

# Testing, Tracking, and Toeing the Line

A role play on the origins of the modern high school

By *BILL BIGELOW*

WHAT WE DON'T TEACH IN SCHOOL can be more important than what we do teach. When we fail to engage students in thinking critically about their own schooling, the hidden message is: Don't analyze the institutions that shape your lives; don't ask who benefits, who suffers, and how it got to be this way; just shut up and do as you're told.

Several years ago, my wife and teaching partner, Linda Christensen, and I began teaching a unit on the history and sociology of

schooling. In the unit, our 11th-grade students at Jefferson High School in Portland, Ore., wrote and shared stories about their own school lives—both good learning experiences as well as times they encountered unfairness or abuse. We invited students to probe the hidden curricula in their own classes, including ours, asking them to reflect on what they were learning about authority, bosses, and democracy; solidarity and resistance, people's capacity to stand up for themselves and each other; knowledge, what



*U.S. Army recruits taking an IQ test at Ft. Lee in November 1917. These tests were employed in the military before being used in American schools.*

Time & Life Pictures/Getty Images

kind is valued and where it comes from; and self-respect. Our class traveled to a high school in a wealthy Portland suburb to compare the hidden curriculum there with that at Jefferson, a school serving a predominantly working-class, African American community.

## Roots of Modern Schooling

To explore some of the historical roots of the modern high school, I wrote a role play that I hoped would allow students to question aspects of schooling they often take for granted, such as tracking (“ability grouping”), standardized testing, guidance counseling, student government, the flag salute, bells, required courses with patriotic themes, and extracurricular activities like athletics and the school newspaper. These now commonplace components of high school life were introduced in the early years of the 20th century, a time of growing union militancy and radicalism, and large-scale immigration from southern and eastern Europe, accompanied by vastly increased high school enrollment.

Underlying the new reforms was a consensus among leading educators that social class stratification was here to stay, and that high schools should abandon a single academic curriculum for all students. Charles Eliot of Harvard, for example, argued that classes were “eternal,” with an elite “guiding class” at the top and on the bottom, a “thick fundamental layer engaged in household work, agriculture, mining, quarrying, and forest work.” Schools, the educational establishment concluded, must be “realistic” and train children for specific roles in the social hierarchy. Intelligence testing would allegedly ensure students’ accurate placement in differentiated curricular tracks. Simultaneously, as one school board president complained, “Many educators have failed to face the big problem of teaching patriotism. . . . We need to teach American children about American heroes and American ideals.”

Instead of just lecturing about the profound changes in schools occurring in the early years of the century, I wanted students to encounter them as if they were members of different social classes and ethnic groups, learning of proposed reforms for the first time. Through argument and negotiation, students-as-different-social-groups would need to decide whether they supported the then-new reforms in public education.

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In the activity, I portray a gung-ho superintendent, newly arrived in “Central City,” determined to modernize—i.e., stratify and “Americanize”—the curriculum. Each student portrays an individual in one of five social groups: corporate executives, members of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), middle-class people, Hungarian immigrants, and black activists. Everyone is posed a series of questions about their views on

schooling and is invited to advise the superintendent at a community meeting. In preparation, each group has a chance to consult and build alliances with any of the others. Through participating in the role play I hoped students might see firsthand that the school reforms were not simply benign, value-free changes, but were deeply political, benefiting some people at the expense of others. (For more on this activity, see the section “An Explicit Critique of Tracking” in “Getting Off the Track: Stories from an Untracked Classroom,” in the Rethinking Schools book, *Rethinking Our Classrooms: Teaching for Equity and Justice*, Vol. 1.) [<http://www.rethinkingschools.org/publication/roc1/roc1.shtml>]

## Materials Needed

Enough for all students: copies of “Superintendent’s Statement,” “School Reform Meeting Questions,” and “Mental Ability Test.” Enough role sheets so that each student has a role (pp. 6–13).

## Suggested Procedure

(Also see “Suggestions for a Successful Role Play,” in *Rethinking Our Classrooms*, Vol. 1.) [<http://www.rethinkingschools.org/publication/roc1/roc1.shtml>]

1. Write on the board: “Place: Central City, U.S.A.; Time: Early 1920s.” Also list the names of the five social groups. (Note: “Central City” represents numerous Midwestern and Eastern U.S. cities; I set the role play in the early 1920s because this is when standardized testing took off, but the social and educational trends described in the role play began earlier, in the beginning years of the 20th century.)
2. Divide the class into five groups, of roughly equal numbers. Distribute a different role sheet to students in each of the groups: i.e., all the members of one group portray Hungarian immigrants, etc. Ask students to read these carefully, and, in their role, to think about the kind of schooling they want for their children. Encourage them to mark important sections. After they’ve finished reading, you might ask them to write a brief interior monologue—their inner thoughts—on what kind of education they hope for their children; or they might write on their fears. Afterwards ask them to read these to others in their group. The goal here is simply to prompt students to internalize the information in their role sheets, and to encourage them to imagine these individuals as real people. Ask students to make placards or name cards indicating their social group.
3. Tell students that Central City has hired a new superintendent who is proposing a series of reforms in Central City high schools. To each student, hand out the “Superintendent’s Statement” and the “School Reform Meeting Questions.” As mentioned, the teacher plays the superintendent. Before my “speech,” I generally ask a student to introduce me as Superintendent Quincy P. Aldrich or another similarly aristocratic sounding name. I read the statement aloud, with a



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*Italian immigrant children having a geography lesson in 1920.*

good dose of pomp, stopping along the way to emphasize a point and to make sure students understand each proposed reform. (Note that the four tracks—feeble-minded, dull, etc.—come from a quote by Lewis Terman of Stanford, who suggested that these categories of students would never change. I tell students that if they don’t like those designations, perhaps they’d prefer the tracks suggested by Professor George Strayer of Teachers College: bright, slow, backward, and deficient. Clearly, I am hoping to provoke students by using these terms. For public consumption, the educational elite preferred designations such as college, general, commercial, and vocational.) I assure the gathering that all tracking will be based on scientific evidence and I have a sample test to prove it. Students always want to see the test, so at this point I distribute the “Mental Ability Test,” (developed by Lewis Terman, p. 6). “What does knowing the color of emeralds have to do with your intelligence?” an inquiring immigrant or black activist might ask. I encourage students’ critical questions, but don’t respond to them all as I want to conserve their defiant energy for the community meeting. After the superintendent’s proposal on guidance counseling, I emphasize that this is especially important considering the increased number

of females in school these days: “Why, suppose a girl were to score high on a science test. It would be senseless to place her in a chemistry class. There are few if any female chemists in the country. It would be more sound to place her in an advanced domestic science course, which will help prepare her for the actual challenges she’ll face in her life.” After my presentation, I tell people that I don’t want to argue about the reforms I’ve proposed, that right now all I want are questions about my speech, and later, in the community meeting, they’ll have a chance to argue all they want. Generally, students in several of the groups will pay no attention to this plea and will argue anyway. Again, at this stage it’s good to get their critical juices flowing, but not to exhaust their arguments.

4. In preparation for the community meeting, in their small groups,

students should discuss the “School Reform Meeting Questions” and, at least tentatively, decide what they think. These opinions may change based on their negotiations with other groups.

5. After they’ve had a while, probably 15 minutes or so, to discuss the questions, I say something like:

“Choose half your group to be ‘traveling negotiators.’ These people will meet with individuals in other groups to discuss the questions. This is your chance to find people who agree with you about the superintendent’s reforms, or to convince others. Remember, there is power in numbers; the more united you are in the community meeting, the more likely it is that the superintendent will be convinced—or forced—to agree with you. One rule: travelers can’t meet with other travelers, otherwise people left sitting in their groups will be left out.”

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6. This is the part I enjoy the most. As students dart around the classroom arguing points and finding allies, I listen in (as teacher, not superintendent), sometimes prodding people to meet with other groups or raising points they may not have considered. There is no “correct” amount of time to give this phase, but I don’t want students’ enthusiasm to wane, so I call a halt before they’re talked out, perhaps 20 minutes or so.

7. Students should return to their small groups to prepare a presentation, however informal, on the various questions. I ask each group to choose a member to write on the board their response to question 1, on the purpose of schooling.

8. I seat the entire class in a circle (people should remain seated with their social group, each indicated with a placard) and begin the

meeting by asking each group to respond to the question on the purpose of schooling. Again, there is no right and wrong way to run the meeting. The aim is to encourage the most spirited and democratic participation possible. As superintendent, I’m able to provoke people, point out contradictions, and raise questions. By the way, sometime during the community meeting I remind them that this is only an advisory meeting, that there

is a school board, elected citywide, to decide educational policy. I’m just seeking “input.” We wouldn’t want to give students the false impression that all social groups affected by school reform actually had any say-so.

9. After the meeting, it’s important that students have a way to distance themselves from their roles so the debriefing discussion is not simply a continuation of the community meeting. Sometimes I ask students to write about who they think “won” in real life, and to think about how things work in our high school today, to get clues on whose vision of



schooling prevailed. Students might write a critique of the superintendent's position or of the position of one of the groups, including their own. Alternatively, they might remain in character to write an interior monologue on how they feel about their child's future in Central City Schools. Afterwards they might read these to the class.

10. Discussion questions include:

- Who do you think “won” in real life?
- Which of the reforms do you think were adopted in U.S. schools?
- If a majority of the groups opposed the superintendent's plan: If most of you opposed the reforms, why were they put into effect? What power did the different social groups have? What power didn't they have?
- Which of the alliances you built might not have happened in real life? Why not?
- Which of the superintendent's proposals do you see in our school today?
- Draw students' attention to the five purposes of schooling that a member of each group wrote on the board: Which of these do you personally find most appealing? Why?
- Which of these seems closest to the kind of schooling you've had? Which of these do you think guides the way our school is set up today?
- What did the “intelligence test” measure? What didn't it measure?

If you haven't already done so, it might be valuable to have students write about their personal experiences with standardized testing and/or tracking. ■

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## Useful Background Materials

Some background materials I've found useful include:

Paul Davis Chapman, *Schools as Sorters*, New York University Press, 1988 (especially Chapter 5, “The Use of Intelligence Tests in Schools: California Case Studies”).

David Tyack, *The One Best System: A History of American Urban Education*, Harvard University Press, 1974.

Joel Spring, *The American School, 1642-1985*, Longman, 1986 (especially Chapter 7, “Education and Human Capital”).

Robert S. Lynd and Helen M. Lynd, *Middletown*, Harcourt, Brace, 1929 (especially part II: “Training the Young”).

Jeannie Oakes, *Keeping Track: How Schools Structure Inequality*, Yale University Press, 2005 (Chapter 2, “Unlocking the Tradition”).

Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis, *Schooling in Capitalist America*, Basic Books, 1976, (Chapters 5 and 6, “The Origins of Mass Public Education” and “Corporate Capital and Progressive Education”).

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# Mental Ability Test

## Stanford University Test 1 Information

Draw a line under the ONE word that makes the sentence true, as shown in the sample.

Sample:

Our first president was:                      Adams                      Jefferson                      Lincoln                      Washington

- |                                     |          |               |             |          |
|-------------------------------------|----------|---------------|-------------|----------|
| 1. Coffee is a kind of              | bark     | berry         | leaf        | root     |
| 2. Sirloin is a cut of              | beef     | mutton        | pork        | veal     |
| 3. Gasoline comes from              | grains   | petroleum     | turpentine  | seeds    |
| 4. Most exports go from             | Boston   | San Francisco | New Orleans | New York |
| 5. The number of pounds in a ton is | 1000     | 2000          | 3000        | 4000     |
| 6. Napoleon was defeated at         | Leipzig  | Paris         | Verdun      | Waterloo |
| 7. Emeralds are usually             | blue     | green         | red         | yellow   |
| 8. The optic nerve is for           | seeing   | hearing       | tasting     | feeling  |
| 9. Larceny is a term used in        | medicine | theology      | law         | pedagogy |
| 10. Sponges come from               | animals  | farms         | forests     | mines    |

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# Superintendent's Statement on Reforming the High Schools

I'VE INHERITED a 19th-century school district in a 20th-century city. It's time for some changes. The following proposals are based on reforms that are sweeping the nation, reforms developed by the finest universities. Up until now we've run pretty much on the "common school" system. We've assumed that all students are the same, that all should be trained to be President of the United States. Well, my friends, not all our students are going to be President. In 1890, when fewer than 10 percent of 14- to 17-year-olds were in high school, this probably made sense. But by 1920 over a third of all teenagers were in high school, and not all these kids are well-served by such a difficult academic curriculum. Nor is our society as a whole well-served by such a system. As the revered Stanford educator Lewis Terman reminds us, we have both "gifted and defective" children in school and they need to be taught differently. It's too bad, but as Ellwood Cubberley, Dean of Education at Stanford points out, in our schools we have "many children of the foreign-born who have no aptitude for book learning, and many children of inferior mental qualities who do not profit by ordinary classroom procedure."

Therefore, I propose segregating students into four tracks, each with a different curriculum: Track #1: **Feeble-minded**; Track #2: **Dull**; Track #3: **Average**; and Track #4: **Superior**. This will allow us to adapt a given course of study to

students' individual needs. As suggested by one California school administrator, the lower tracks will naturally train students for "definite hand occupations as opposed to brain occupations."

There will be no guesswork in placing students in different tracks. They will be placed scientifically, on the basis of test scores. A system of guidance counseling will assist students in the interpretation of test scores, and to help them plan a personally rewarding and socially useful occupation.

Lots of the people entering Central City schools are immigrants. These immigrants are worrisome for a number of reasons. Instead of identifying themselves as Americans, they see themselves as Hungarians or Italians. Some of them identify with the working class against the owners, or even with radicals, people who want to overthrow our form of government. In order to ensure that all children become loyal Americans I'm proposing the following: To encourage students to learn about democracy, all schools will have student councils, and every day all students will pledge allegiance to the flag. In all classes we will teach that our system of government is the best in the world. Through clubs, athletics, school assemblies, school newspapers, and the like, we will encourage students to identify not with their social class or radical group, but with their school. We will teach them to be patriotic to their country and patriotic to their school.

# School Reform Meeting Questions

Be prepared to explain the following in your presentation at the school reform community meeting.

1. In one or two sentences, describe what you see as the purpose(s) of schooling.
2. Do you support the superintendent's plan for "tracking?" Why or why not? If you don't support the plan, how do you propose to deal with the variety of social backgrounds and skill levels in Central City high schools?
3. Do you support the superintendent's plan for increased testing and guidance counseling? Why or why not?
4. Do you support the superintendent's curricular and extracurricular proposals? Why or why not? Do you have any other suggestions?



# Corporate Executive

YOU ARE AN EXECUTIVE with a large and prosperous corporation. There are a lot of problems in the country, problems that pose serious challenges to public education. In your eyes, the schools have not been meeting these challenges very successfully. For example, before 1900, fewer than one out of every 10 kids between the ages of 14 and 17 was enrolled in high school. This is a real problem because people not in school become juvenile delinquents, turn to crime, or worse, join radical groups like the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW). And besides, there simply aren't enough jobs to go around for everyone who wants one.

Also, lots of those entering schools are immigrants. They don't speak much English and haven't learned anything of what it means to be an American. Instead of identifying themselves as Americans, these immigrants see themselves as Hungarians or Italians. Some identify with the working class against the owners, or even see themselves as radicals. In Lawrence, Mass., in 1912, a massive strike involving 30,000 workers—teenagers, men, women, almost all immigrants—led by IWW radicals, defeated the mill owners. In 1919, workers in Seattle staged the first citywide strike in U.S. history, and there were huge strikes in the steel, coal, and meatpacking industries. What is this country coming to? You need to make sure that the children of immigrants identify themselves as loyal, responsible Americans—and

that they don't identify with one social class against another.

Besides all the immigrants arriving in Central City, there are lots of people leaving the farms to come to the city. These immigrants and farmers aren't used to the factory ways of the city. They aren't used to being prompt, working by the clock, doing repetitive work, obeying orders from a boss, etc.—all skills and attitudes needed to succeed as a factory worker. Their children are not ready to meet the challenges of modern life. You want the schools to turn out good factory workers—but also serve the needs of your children, who are certainly not going to be factory workers. Up until now, the high schools in Central City have been “common schools” with one curriculum for all students. With few exceptions, everyone took the same subjects in the same classes: boys with girls, bright kids with dull kids. The problem is that in earlier times, very few people went to school, so if you had a high school diploma, it meant something—you could get a good job in the business world. These students tended to be from upper-class or middle-class families. But now, with all these farm kids and immigrants entering the schools, there's no way that all of them are going to get these high-paying jobs. You need to figure out a way for the school system to train the future bankers as well as the future factory hands in the same classrooms—or at least in the same schools.

# Hungarian Immigrant

LET’S GET ONE THING STRAIGHT: You didn’t move to the United States to take anybody’s job. At the turn of the century conditions were tremendously difficult in Hungary. You owned a little plot of land, but when wealthy farmers began buying machinery to harvest their crops, you simply couldn’t compete. You could either starve or move. When labor contractors began showing up, they promised good jobs and high wages if you would travel to the United States—a real land of milk and honey. The traveling conditions in Europe, on the ship coming over, and within the United States were difficult beyond belief. But finally you arrived in Central City, home of Miller and Jones, a giant manufacturer of railroad cars. Instead of milk and honey you found grease and grime.

Even though in Hungary you were a skilled farmer, here you were called “unskilled labor.” Your pay was low, but at least work was steady—for a while. But then you realized that you were guaranteed nothing. Often you’d work only six months out of the year and be laid off the rest of the time. Needless to say, during these periods there were no unemployment benefits. As an unskilled worker you had no security. At times your friends would not be hired back by Miller

and Jones; younger, stronger workers would be hired to take their places. With no formal education, no access to additional training, and no big bank account, you have little hope of escaping this life of poverty.

There may be little hope for you, but there is hope for your children. In America, education is free. You’ve been told that a high school diploma guarantees a young person a decent job. Just because you are an unskilled laborer doesn’t mean that your children will suffer the same fate. They might be teachers, clerks, shopkeepers, or even doctors or lawyers. That’s why you will sacrifice anything to send your children to school. They will be in the same classes with the sons and daughters of bankers and businessmen, architects and artists. They will read the same books, write the same essays, and solve the same equations. In school, rich and poor will mean nothing. Your children are smart. There will be no limit to what they can accomplish. You want them to learn to be Americans, but you are proud of your Hungarian culture and also want them to value that heritage. Your children learn quickly and already speak two languages. You have absolute confidence they will be able to thrive in high school and go on to get good jobs

# Black Activist

YOU ARE A BLACK ACTIVIST in Central City. Over the years you've worked with a number of organizations to promote civil rights and independence for black people. Sometimes you've worked with groups that make alliances with whites, other times you've worked with black-only organizations. You join with whomever you see as capable of effectively fighting racism in Central City and the country as a whole. For years there weren't many black people in Central City. Most blacks came north during World War I. Conditions were horrible in Mississippi. Your family worked as sharecroppers there, growing cotton and a few vegetables. It seemed like you were always in debt to the white landlord. Everything you had to buy was expensive; but they paid you next to nothing for the crops you raised. Anyone who protested would be beaten or even killed. Blacks were denied the right to vote and the kids went to crummy schools.

When people heard there were jobs up north, practically your whole county emptied out overnight. But conditions in Central City have become increasingly difficult since the war. Perhaps the biggest problem is job discrimination. Employers hire blacks in only the most dangerous, worst-paid and dead-end jobs. Even when you have the skills and education that qualify you for good jobs, the jobs still go to white people. The Ku Klux Klan is strong in Central City. They want to make sure that blacks stay poor and powerless and don't get too "uppity" and start demanding good jobs, better housing, and decent schools. You are especially concerned about the education of black children. While schools are not formally

segregated in Central City, you know that black children are discriminated against. One recent study found that 50 percent of black girls in Central City schools were classified as "retarded" and put in "special classes," whereas only 4 percent of native-born whites were classified this way. For this you blame racist administrators and teachers.

Many school officials say that they want to teach children the skills they will need in "real life." They assume blacks will continue to be janitors and maids and so want to teach you to be good—and happy—janitors and maids. But you want your children to get a good academic education so they can become anything they set their minds to.

However, some people complain that this kind of education will only make black children resentful. As one judge warned recently, education should not put "fool ideas of rising and equality into [black] folks' heads, and [make] them discontent and unhappy." In your view, in an unjust society, education *should* make young people discontented. It should fill their heads with dreams of equality and give them the tools—reading, writing, knowledge of their history—that will allow them to make their dreams real. You hope that the more education children have, the unhappier they will be with the racism in Central City and the larger society. A good education should help give children the skills to organize for a better, more just, society. What you want from the superintendent of schools in Central City, and the school system as a whole, is a commitment to fight racism.

# IWW Member

YOU LIVE IN CENTRAL CITY, USA, and are a member of the Industrial Workers of the World, the IWW, a radical labor union. You're concerned about school because you care about children, but also because you see schools as a place where people learn about what is expected of them by society. You see changing the schools as part of a larger movement for changing the whole society. Much is now different in America. The society is more and more divided between rich factory owners and workers who own nothing but their own ability to labor. As far as you in the IWW are concerned, the problems of working people will only begin to be solved when workers take over all the workplaces and run them together for the benefit of the whole society—not just for the private profit of the owners. As long as owners run industry for their own profit, there will be continual conflict between them and the workers they control. You believe that all wealth is produced by the workers, so all wealth should be controlled by the workers—what do owners produce?

Thus, the goal of the IWW is not only for higher wages or shorter hours, but to change the whole society. Workplaces and all of society should be run by the people who produce, the

people who do the work. And schools should help people learn the skills to run the whole society. In the IWW you don't believe in the idea of "follow the leader." Your goal is for every worker in the country to be a "leader." Recently, you read a speech by Eugene Debs, an IWW founder. Debs summed up the IWW belief:

*The average working [person] imagines that he must have a leader to look to; a guide to follow, right or wrong. ... You have depended too much on that leader and not enough on yourself. I don't want you to follow me. I want you to cultivate self-reliance. If I have the slightest capacity for leadership I can only give evidence of it by "leading" you to rely on yourselves.*

That's what democracy is all about as far as you're concerned: everyone a leader, a thinker, a participant—regardless of race, sex, or class background. And that's what schools should promote for all the students, not just the ones from rich families. Schools should model a truly democratic, classless society.

# Middle-class Person

YOU CONSIDER YOURSELF “MIDDLE-CLASS”—maybe upper-middle-class. You manage a small variety “five and dime” store; your father was a clerk for a large machine shop in town. The changes going on in Central City make you nervous—not so much for yourself, but for your children. When you were young, the common wisdom was that if you went to high school and you graduated, you were guaranteed a good, solid middle-class or business job. You might become a clerk or a factory superintendent, or go on to college to become a lawyer or a doctor. The ticket was high school graduation, and for the most part only the upper and middle classes went to high school.

But now everything is changing. In the last 20 years or so, the population of Central City has tripled. Quite a number of people are coming into town off the farms, but most of the newcomers are immigrants from overseas. These people, many of whom can’t even speak English, think that in America the streets are lined with gold. The problem is that the immigrants think that the way to get some of that good American gold is to send their kids to high school. Why is this a problem? Because there aren’t enough good jobs to go around. A university did a survey recently. They asked high school kids what they wanted to

be when they grew up. Just over 90 percent wanted to be some kind of professional person, clerk, or business person; only 4 percent wanted to work in a factory. But in the real world, only about 18 percent of the jobs are those kind of decent middle-class jobs. Over 60 percent are factory jobs or farmwork of some kind.

You hate to think of yourself as selfish, but these statistics mean that there are going to be lots of people competing for the jobs that should belong to your children. You know that in a fair competition, your child would succeed. But what is happening now is that all these immigrant kids and farm kids who can barely read or write are crowding into the same classes. Soon, a high school diploma won’t be worth anything. You want your child to read classic literature, take mathematics, write essays and research papers, learn the history of this great country, and master the workings of our form of government. But all these slow learners are going to hold everyone back. And they are also disruptive, many of them juvenile delinquents. The world is a different place. Today, good jobs require more education. You might even have to send your children to college. But what if they’ve had an inferior high school education because of all these rowdy newcomers?