certification local. Once control over certification was removed from the local unit, discussion over what constituted a quality teacher was muted to the extent that a community relied on the candidate’s credential and the evaluation of experts.

**Free Schools**

Despite state financial aid and mandated local taxes for the support of schools, a common school education was not entirely free prior to 1867. All costs associated with building, repairing, and operating a schoolhouse were raised through local property tax. Schoolbooks were purchased by an individual’s parents. Money from the state’s Common School Fund was reserved for teachers’ wages. However, state money combined with local taxes did not generally cover the full cost of hiring a teacher. The difference came from tuition paid by a child’s parents. This tuition was called a “rate bill.” In practice, all students could attend school for free until the public funds ran out, usually after three months. The remaining five months or so of schooling were tuition-based, with voluntary local provision made for the education of those who could not afford to pay the rate bill.

During the constitutional convention of 1846, the standing committee on education proposed an amendment making common schools free and open to all; it did not pass. In 1849 the legislature took the unusual step of putting a referendum on the ballot requiring a townwide tax to support free schooling. The referendum passed with overwhelming popular support, though support in the most rural areas was much weaker than in the state as a whole. However, as instituted, the 1849 law was widely unpopular. Not only did taxes often increase by hundreds of percent, but because taxes were collected on a townwide basis, those living in lower-expense rural CSDs found themselves subsidizing more expensive village schools. More galling than the expense was the knowledge that local tax revenues funded the actions of people over whom one had no democratic control. More than 300 petitions were presented to the legislature urging repeal. A second referendum was placed on the November 1850 ballot. A slim majority voted against repeal, 53 percent to 47 percent. Repeal was overwhelmingly favored in rural areas and rejected in urban areas; forty-seven of fifty-nine counties voted for repeal. Rural legislators got the point and secured repeal of the law in 1851.

However, proponents persisted in their efforts and compromises were introduced, including making the tax unit the district rather than the town. In 1867 rate bills were abolished; state aid to CSDs was increased slightly; and a mill-based, district property tax was fixed as the primary source of funding of a fully free education for all school-age children. However, despite reformist rhetoric that the rate bills had prevented children from getting an education, the effect of the free school act on both attendance and enrollment were minimal. Through a variety of informal welfare provisions, CSDs had managed to ensure access to most of the children in the community. For those who did not attend, the rate bill was not the primary cause.

In 1895 the provision of free public schooling was incorporated into the state constitution as an individual right and state responsibility:

>“The legislature shall provide for the maintenance and support of free common schools, wherein all the children of the state may be educated.”

In one hundred years schooling had gone from an entirely local, volum-
Compulsory Education

The passage of the free school act of 1867 gave legislative momentum to the idea that if free public education is offered, and if the rationale for so doing is to meet a compelling interest of the state to provide for individuals and protect the polity by ensuring a democratic citizenry and competent work force, then all children are obligated to take advantage of the offer.

Compulsory education was resisted in part due to a concern that it detracted from civic apprenticeship. It is perfectly consistent for a monarchical government, which manages all its concerns by the exercise of a central power, to enforce education, although it might otherwise become as thorough and general. . . . But the citizens of a free State need the discipline of self-government. . . . They must learn to take care of themselves in the matter of education, as in other respects, if they wish to remain their own masters. They should realize that power belongs to them, and, in addition, not only that the instruction of the schools is beneficial, but that the education which results from the practice of inquiring, and of doing so voluntarily, what is essential to the intelligent exercise of power, is also essential to its preservation. 21

Nevertheless, New York’s first compulsory education law was passed in 1874, compelling all children aged eight to fourteen to attend school for at least fourteen weeks each year. Reflecting on the new law in his 1875 report, Superintendent of Public Instruction Neil Gilmour summarized the arguments in favor of its passage:

Those who favor such a system, urge that the education of the citizen is necessary for the welfare of the State; and that unless general intelligence prevails among the people, neither property, life, nor liberty will be safe under such a form of government as ours. They also assert that, inasmuch as the State has provided, and is, at large expense, maintaining a system of free public instruction for the purpose of making good and useful citizens out of those who are now children, it is the right and duty of the State to see that its policy is not thwarted by the carelessness or indifference of parents or guardians, by the greed of employers, or by the wants, necessities, or viciousness of the children themselves. 22

Mr. Gilmour points out a fundamental principle of the logic at work in developing a state system of schooling. Once a compelling interest of the state is identified and generally accepted—e.g., providing free, universal schooling—then an unanticipated consequence is that the interest becomes justification for the maximal use of authority and power to support or enforce related policies or programs. The interest originally identified becomes a justification for construction, maintenance, and expansion of supportive legislation, structures, or institutions.

As the components of the evolving school system—by which I mean all the laws, practices, administrative structures, buildings, and attitudes—become disassociated from the identified compelling interest, the more likely they are to take on a self-justificatory life of their own. The evolving centralized school system was becoming disassociated from the compelling interest of developing independent, politically effective, and engaged citizens. Democracy had become a means to an end. Insofar as democratic processes helped the state administer a system increasingly responsive to centralized control and, to give those who lead their due, designed to be ubiquitous and fair while developing law-abiding citizens who were financially self-sufficient, then democratic processes seemed justified. But, whenever democratic processes interfered with the development or administration of that system, they were increasingly circumvented. Civic education becomes a subject taught in school to assist in developing law-abiding citizens, not a practice encouraged among adults.

The 1874 law was weak and poorly enforced. By 1893, Superintendent of Public Instruction James Crocker urged a new, vigorous com-

21. Annual Report, 1875, 57; emphasis added.
22. Annual Report, 1875, 57.
pulsory attendance law. He argued that the 1874 law was defective due to its lack of "a thorough system of administration which will remove its enforcement from local authorities and put it in the hands of a power able and willing to enforce it." He concluded that the "persuasion" and modeling effects earlier superintendents relied on had not worked and so it was time to try central authority and force. The goal of efficiency overrode the goal of developing effective democratic citizens. Mr. Crocker turned the means, universal education, into an end and used it to justify assailing a practice to the maintenance of that interest, a competent democratic citizenry, which originally justified the arguments for universal education. The tables had been turned. His arguments were prelude to the twentieth-century focus of the State Education Department on consolidation of centralized control.

In 1894 the compulsory education law was strengthened, requiring children between the ages of eight and twelve to attend school for the number of days in which the local public school was in session. Twelve- to fourteen-year-olds must attend at least eighty actual days in any given school year. Fourteen- to sixteen-year-olds must attend the same number of days the public school is in session unless "regularly and lawfully engaged in any useful employment or service." Like its predecessor, however, despite vigorous enforcement, the 1894 law had virtually no effect on either enrollment or attendance.

**School Consolidation and the Authority of the State Superintendent**

If the state was going to help fund the education of prospective teachers and subsidize their salaries, then the state was going to control entry and status in the profession through state generated and controlled examinations. If the state was going to help fund free schools, then children would be compelled to attend them. If the state was going to provide money to local districts, then state officers would oversee the expenditure of that money. The provision of public money provides a strong argument for public accountability. A premise of public accountability provides strong support for state structures of administration and oversight. When public money is involved, state administration and oversight chafe under the constraints of local control.

To many reformers, decentralized control of schools and school districts and the dispersed school population emerged during the latter half of the nineteenth century as the primary obstacles to creating an efficient, excellent, and equitable state school system. The grade and department classification of children in urban schools and in union free schools impressed state education officials as a model to which CSDs should aspire. Such a system was deemed more "efficient." The rhetoric of administrative efficiency and efficiency of instruction, building, and operating costs gained increasing legitimacy. State education officials began urging the legislature to grant the state superintendent the power to mandate the consolidation of schools and districts. In 1862 Deputy Superintendent of Public Instruction Emerson W. Keyes dismissed arguments against mandatory consolidation as "of the most frivolous and childish character," and concluded: "I cannot think there would be any injustice or hardship in providing by statute for the compulsory consolidation of any two or more districts."

The old democratic rhetoric had not completely lost its power. However, those seduced by the lure of the great good that could be done with increased power in the right hands, grew in power and frustration. "If the statute can be so amended as to create an inducement for districts themselves to consolidate, thus obviating the obnoxious features of compulsory action, and securing the same result through voluntary proceedings, such a policy would, perhaps, be preferable; but some action that shall ensure the consolidation of districts whenever practicable, is imperatively demanded." Attracted to the perceived educational efficiency of urban schools, and taking village-centered union free districts as proof that such a system could work in rural areas, there was an eagerness to create a "one best system" which responded coherently, univocally, and effectively to directives from Albany.

An important first step in getting organizational control of schools and districts required that the rulings of the state superintendent have

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the force of law. This had been accomplished long before, in the era when civic apprenticeship was still alive and well. An 1822 court decision ruled that the state superintendent (or successor office) had the power to make "final and conclusive" decisions on matters of fact and law pertaining to "a person aggrieved by any action of school district officers or employees." An 1864 law added that the superintendent's ruling was "not subject to question or review in any place or court whatever." These rulings developed into a history of precedents governing almost every facet of school activity.

Until 1864 school district boundaries were modified by the directors of the affected districts consulting with each other. Protesting that such authority resulted in abuses, which in turn resulted in unnecessary lawsuits, the superintendent of public instruction successfully lobbied the legislature to give authority for changing district boundaries to the school commissioners, with or without the consent of the relevant district's trustee(s). The onus of resisting such on order was on the local district, which could appeal to the state superintendent. Despite this shift in control, resistance was strong, and the commissioners were comparatively weak. No wholesale consolidations took place during the nineteenth century. However, from the time the office of school commissioner was created in 1856 until it was abolished in 1909, the commissioners were exhorted by successive state superintendents to persuade local schools and districts to consolidate.

IV. 1904 - The Present: Civic Apprenticeship Lost in the Triumph of Efficiency

During the twenty years from 1904 to 1925, beginning with the creation of the State Education Department (SED) in 1904, the state apparatus for overseeing both elementary and high school education was made organizationally coherent. The system of common schools and the system of public high schools were linked into a single system, and through the office of the district superintendent that system was directly linked to the State Education Department and the commissioner of edu-

28. Ibid.

cation in Albany. With that organizational coherence and administrative structure came the possibility that the commissioner of education and officials within the State Education Department could systematically and uniformly reform public education in the state. Also, financial incentives, sustained pressure from the SED, and the Depression made consolidating schools and districts locally attractive. Once consolidation took hold, the power to resist centralized reforms decreased dramatically.

The possibility of Albany-directed systemic reform gained political support through the prevalence of certain popular and professional beliefs complemented by a demographic shift to a more urban population in the state. Those beliefs included the science-ringed perfectionist ideals of social and administrative progressives; the ubiquity of business metaphors focused on hierarchical management, division of labor, and economics of scale; the scientific management wave which emerged from the work of Frederick Taylor, swept the nation, and forever changed the meaning of the term efficiency; and a shift in the social and political center of gravity from an isolationist rural polity which emphasized democratic control and the moral superiority of small communities to an urban-industrial power with international responsibilities which emphasized expertise and social efficiency.

Efficiency was the coin of the realm. The heart of efficiency was top-down management and supervision by experts in administration and instruction. The 1897 National Education Association Report of the Committee of Twelve on Rural Schools pronounced the school district as "the most undesirable unit possible." It therefore called for the consolidation of districts. . . . [t]o make possible a system of supervision which had never been achieved in country schools." New York's superintendent agreed. "It is only by placing the public school as a whole under the exclusive jurisdiction and management of one properly constituted authority that the interests of the public school as a whole can be most efficiently carried out."
Andrew Draper, an energetic and visionary modernizer, was appointed the first New York State commissioner of education. In the course of his nine years in that position he was able to shape the tone and direction of the SED. The SED adopted a top-down style of management by legislation and dictation. Unlike its nineteenth-century predecessors, who led primarily through exhortation and persuasion, its approach was confrontational, softened by compromise and negotiation only to the extent that either was necessary to realize its legislative goals.

The educational vision of those within the SED included the elimination of the common school districts, the elimination of most of the small schools, and the creation of a statewide system of large, graded schools with specialized instruction and state-of-the-art high schools, operated on at least the scale of townships, and overseen by a cadre of highly trained district superintendents who answered directly to Albany. Democratic or popular influence in the schools was viewed as something to be minimized, to be retained only as necessary in order to obtain the support and cooperation of community members. The SED's vision of a school system was of one planned, developed, controlled, and operated as an organizationally coherent structure with vertical lines of responsibility proceeding through a hierarchy to the SED and the commissioner of education. The entire system would march in step and resonate in tune with the dynamism of modernity, progress, and efficiency. The One-Room School with its family, congregational, and neighborhood ties—and soon the small consolidated schools with their town or village identities—were impediments to the full realization of an efficient system. Civic apprenticeship, while perhaps effective in maximizing the number of civically competent citizens, was not "efficient."

One of the first challenges tackled by Commissioner Draper was the creation of a professional cadre of midlevel administrators who were responsive to Albany. In 1910 the legislature abolished the office of school commissioner and replaced it with the office of district superintendent with professional qualifications. To qualify for election as district superintendent, one had to "possess or be entitled to receive a certificate authorizing him to teach in any one of the public schools of the state without further examination and he shall also pass an examination prescribed by the commissioner of education on the supervision of courses of study in agriculture and teaching the same." 32 Women were specifically made eligible to hold the office of district superintendent.

The district superintendent was also prohibited from holding any other office during his/her tenure. Unlike their predecessors, their base salary was paid by the state and the commissioner of education held the power of oversight and dismissal and could direct the efforts of the superintendent. The state was not slow to use its authority. "At the first meeting of the district superintendents in Albany in 1912, these departmental field agents were advised [by Mr. Draper] to 'go home and consolidate.'" 33 Resistance to consolidation by CSD residents was nearly universal and effective. The rhetorical position was one of local control versus state control. The response of the commissioner to this argument for local control was unequivocal. "The schools of the State, wherever located, are not local schools but they are State schools...authorized and controlled by the State." 34 However, it would take political action to make this claim a reality on the ground and many years of practice to diminish the legacy of local control, which claims adherents to this day.

Modern farming, with its attachment to the language of business, progress, and efficiency, gained increasing political strength in the countryside during the early decades of the twentieth century. Urban populations swelled while rural ones declined. The combined result was a shift in the balance of power in the legislature. School reorganization bills began to be politically feasible, though still fiercely contested in rural areas. A 1914 law allowed CSDs to consolidate to create one central district with a high school. The law would make little difference in access to education but would eliminate local districts. It was unpopular and only one district was formed. A 1917 law allowed the creation of a central high school district, without the component CSDs being eliminated. More popular than the central district option, it was not promoted by the SED as it was inconsistent with its intent to eliminate small districts and assert state control. In 1915 the SED had proposed a township system. In terms of academic excellence, equity of access and
resources, and administrative efficiency, the township system seemed promising. With a great deal of effort and a sustained publicity campaign, the SED finally convinced the legislature to pass the township law in 1917, a month after the central high school law passed.

The township law created town school boards having jurisdiction over all schools within the town, effectively giving residents of the more populated areas of a town control of the school board, the tax rates, and the consolidation of schools. Outlying residents stood little chance of being elected to the school board and would have virtually no say in questions of school governance. This was a triumph for local modernizers.

The township law generated more unified and unifying opposition to the state intervention in local school affairs than any other law. Not only did the new law promise to eliminate the CSDs, it was also expensive. The tax rate soared without changing either the quality or quantity of education to which most people had access. In effect, the more heavily indebted village districts shifted their tax burden onto their more rural neighbors, thus substantially raising the average tax increases for the township as a whole, but disproportionately higher for rural residents, in order to raise the same amount as from higher value properties in villages. A study ordered by Governor Charles Whitman concluded that districts exempt from the township law averaged a 13 percent tax increase for the 1917-1918 fiscal year. Township districts averaged a tax increase of 33 percent. After a storm of protest, the township law was repealed on April 3, 1918, less than a year after it was passed.

There was a sense of disbelief and incomprehension among the leading education officials and reformers of the day that anyone could object to this attempt to modernize, cohere, and reform the school system under the direction of a political and professional elite. Not only was the idea of civic apprenticeship apparently dead at this level of leadership, but removing control of the school system from its local origins had moved beyond merely an attractive possibility. Failure to do so would be "a calamity," as the Massachusetts commissioner of education wrote in sympathy to his New York counterpart: "Education in a democracy will certainly in some measure fail to produce what the people expect of it if its administration and support are left upon a parochial or neighborhood basis. It would be hardly less than a calamity if New York should recede from the position which it has taken." 35

The township fiasco so polarized and politicized rural residents that any organizational reform would have to proceed by carefully building a supporting coalition among rural constituencies. In the spring of 1920, at the annual Farmers' Week at the New York State College of Agriculture, Commissioner of Education John Finley addressed a conference on rural schooling. The Conference Board of Farm Organizations passed a resolution calling for a study of the problems of rural schools, and the Joint Committee on Rural Schools, popularly known as the Committee of Twenty-One, was created. Seven organizations each sent three representatives: the State Grange, the SED, the Dairymen's League, the Farm Bureau Federation, the State College of Agriculture, the Home Bureau Federation, and the State Teachers' Association. George A. Works, professor of education and supporter of the township law, chaired the committee.

The study itself was divided into a series of smaller studies, each directed by university faculty recruited for the effort from a national pool. In addition to their staffs, these consultants had the help of 150-200 researchers from among educators and administrators in the state. In 1922 the Committee of Twenty-One released an eight-volume report. The studies concluded that school improvement was not a simple matter that could be resolved by a top-down approach. The report on teacher quality agreed that there was a need for better teachers, but emphasized the need for better communication between rural residents and teachers and the SED, not greater control by the SED over teachers. The report on facilities found school buildings generally to be inadequate, but noted that quality of a facility could not be predicted accurately on the basis of district size or wealth. Commitment to maintaining a school rested more on popular sentiment than on legislative directive. Academic achievement varied by subject level and school size. In a comparison with urban schools and larger rural schools, the smallest schools were poorest in reading and history, did well in spelling (larger rural schools

35. Annual Report, 1918, 622.
were superior to urban schools, did poorly in Latin, and excelled in math. 36

The report on financial support of schools directly addressed the question of civic apprenticeship. Harlan Updegraff, the author, concluded that while state support for education was justified on the grounds of a compelling interest in ensuring a competent democratic citizenry, the development and maintenance of just such a competent citizenry also relied on "the efficient participation of citizens in the exercise of citizenship." 37 A balance between state and local control must be found so as not to eclipse the instructional aspect of local control, if for no other than practical considerations.

The facts are that in a fairly large number of the communities . . . we need a change in attitude on the part of the citizens toward the schools. These communities can frequently be led to change their vote and to substitute right action for wrong action over a sufficiently long period of years to bring about fundamental change in their attitudes. . . . That which a citizen learns through the operation of his own action becomes established, while that which is forced upon him against his will he opposes. It is, therefore, fundamental in state aid that we leave the final decision to the local communities, and allow them to choose what they think is best. In the doing of this we will have stronger agencies in the making of a better government and a better society. 38

The Committee of Twenty-One recommended the organization of the school system into four layers. The most local unit would be the CSD as it existed, necessitated by the demand for local control. The next layer would be the community unit. The school board of the comm


the exemplary and discourage the incompetent; but above all, the SED should lead democratically. After detailing the ineffectiveness of legislation and mandates in improving schools, Julian Butterworth, in his report on facilities, recommended that the "approach to the whole problem should be through leading the people themselves to see the need for better things." In other words, to educate and support citizens to act through local governance so as to better run their schools.

The recommendations of the committee, with some modifications, were presented to the legislature as the Downing Bill. The bill languished in various committees. Since his appointment in 1921, Commissioner Graves had been arguing for large-scale consolidations. If the Downing Bill was all the SED could get, it would take it. But there was little enthusiasm by the commissioner for such a bill. The issue of local control versus further centralization had polarized the state. As a compromise, the Downing Bill was seen as too decentralized by the SED and as too centralized by those who opposed any further loss of local control. It had little support in the legislature. In early March 1925, Senator Cole of the Senate Education Committee—later to be State School Commissioner Cole—introduced several bills aimed at reinvigorating the central rural school act of 1914 through the provision of state incentive aid. After the introduction of the Cole bills, the SED withdrew its support from the Downing Bill and backed the Cole bills. No open hearings were held on the Cole bills, and they were quickly enacted into law on April 16.

The Cole law transformed the system. It provided incentive aid for the formation of central rural school districts in the form of a transportation quota equal to 50 percent of the cost to the district, plus 25 percent of the cost of constructing new buildings. It also carefully avoided automatically eliminating existing districts, a major political error of the township law. The vote on consolidation was aggregated within the proposed new district, but the actual dissolution of a CSD and the sale of the school building would be decided by each district’s voters.

The incentives came just as motor transportation and improved

roads began minimizing some of the transportation problems associated with central schools. Then the Depression hit. The national economic depression not only squeezed local economies, thereby making the incentive aid particularly attractive, but it also brought about the federal Resettlement Administration programs with their emphasis on concentrating rural populations in productive regions, the state and federal purchase of submarginal farmlands, and federal aid for school and road building projects through the Works Project Administration. The money, improvements to infrastructure, mobilization of the population, and local economic pressures combined to make school consolidation hard to resist.

The resulting school consolidation, from 1925 to the present, can be grouped into three waves. The first wave, lasting roughly from 1925 until 1945, eliminated 4,838 school districts (49 percent of the 1925 figures) and 4,022 schools (33 percent). The second wave of consolidation, lasting roughly from 1945 until 1970, eliminated another 4,354 districts and 3,730 schools. The third wave of consolidation, from 1970 to the present, was more of a trickle than a wave. By 1990, the 1925 figures of 9,950 districts and 12,165 schools had been reduced to 719 and 3,971 respectively. In sixty-five years 93 percent of the districts and 67 percent of the schools in New York State were eliminated. Almost all of these reductions were accomplished within forty-five years. The one-room school was all but extinct by 1959. The SED achieved one of its original goals: rural children were aggregated into large, graded schools, which in turn were situated in geographically large districts supervised by a small number of professionally certified administrators who were responsive to Albany.

The first wave had two parts. First was the initial creation of central school districts. Somewhere between eight and thirty common school districts and one or more union free districts would merge to form a single central school district centered on a village school with an "academic" or high school department. For these common school districts,

44. See discussion in The Rural New Yorker (a statewide-distributed farm periodical) during this period.
which had traditionally sent their children to the village for high school, and some of which had also tuitioned their elementary students to the village school, the first wave meant formalizing existing relations, eliminating tuition and transportation negotiations and contracts, and taking advantage of state and federal aid to build a fine school and both expand and improve the educational program at the high school level. The second part of this wave was the consolidation of the schools themselves. The common schools were closed and the common school districts dissolved. This second part of the wave radically changed the relationship between village and country districts and was often, if futilely, resisted.

The second wave consolidated two or three central school districts into an even larger district. Whereas the first wave was marked on the local level by a desire to formalize relations, improve programs, ease access, and reduce costs, the second wave was much harder to sell. With the creation of a central school district the local citizenry had provided for a coherent, often higher-quality, kindergarten-through-twelfth-grade program for the children of an expanded, but already recognized, community. Schools were constructed as grand edifices. The central school district was generally formed on the basis of social, political, economic, and geographic boundaries. Personal and community pride and identity were connected to the central district. Decentralization meant giving up quite a bit in return for the promise of a more comprehensive program and a questionable argument that taxes would be reduced. Unless a severe economic downturn, a significant population loss, or the need to build a new building put tremendous pressure on local resources, citizens were unlikely to embrace reconsolidation. People tended to be at least satisfied with if not inordinately proud of their local school. Its elimination would require a compelling reason.

From the state’s point of view, the compelling reasons for reconsolidations were at least three-fold. (1) Larger districts and larger schools could supposedly take advantage of economies of scale to reduce expenditures, thereby saving the state’s taxpayers money. (2) Larger districts and larger schools could offer a more comprehensive and higher-quality educational program. The improvement in quality and comprehensiveness of rural schools was necessary both in order to promote educational excellence and to ensure the equitable distribution of educational opportunity between urban-suburban and rural areas. (3) The original centralizations, although approved by the commissioner of education, were created without benefit of “scientific” planning. Based on optimal school and district size, assessed property values, transportation capacities, social and economic status, and optimal use and location of building facilities, the state provided a master plan for school district reorganization calling for much larger districts and schools. 46

The third wave was the consolidation of already reconsolidated central school districts, or the consolidation of multiple central school districts into something approximating a county district, or larger. This third wave was manifested in several ways: through the promotion of intermediate districts, the creation of Boards of Cooperative Educational Services (BOCES), and attempts during the 1960s to create super consolidations of four or more central districts. To put it somewhat simplistically, but not too much so, the pervasive attitude of the SED has been that if large is good, then larger is even better. The third wave, however, largely failed of its purpose as the momentum of centralization had run its course.

The centralizations initiated in 1925 seemed, from the perspective of policy elites, an effective solution to the problem of school district organization. However, questions remained about what the state was to do with this system that it had finally gained primary and effective control over. The guiding plan which determined the later consolidations and directed the development of the system emerged out of a huge, multi-year study undertaken in the mid-1930s and published in twelve volumes in 1938: The Regents’ Inquiry Into the Character and Cost of Public Education in the State of New York. It was intended to supersede the report of the Committee of Twenty-One and “was undertaken in order to find out what the educational system of the State is accomplishing, how well its total program fits present-day needs, and what the

costs and cost elements of that program are and should be. Its purpose is to assist the Regents in considering the present needs and problems of the school system and in reformulating the fundamental educational policies of the State." 47 The result of the Regents' Inquiry was the creation of a vision for the future of public education in New York called the New Educational Program. A key element in the New Educational Program was the further consolidation of school districts according to a rational plan of organization. The Inquiry recommended the creation of a "continuous State School Districting Commission to draw up and establish a complete new plan of school districts for the whole State." 48 This became the Master Plan for School District Reorganization, approved in 1947 and revised in 1958. That plan guides school-district consolidations to this day.

According to the most prominent rhetoric of the general report, the primary objective of the system was preparation for the responsible exercise of democratic citizenship. "In a government like ours, where the people is the sovereign power; where the will of the people is the law of the land, which will is openly and directly expressed; and where every act of government may justly be called the act of the people, it is absolutely essential that the people be enlightened." 49

The rhetoric of democracy was prominently displayed. However, the body of the report, and that of the individual studies, placed greater emphasis on education for work and on the organizational and economic efficiency of the system itself. Even where education for citizenship was directly addressed, what was meant by "enlightened" was far from clear. In the general report, the goal of educating children was defined as preparing them "to be self-supporting, useful, and happy." 50


49. Education for American Life, 3.

50. Education for American Life, 3.

volume of the Inquiry directed specifically at education for citizenship, aptly titled Education for Citizenship, was an analysis of the social-studies curriculum used throughout the state. A section of that study, titled "Evidences of Civic Competence," was introduced by a brief review of the literature citing the low level of involvement of citizens in recent public elections, imputing that this low level represented a decrease, and equating low levels of voter participation with lack of civic competence or involvement. The remainder of the section was taken up by an analysis of survey and test data based on an examination of high school pupils and consisting of low-level, knowledge-content questions. These test scores represented civic education.

Nothing that could be construed as civic apprenticeship was mentioned anywhere in the Regents' Inquiry nor in any of the subsequent reports that emerged from legislative committees of the SED. The report of the Committee of Twenty-One marked its last inclusion in an official document.

There were 10,791 school districts in New York in 1900. In 1990 there were 719, a loss of 93 percent. In 1915, the first year in which the state counted, there were 12,708 public schools in the state (counting elementary and secondary). In 1990 there were 3,971, a decline of 69 percent. In 1900 there were 1.6 million school-age children in New York State, of which 77 percent were enrolled. In 1985 there were 3.2 million, of which 82 percent were enrolled. While the number of schools and districts plummeted, the population of students doubled. Each consolidation represents a dilution of electoral power and the further remove of individuals from active participation as the ruler and ruled.

Resistance to this consolidation and centralization of the school system has often been vehement, and continues to this day. The most organized and pervasive resistance occurred in the 1920s through the early 1940s and was coordinated by an organization called the Rural School Improvement Society, which found voice through a farm journal called The Rural New Yorker. The civic-apprenticeship argument found its last home among these dissenters. In 1930 D. Boyd Devendorf, president of the Rural School Improvement Society, responded to a bill before the legislature which proposed to give the district superintendent of schools power to initiate school consolidations.
The modern bureaucratic contention is that farmers are not qualified to decide for themselves what is good for them, and consequently must submit their problems to others for wise decision. The Webb-Rice bill can be defended on no other theory. If farmers and their wives living in these rural districts, paying taxes to educate their own children under their own direction and familiar with every phase of the problem, are not capable of deciding this rural school question for themselves, there may be reason for debate on this new law, but if these rural people have the information and the capacity to decide for themselves, then the Webb-Rice bill or any other law that deprived them of that privilege is a rank invasion of their intrinsic rights. Even if it were conceded—and it is not—that others were better qualified, we would yet contend that the moral and natural right belonged to the rural people, and if safeguarded in these rights by legal authority they would increase their capacity by practice and make a better job of it than others would do for them. 51

Educational reformers had sought centralized control, organizational coherence, and standardization as necessary foundations for building a comprehensive, equitable, academically and vocationally excellent, and economically and organizationally efficient system of schools. Local control was an obstacle to building such a system. Varieties of local control would lead to inequitable funding, an uneven quality of educational programs, lack of certain services for particular student populations, inconsistency of educational vision and practice, and an inability for educational programs to be coordinated in a timely fashion with the evolving vocational, social, and health needs of the society. At its root, local control seemed to deny the possibility of effectively realizing any systematic and universal educational reform. Direct democracy and lay management was simply too messy and inefficient and susceptible to promoting local prejudices via a public institution.

The report of the Committee of Twenty-One offered a middle way the SED could have chosen that promised to mitigate the problems of a highly decentralized system without exchanging them for the problems of a highly centralized system. Moreover, running their own schools could have provided an important aspect of civic education to people in those 12,000 little republics. With help, the citizenry might improve their competence as democratic citizens and effective rulers. To declare that experiment in self-rule tried and failed, or inadequate to meeting the challenges of the twentieth century, was to exorcise a seminal myth of democratic America and to remove a powerful institutional locus for its practice.