



How Good Are New York's Schools?

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THE AMERICAN big city inevitably calls for mass public education. In practice this has come to mean a centralized mass-production system that attempts to give at least the appearance of education amid rising pressures and declining standards. No doubt about it, big-city schools have driven hundreds of thousands of middle-class people out to the suburbs, where the caliber of public education is constantly improving instead of deteriorating.

Can anything be done to prevent our city schools from becoming an educational wasteland? As things stand now, they are increasingly abandoned by the urban rich, who send their own children to private schools, and increasingly filled with the urban poor, who can't afford to move to the suburbs. To combat this tendency, a movement has recently gotten under way to cut down overcentralization and to restore the responsible participation by local citizens in the teaching process that has always been a hallmark of our public-school system.

AT THE TURN of the century, educators were not so much preoccupied with the deficiencies of city

schools as with those of the then sparse rural school systems—their lack of competent leadership, their shabby one-room schoolhouses, and their meager curriculums. It seemed only logical to apply to public education one of the basic beliefs of the time—the bigger the organization, the better the product. In New York City back in 1902, for instance, all three hundred school districts were consolidated into one.

New York City's school system now embraces 598 elementary schools, 114 junior high schools, 31 vocational high schools, 55 academic high schools, and nearly one million pupils. This whole system is still run as one school district—from the top. The difference between the city and its suburbs is striking. In New York the board of education, which is in charge of all schools, is appointed by the mayor; in the suburbs it is elected. In the city, the mayor allocates money for the schools from the over-all tax fund, and the taxpayer has no control over the size of that amount. In suburban districts, a property owner pays a separate school tax and knows that what he pays out for schools is actually used for schools. There may be waste and

graft in either case, but it is easier for the citizens of the suburbs to find out about it. In New York City the mayor, the board of estimate, and the city council have to approve the school budget and they can cut any item they want; in fact, Mayor Robert F. Wagner recently cut the board of education's request for an increase in teachers' salaries from \$23 million to \$6.4 million, to be spread over two years, prompting the teachers to stage a march on city hall and threaten a strike. In the suburbs the taxpayers themselves give final approval to the school budget, and they can have just about anything they are willing to pay for.

Special Care for Quiz Kids

This is not to say that public instruction in a city as large and varied as New York is all the same and all bad. New York does perform special services, for instance, in teaching the unusually intelligent child. Throughout the five boroughs there are various kinds of special classes where the bright youngster can use his brain, instead of sitting bored through his classes as he might in a small-town school. In nearly all the city schools, classes are divided according to ability. In many cases pupils with an IQ of 130 or more are eligible for I.G.C. (Intellectually Gifted Children) classes, where they are given more work and tougher assignments than their slower colleagues, and if there aren't enough of these children to fill a class in a given school they are pooled from several neighborhoods.

When they reach junior high school, children with high marks can enroll in speed-up classes that cover three years' work in two. Finally, superior students can enter one of the five highly rated special high schools by passing the stiff entrance exams, or they can profit from "honors classes" in the regular academic high schools.

It's fair to say that in New York City, the really bright public-school child usually gets as good an education as a bright child would in the suburbs, and often a better one. Yet the fact remains that the New York City public schools on the whole are not on a par with those in surrounding suburbs. Schools are not improving as fast in the city as they are in



the suburbs, and even where the educational and economic level of the parents is comparable to that across the city line, the city schools lag behind.

IT IS NOT simply a matter of wealth, as is often supposed. Many city neighborhoods are very rich and many suburban districts are drab and crowded and poor. Suburban schools are better because no matter how interested a city neighborhood may be in its schools, it is hemmed in by a city-wide framework of large classes, overworked teachers, a shortage of money, and centralized authority. A study by the Public Education Association (a volunteer organization) shows that although New York City spends as much money per child on education as its suburbs do, its system yields less education per dollar.

In New York City the average elementary-school class has thirty children; in suburban Pelham it has twenty-one, in Scarsdale twenty-three, in Great Neck and Roslyn twenty-five. In New York City, forty-one thousand children are going to school part-time, and more than a third of the high schools are on double sessions. In East Meadow, Roslyn, Garden City, Freeport, and Scarsdale there are no double sessions at all. With school populations that have tripled and quadrupled since the war many suburbs do have double sessions, but they are catch-

ing up fast. New York City's school rolls are only eleven per cent higher than in 1945, yet today nearly three and a half times as many pupils are on part-time sessions. New York City has one teacher for every twenty-six schoolchildren; prosperous Manhattan and Bronxville have one for every fifteen—yet everyone agrees that where there are more difficult and underprivileged children, more attention is necessary.

In the junior high schools of New York City forty-five per cent of the teachers are substitutes, who are not properly trained in the subjects they teach or are unable for some other reason to get a regular appointment. In many communities a few miles beyond the city limits, every teacher is fully qualified.

An Open Meeting in Brooklyn

Beneath the statistics, the fundamental difference between the city and the suburbs lies in what the average citizen can do to affect his schools. If a school board in a small district near New York City is incompetent, if building isn't keeping up with the baby boom, or if Johnny isn't learning to read, his father can show up at the board's monthly meeting and ask questions. He can vote on the school budget, and he can vote to toss out the old school board and install new members. When a family leaves the New York City school district of nearly eight million and moves to a suburban

district of ten or twenty thousand, the influence that family can exert on the schools doesn't merely increase proportionately—it changes altogether.

Recently I attended a regular monthly meeting of the New York City board of education at its headquarters in downtown Brooklyn. At these meetings decisions that the board has already made are announced, and citizens may register their protests. The scheduled starting time is four-thirty in the afternoon, a time when most working people are still at their jobs. If a Bronx mother wants to complain, she first has to travel an hour and a half on the subway. At four-thirty, exactly eight people besides the board and its staff were present. When the meeting finally got under way about an hour later, the number had increased to twenty-eight.

At this meeting the board announced a \$2-million increase in its budget request, the site chosen for a school in Harlem, and the appointment of five new assistant superintendents—all matters of vital concern to large numbers of city parents. Representatives of four organizations spoke briefly, but only 0.000004 per cent of the people of New York City took part in these proceedings.

THE CONTRAST with the suburbs is startling. In a Long Island district of seventeen thousand people, the local board of education's monthly meeting draws about fifty people, the annual meeting brings in ten per cent of the total population, and more than a quarter of the parents and property owners who are eligible to vote cast their ballots in board elections where there is a contest.

Of course, no organizational structure can guarantee good schools. Some suburban districts are badly run, many needed expansion programs are turned down by their voters, and some parents are no help to the schools no matter where they live. But suburban schools are nearly always improving, while the New York City system seems to make real improvement almost impossible.

With an expense budget of \$344,926,974 and a staff of forty-nine thousand, the New York City system is so colossal and so far removed

from the ordinary citizen that the kind of participation by parents and private groups that has done so much for schools in smaller communities during the last twenty years has had little effect. Several outstanding volunteer groups do work on the city-wide level. The Public Education Association, already mentioned, has made valuable studies and experiments that have often influenced the board's planning; the United Parents Association campaigned for a \$100 million school-building program and got it; the Citizens' Committee for Children keeps close tabs on how the city is treating its younger generation. But the problem is so vast that such groups can only scratch the surface and try to remedy the most flagrant abuses.

Mayor Robert F. Wagner has been more generous to the schools than many of his predecessors. He increased the amount of new funds to be spent for school construction and modernization from Impellitteri's \$70 million in 1953 to \$99 million in 1955. Wagner has devoted seventeen per cent of the city's total capital budget to school construction, while Impellitteri gave fifteen per cent and O'Dwyer eight per cent. But with school rolls increasing constantly and many buildings in a shocking state of deterioration, even Wagner's program is not enough. And construction is only part of the picture.

UNLIKE those in smaller communities, the city's board of education has no fiscal independence; it cannot raise money by itself but must depend on the city's politicians for approval of the way it allocates whatever it is given—even the one-third of its expense budget that it receives from the State of New York.

Another serious deficiency of the New York City system is the generally poor quality of appointments to the board of education. In Chicago the mayor appoints the board from a slate drawn up by a commission of leading civic and professional groups. No such obligation restricts the mayor of New York. Wagner has consulted informally with certain qualified groups on three appointments, but he has not asked their opinion on five reappointments.

The law decrees that the board

of education in New York shall contain two members each from the boroughs of Manhattan, the Bronx, Brooklyn, and Queens, and one member from Staten Island. Tradition decrees that the board shall be composed of three Catholics, three Jews, and three Protestants. In practice, this means that if a Queens Catholic resigns, another Queens Catholic must take his place.

Experiment in the Bronx

The structure of New York's school system has become so monolithic under the control of politicians and their appointed professionals that many educators think the time has come to find ways of turning back to the citizens themselves their proper share of school responsibility.

For many, the word "decentralization" remains a pious platitude. But one private citizen has put his ideas to the test up in the Bronx in a way that is commanding wide attention. He is Dr. Paul R. Mort, an energetic sixty-three-year-old professor from Michigan who teaches at Columbia University Teachers College and runs the Metropolitan Schools Study

the community itself is clearly responsible for running its own schools, provide the best education. His ideas on decentralization were strengthened when he surveyed Germany's educational setup for the U.S. Military Government after the war. Americans thought the tight-knit German system should be split up; Mort was struck by the fact that there was more local control in Germany than in New York City.

When he got back to this country he buttonholed everyone he could find about extending self-government in education to city dwellers. Always he got the same answers:

¶ City people don't think of themselves as members of separate communities within the city; they have no experience with self-government and couldn't handle responsibility if it were given them.

¶ The professionals and bureaucrats who control the city systems will never relinquish their power.

Mort decided to test these assumptions. He persuaded the Public Education Association to put up thirty-one thousand dollars and Teachers College another five thousand for an



Photos by Black Star

Council, a research organization for the New York, New Jersey, and Connecticut area.

Dr. Mort holds that the trend toward ever-bigger school systems in this country has gone much too far, and that school districts with a population of ten to fifty thousand, in which

experiment. "We thought that if we could draw back the curtain of authority from one little area," he told me, "we could see what city people could do if given the chance." For his test he chose a four-square-mile area in the Bronx with a population of 141,000. It was a middle-income section not

too different from those just across the city line in the not so chic suburbs. But whereas most localities surrounding New York City had fifty teachers per thousand pupils, the test area had only thirty-six per thousand.

There is very little in the area to give its inhabitants a sense of belonging to a distinct community. On one side respectable apartment houses overlook the handsome Botanical Gardens. At its southern end stands Parkchester, Metropolitan Life's huge prewar housing project. The rest of the district contains row after row of one- and two-family houses with a patch of back yard, along with five- or six-story apartment houses and little colonies of corner stores.

PROFESSOR MORT and his staff set out to bring to life what they called the Bronx Park Community and held a mass conference to determine what the people of the area wanted most for their eleven schools. Skeptics called it a "squawk session," but half the suggestions handed in by the participants turned out to be constructive ideas, many of which have been adopted.

Nine leading citizens were named as an advisory council to work with the school officials responsible for the area. The original appointments were somewhat at random, but three years later an electoral system was set up. In 1952 the community elected area representatives—one for every hundred pupils—and these representatives constituted a limited town meeting, which chose a school committee to replace the appointed advisory council. The voter turnout was gratifying: Three times as many people took part as had previously participated in the separate schools' parent groups' elections.

This elected school committee has become a prototype for a board of education adapted to a community district within a large city. Although the New York City system does include local boards of education, their members are appointed by the borough presidents—often, it seems, for political reasons. In any event, they have practically no power.

The Bronx Park school committee devotes most of its time to special programs. One such program,

undertaken because of the widespread interest discovered at the "squawk session," provides music instruction for all Bronx Park children—a rare opportunity in New York City. Over the years ten thousand dollars in voluntary contributions have been collected for this purpose, and the schools' new orchestras put on "musicales" every so often.

Many parents went to the committee to complain that their children were poor readers. The committee thereupon persuaded the assistant school superintendent for the area to set up a reading clinic in an old school building that was no longer used for regular classes. Children now go there two afternoons a week for individual attention. A social worker, paid by the community, visits the children's families in case their difficulty lies at home. Of eighty-three children with serious reading trouble who took part in the program last year, all but six have caught up completely with their classmates.

Bronx Park residents are also proud of the recreation programs and teen-age centers that have been set up recently. Younger children are offered sports and crafts after school hours; teen-agers spend evenings playing basketball, dancing, or learning about fishing tackle instead of roaming the streets. To make the centers possible the community has spent sixteen thousand dollars of its own funds in three years to supplement the city's contributions.

Dr. Jansen Approves

It is clear from all this that citizens in a great metropolis sometimes *will* make the effort to improve their schools. What's more, their officials will go along with them. Although the New York board of education itself has never approved the Bronx Park Community venture, Superintendent of Schools Dr. William Jansen has granted it a charter. "Wide and energetic co-operation between the community and the schools," he told me, "is invaluable in the search for new ideas, the improvement and expansion of school facilities, and even in enhancing a vital, creative atmosphere in the classroom. The Bronx Park project has done much for the area

it serves." And Dr. Joseph Loretan, until recently assistant superintendent for the area, also became enthusiastic. Although it was something of a new experience for him to submit his professional judgments to the scrutiny of nine inquisitive laymen, he feels that "What we're doing is to try out something radically new in school government, and it's one of the most exciting things I've had a hand in."

Not long ago Loretan extended the Bronx Park idea to the neighboring area of Bronxwood. In the Bronx Park area the population is largely white—Jewish and Catholic. In Bronxwood there is a sizable Negro minority concentrated in one section. A few years ago there was almost no contact between this old Negro section and the neighboring white ones, but now representatives of the various groups work side by side to improve the schools of all the children, no matter what divisions the housing pattern has produced.

Loretan's chief, in turn, thinks so highly of the Bronx Park venture that when five new assistant superintendents were appointed recently, they were taken on a tour of Loretan's district to see how the community had been brought into school affairs. Loretan himself has just been promoted to head of the city's junior high schools.

ENTHUSIASM for the Bronx Park project has not been entirely unanimous. The United Parents Association argues that some of its parent groups have accomplished as much with less fanfare. James Marshall, an outstanding and enlightened member of the New York City board of education during his seventeen years of service on it, has serious reservations about local school government. "The smaller system will simply be taken over by a local political clique," he told me. "The city's board of education functions in the public view to some extent, but in a small section of the city a political faction would take over and manipulate elections. The people wouldn't care; in cities they just aren't interested in this sort of thing."

The proponents of the Bronx Park project argue that it offers the

best hope for improving the organization of the urban school system. Technically, the Bronx school committee's authority is still purely advisory, and so far it has concerned itself largely with extras rather than with the regular school program. But why shouldn't it have a voice in the selection of the school administrator assigned by the city to the district, take part in drawing up the school curriculum, look into the way funds allocated to the area are spent, and possibly even acquire some power of local taxation?

Some time ago several Bronx Park citizens studied the Delaware system, where school government is centralized at the state level and where local areas may tax themselves for school funds over and above what they receive from the state. They discovered that community taxation yielded much more than a few extra dollars: It meant more citizen awareness, more alert teachers, more lively education. Some of the people from the Bronx wonder if this same idea might not work in New York City.

At this point some critics argue that local initiative and self-taxation might merely widen the gap between poor and wealthy neighborhoods: "It's the poor neighborhoods that really need attention." One answer to this argument is that there is already so much disparity between city and suburban schools that the best thing to do is to allow more diversity in the city and in this way help to stop the exodus of middle-income families.

The Idea Is Spreading

Even those who are most enthusiastic about Bronx-style decentralization are still not entirely sure just how authority should be divided between the local community and the city. Dr. Mort says he would like to see "the citizens of city communities handle the tactics and leave the Board of Education free to plan strategy." In any case it's apparent that the city-wide structure could not—and should not—be broken up entirely. It's a question of diversifying it and getting out from under. Administrators in large cities today have vast power to put through necessary reforms without even consulting the voters. But in practice the

money often isn't spent and the reforms aren't made. City systems languish while suburban ones, dependent on voter approval, forge ahead.

New York City is not too poor to afford good schools. Mayor Wagner boasted recently that the per capita income of the city's residents is thirty-five per cent above the national average. Yet in this mayoralty-election year there are plans to lower the basic tax rate in spite of the urgent need for more teachers and better facilities.

In answer to James Marshall's doubts about decentralization, the prominent New York lawyer Morris Ernst told me: "Maybe a local clique *would* take over, but only for a decade. Then the citizens would wake up and run the schools and the playgrounds themselves. It takes fifty years for an idea to get through

the city board of education. If you'd split up the city you'd get some dreaming: Lots of people would have ideas and a way of getting them heard and the schools would be richer for it."

The idea of decentralization is gradually gaining support in Chicago, Baltimore, and Buffalo, where school superintendents are delegating greater authority to the administrators responsible for particular areas of the city. But only in the Bronx has the urban citizen really been offered a chance to assume some of the responsibility himself.

It stands to reason that if people can get good schools just across the city line, they can do the same within that line, if only they are given the chance. Paul Mort and the people who have taken part in the Bronx Park Community think they have shown the way.

All the Blacksmiths You Want For Twenty Bucks a Thousand

GENE R. KEARNEY

A JUNIOR from Cornell approached Herbert Odza, chairman of the board of Dunhill International Lists, Inc., one day last year with a complicated problem. His mother and father had taken a trip around the world two years earlier and had sent him a pure-white Arabian pony worth five thousand dollars. His

pony to finance the rest of his education. He wanted the full amount, and had come to Dunhill's in New York City on recommendation of the Duncan Hines office in Ithaca, a regular client of Dunhill's.

Since the market for pure-white five-thousand-dollar Arabian ponies is somewhat limited, Odza suggested the young man try a direct mailing to that year's crop of debutantes. He called Stuart Whitmarsh, publisher of the *Debutante Register*, explained the situation, and got an advance roster of the girls who would be coming out that season. Calling in a make-up man, Odza and the student designed a two-page folder including a photograph of the pony. The list cost the boy twenty dollars, and he departed for Ithaca with Odza's best wishes in this long-shot venture. Two weeks later he was back in town, insisting on taking Odza out to lunch. He produced a check for one thousand dollars, a deposit on the full five-



father had died recently, and, to the shock of the son and his mother, his estate was found to be insolvent. The boy had to sell the Arabian