

David A. Gamson

*The Importance of Being Urban: Designing the Progressive School District, 1890–1940*

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When discussing school reform in the United States, historians of education tend to focus on cities. It was in urban environments that social problems pushed schooling to scale and called forth new forms of organization and governance. The interpretive challenge is how to generalize these changes without sacrificing the particularity of local context. It is easy, on one hand, to present interlocking reforms in terms of David Tyack's "one best system" and to offer Chicago or New York as stand-ins for the rest of the country; or, on the other hand, to emphasize the unique characteristics of outliers like Gary, Indiana, or Quincy, Massachusetts. It is more difficult to present national coherence and local variety at the same time. One way to do so has been through comparative, regional studies of smaller cities. For example, William Reese's *Power and the Promise of School Reform* (1986) looks at grassroots politics in a string of Midwestern cities, from Rochester to Milwaukee. Arthur Zilversmit's *Changing Schools* (1993) examines the adoption of child-centered curriculum in Chicago's North Shore suburbs. Now, in his thoughtful and thorough new book, *The Importance of Being Urban*, David Gamson takes us west of the Mississippi, examining school district administration in Oakland, Denver, Portland, and Seattle. The change of scenery is welcome, and it allows Gamson to make interesting arguments about the political dynamics of the Northwest, the role of education in municipal growth and economic development, and the development of regional professional networks. In the decades since classic studies of Progressive Era education appeared, urban historians have greatly expanded our understanding of racial and economic inequality as a spatial phenomenon—through zoning, redlining, restrictive covenants, and attendance zones—and while these are not the primary focus of Gamson's analysis, it is nice to see him incorporate them simply as a matter of course.

Most appealing to Gamson is the way that the belated creation and rapid growth of Western school districts created opportunities for sweeping reorganization. In each of the cities he studies, administrators solicited organizational surveys by Stanford professor Ellwood Cubberley, a nationally recognized expert on school reform, who responded with prescriptions for system-wide changes. These surveys were hardly neutral inquiries. They became a tool for experts to impose preferred reforms on resistant school boards, the era's equivalent of push-polling. But they also provide Gamson with a convenient framing device—indeed, something like a natural experiment. Confronted with the same problems of efficiency, quality, and scale, and presented with essentially the same advice at the same time, how did local officials choose to modernize their schools?

Gamson examines a number of issues in each city—most importantly, curricular differentiation and intelligence testing, but also broader questions of "leadership, organizational structure, democratic governance, citizen participation, integrity, and

privilege" (259). In each of these areas, Gamson points out that historians' traditional distinctions between administrative and child-centered reforms tend to break down, as do catchwords like "efficiency" and "democracy." If "district practices rarely conformed to the labels scholars have traditionally attached to various progressive ideologies, interest groups, and philosophies" (3), he writes, it is because administrators confronted the complications of operating actual school systems (255). Establishing their legitimacy with diverse interest groups required constant experimentation and compromise, not philosophical consistency. Instead, "district progressives often took the more-traveled road of adopting reforms that were tangible, digestible, and easily diagrammed, graphed, or charted" (258), a fact borne out by the organizational charts that accompany each chapter.

Critical readers might concede that national debates get more complicated when applied locally, but nevertheless insist that they remain important as interpretive guideposts. What makes Gamson's work so rich is that local variations do not devolve into mere particularism or rudderless pragmatism. He presents board members and superintendents making fairly sophisticated claims about how poverty affected students' academic performance, for example, and the ways in which curricular differentiation did or did not meet the needs of local children or satisfy the interests of local voters. Moreover, he draws these districts into the heart of national debates, with cameo appearances by William C. Bagley, Lewis Terman, Edward L. Thorndike, and others. Acknowledging the intelligence and sensitivity of local officials hardly absolves them from the inequalities that persisted in the public schools, but it certainly gives a better sense of the contingency underlying their choices. Extended across four cities, Gamson's work dispels the air of inevitability that too often accompanies discussions of educational modernization, opening the possibility of different categories and interpretive approaches in the future. If *The Importance of Being Urban* is in many ways grounded in old-fashioned approaches to the Progressive Era, it is this element that offers readers something strikingly new.

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