THE MAN NOBODY LIKED: TOWARD A SOCIAL HISTORY OF THE TRUANT OFFICER, 1840-1940

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POPULAR STEREOTYPES OF TRUANT OFFICERS HAVE HARDLY BEEN flattering. In 1880 a writer in *Harper's Magazine* expressed a common view: the purpose of the "attendance agent . . . is to let loose upon truant scholars and nonattendants the legal 'dogs of war,' and woe be to the hapless urchin who becomes the object of his terrible eye. Petitions, complaints, warrants, and commitments are hurled at his devoted head, until he is thrust headlong into the Attendance School—a sort of earthly purgatory." In 1918 the supervisor of attendance in Milwaukee complained that his department was "the Cinderella of the school system—does most of the unpleasant work, has no appreciation from anybody, only criticism if something goes wrong. Most people today, when a truancy or attendance officer is mentioned, have only the idea that he is a baby-catcher or children's scare; his main occupation is to drag the hookey-player, delictum horribili, to school by force." The commonest image of the truant officer was that of decrepit tyrant, an "archaic 'hookey-cop' with his bogey-man whiskers and a big tin badge on his breast" or an "asthmatic, broken-down police officer whose arches no longer support him on a beat." Half fearsome, half ridiculous, he was the butt of cartoons and jokes (see Plate 1). Edgar Bergen had Charlie McCarthy call the truant officer "old ramshackle—a talent scout for the reform school."[1]

[1] F. E. Fryatt, "Compulsory Education in Brooklyn," *Harper's Magazine* (Jan. 1880), 218–27; H. R. Pestalozzi to Mary Bradford, Jan. 3, 1918, Archives of the Milwaukee Public Schools; William L. Bodine, "The Pace Progressive in Attendance Standards," National League of Compulsory Education Officials, *Proceedings, 1939,* 69 (hereafter cited as NLCEO, *Proceedings*); NLCEO, *Proceedings, 1938,* 104.

Plate 1: Truant Officer Captures Boy. Illustrations originally appeared in *Harper's Magazine,* 60 (Jan. 1880).

Indeed, the truant officer's lot was not a happy one. During the nineteenth century, in particular, a large percentage of Americans were ambivalent about compulsory schooling laws. Some parents openly resisted enforcement of them, saying that it was no business of the state to meddle in family decisions; one father angrily said to a truant officer in Connecti-

cut that he could not "immagane What Sort of person you would be to hold down an Worthless Position for what there is in it. and I only regret that I have to Pay taxes to keep such People that are of no use Whatever." Many citizens regarded footloose truants as harmless Huck Finns. When attendance officers enforced child labor laws, parents often resented the loss of their children's income, employers lost cheap labor, and many of the children themselves had no desire to return to school. One factory inspector in Chicago found that 412 of 500 children she interviewed would rather have worked in the factory than gone to school.[2]

Even when public opinion began to swing in the early twentieth century towards approval of compulsory education, and when enforcement of the laws became more efficient, the truant officer was often the low man on the totem pole of "child helpers." He was the man in the middle, often perceived as a bungler in the tangled web of human relationships in home, school, courts, welfare agencies, and workplaces. In turn, every day he saw the shoddy side of society and became the keeper of its dark secrets. He tended to regard parents of truants as incompetent, intemperate, ignorant, or cruel; they were likely to see him as an invader of their own prerogatives and an officious questioner (though sometimes they welcomed his assistance in controlling their "wayward" offspring). He had more opportunity than most to learn the faults of the teachers and the boredom and rejection children experienced in classrooms ("when the garbage cans and dumps are more attractive than school there is something wrong with the school," wrote one); but teachers frequently resented the person who returned rebels to their overcrowded classes. Truant officers often complained that "sentimental" judges would refuse to commit confirmed truants; many magistrates did not consider truancy a real crime and loathed sending nonattenders to reform schools where boys would associate with hardened delinquents. Social workers spoke condescendingly of the primitive methods of the truant officers, yet the latter often had several thousand pupils to police and had no time for the careful "social case work" that was social work's professional hallmark. Finally, employers and truant officers sometimes came into conflict over illegally employed children, but when truant officers tried to place young school leavers in jobs, employers feared that they were trying to palm off delinquents as workers in their firms.[3]

[2] *Connecticut School Report, 1900,* 84; Helen Todd, "Why Children Work: The Children's Answer," *McClure's Magazine* (Apr. 1913), 73–78; Jean M. Gordon, "Why the Children Are in the Factory," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science,* 32 (July 1908), Supplement, 67–71.

[3] "The Trials of the Truant Officer," *The American Child,* 6, No. 7 (July 1924), 12; NLCEO, *Proceedings, 1931,* 73.

Much of the difficulty of the job and the conflicts it entailed stemmed from the fact that truant officers dealt largely with the young casualties, the rejects, and the rebels of the larger society. Study after study showed that truants were overwhelmingly poor; apt to be sick or afflicted with emotional or mental handicaps; disproportionately from broken homes; and very frequently from cultural backgrounds different from the mainstream values honored in schools. In short, much of the environment that helped to produce truancy was effectively beyond the control of both the truant officers and their "clients," yet few attendance officers suggested any basic structural changes in society.

Concerned about their image and the everyday stresses of the job, truant officers were examples of that class of workers whom Michael Lipsky calls "street-level bureaucrats," people like police or welfare investigators who are "called upon to interact constantly with citizens" in their work, have some latitude in how to perform their job, and have high "potential impact on citizens" they encounter. People feel stress in such occupations, says Lipsky, because resources for their work are often skimpy, clients challenge or even threaten them, and "expectations about job performance are ambiguous and/or contradictory, including an unattainable idealized dimension."[4]

The efforts of attendance officers to improve their own image and status and to help their "clients" were closely intertwined. As in other discredited occupations, workers tried a variety of ways to upgrade themselves in public estimation. One was to blur the boundaries of the job and to link it at least rhetorically with other, more prestigious occupations in an effort to gain status by association. Truant officers sought to escape the decrepit policeman image by comparing their work with that of ministers, social workers, salesmen, school administrators, psychologists, and a number of other groups. They also redefined the clients: instead of being "evil-minded, vicious, and idle," truants became maladjusted unfortunates, people whom expertise and compassion could rescue from the effects of improper environment. They were fascinated with new names for their work and tried out euphemistic labels. The Pennsylvania "State Department of

[4] Brother Paul Kamerdze, "A Study of the Major Sociological Aspects of Truancy Within Selected Census Tracts of Washington, D. C.," Diss. Catholic University of America 1955; Edith Abbott and Sophonisba Breckinridge, *Truancy and Non-Attendance in Chicago Schools* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1917); NLCEO, *Proceedings, 1939,* 50–55; *Proceedings, 1936,* 58–59, 64–67; Richard Watson Cooper and Herman Cooper, *The One Teacher School in Delaware: A Study in Attendance* (Newark, Del.: Univ of Delaware Press, 1925); Michael Lipsky, "Toward a Theory of Street-Level Bureaucracy," in Michael Kirst, ed., *State, School and Politics* (Lexington, Mass.: Lexington Books, 1972), 206–07.

Compulsory Attendance," for example, was changed to the "Bureau of Child Helping and Child Accounting." Some sought the familiar bureaucratic refuge of "just following the rules" and thereby avoided a personal sense of blame or responsibility. A few attendance officers of authoritarian bent gloried in the *power* that the state delegated to them and asked for more; not content with the ability to enumerate children through the school census and to arrest nonconformists, one state director of "child accounting" argued that *everyone* should be fingerprinted and compelled to register with the authorities whenever he or she moved (this could work well, he said, "but for our boasted liberty which we guard so jealously, but which the lawless take unfair advantage of"). Some attendance officers urged their colleagues to use aggressive salesmanship and public relations gimmicks like posters and radio broadcasts. A number of urban attendance officers tried to improve the job by changing the work routines themselves and by constructing bureaucratic hierarchies; instead of being the man of hard heart and stout limb who spent the day snaffling up truants in pool halls or back alleys, he might instead sit behind a desk and become the record keeper and supervisor, the coordinator of agencies of child welfare.[5]

As part of these efforts to recast the image and character of the job, truant officers emulated other groups seeking professional status by forming their own national organization in 1911. They called for collegiate training, tried to persuade states and districts to set standards for employment, and stressed their disinterested motivation. A school superintendent at the meeting of the National League of Compulsory Education Officials in 1923 summed up their aspirations: "a new profession is being born. . . . This profession is an occupation for which an individual renders a valuable service to a society which requires technical knowledge and special preparation." There continued to be a large gap between their aspirations and their popular stereotype, however.[6]

It was the elite of attendance officers—those active in the National League of Compulsory Education Officials, for example—who were most concerned with these elaborate attempts to raise the standing of their "profession." The vast majority of "hookey cops" probably just left the occupation if the job or the stereotype bothered them; the average tenure of truant officers was about four or five years. Only a small percentage of full-time officials had more than an elementary education in the 1920s or

[5] NLCEO, *Proceedings, 1923,* 8, 11; Arch O. Heck, *Administration of Pupil Personnel* (Boston: Ginn, 1929), 101. We are indebted to Martin Rein for suggestions about how workers deal with discreditation.

[6] NLCEO, *Proceedings, 1923,* 19.

more than a high school education in the 1930s. In small communities the typical truant-catcher worked part-time and the rest of the day served as school janitor, policeman, railway baggage man, or in a similar job. But gradually the changes advocated by leaders filtered down, and by the 1930s, when jobs were scarce, states began to set requirements that reflected the professional image desired by the career truant officers.[7]

The social history of attendance officers, then, reveals the bleak social landscape within which they worked as well as the attempt of a discredited group to improve its standing in a society increasingly dominated by complex organizations. In this essay we shall explore some of the contours of that landscape as well as the development of truant officers from individual hookey cops loosely attached to schools to a self-conscious occupational group that liked to think of itself as a corps of experts in child welfare who had a firm place in the bureaucratic structure of schools.

We say *explore* because the essay offers only a tentative periodization and examines diverse kinds of sources to discover what may be significant shifts in ideology and practice. Obviously changes came at different times in different places. As we see it, during the Victorian era the chief motivation for rounding up truants was fear of disorderly youth—people mucking around in public places, not in school, not at work, and beyond the control of their parents. In a number of places truancy was a crime in fact or in effect before schooling was compulsory. Communities thought of truant officers primarily as quasi-police who dealt with quasi-delinquents. Truant officers and other knowledgeable observers mostly explained truancy as the result of defects of character in parents and their offspring; fear and punishment were the appropriate remedies, at least for the hard core.

At the turn of the twentieth century, as part of the broader concern for child welfare during the Progressive Era, the conception of attendance work changed substantially. Reformers and school people tried earnestly to attract or push *all* children into school and created elaborate organizational machinery to do so. While echoes of the older Victorian moralism persisted, explanations of nonattendance during the Progressive Era focused on broad environmental factors like poverty, illness, and cultural differences. In the 1920s psychologists called attention to the characteristics of the individual truant. Social investigators produced numerous

[7] Frederick V. Bermejo, *The School Attendance Service in American Cities* (Menasha, Wisc.: George Banta, 1923), 40–61; Abbott and Breckinridge, *Truancy;* Charles L. Mosher, *Qualifications of Attendance Officers* (Albany: New York State Department of Education, 1932); Walter S. Deffenbaugh and Ward W. Keesecker, "Compulsory School Attendance Laws and Their Administration," U. S. Office of Education, *Bulletin,* No. 4 (1935).

studies of children out of school, experts in "child accounting" began to appear, functionally specialized and hierarchical attendance departments were created in cities, and a new ideology of truant work was generated. This ideology and practice came largely from social work, psychology, and new concepts of educational administration. By 1940 they were well established.[8]

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Prior to the nineteenth century the word "truant" was roughly synonymous with "rogue." The *Concise Oxford English Dictionary* defines a truant as "one who begs without justification; a sturdy beggar; a vagabond; an idle rogue or knave (often a mere term of abuse)." To the residents of Victorian American cities these connotations remained strong, for respectable people regarded truant "street arabs" as real or potential delinquents, emblems of the decay of parental authority. A Boston schoolmaster wrote the mayor that he was "exceedingly annoyed by a set of dirty, miserable, ragged boys, of wretched parents, who generally are about our streets and wharves." In a similar vein, an Illinois educator complained that near saloons, theaters, depots, and other infamous resorts were children with "expressions of premature shrewdness, bordering on villainy, totally foreign to the faces of well-cared-for childhood." The Ohio Commissioner of Common Schools said that "youthful idlers . . . should be gathered up and compelled to do something. If they learn nothing else, there will at least be this salutary lesson, that society is stronger than they, and, without injuring them, will use its strength to protect itself."[9]

Boston offers an early case study of how to deal with truants. Until 1850 the city treated truants in a makeshift way. In the 1830s and 1840s police officers sometimes served as part-time truant officers, picking up idle youth on the streets and transferring children of "incorrigible character" from the regular schools to the House of Reformation. One eager officer

[8] Heck, *Administration of Pupil Personnel,* and "A Study of Child-Accounting Records," The Ohio State Univ. Studies, *Bureau of Educational Research Monographs,* II No. 9 (Nov. 16, 1925); Arthur B. Moehlman, *Child Accounting* (Detroit: Friesma Brothers Press, 1924).

[9] John D. Philbrick, "Truancy and Compulsory Education," *Boston School Reports, 1861,* 207–74 (hereafter cited as *BSR*); Stanley K. Schultz, *The Culture Factory: Boston Public Schools, 1789–1860* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1973), 278–309; Michael Berkowitz, "An Act to Enforce the Educational Rights of Children," unpublished seminar paper, Stanford Univ. 1972, 14; *Ohio School Reports, 1878,* 63; for an excellent study of compulsion in Ohio and a general discussion of the animus towards truants, see R. William Rosenfeld, "Custodian of All the Children: The Evolution of the Universal Custodianship of Ohio's Children by Schools, 1803–1921," Diss. Case Western Reserve Univ. 1976.

undertook to lock up children without formal charges in order to frighten them, and if that failed he watched them until they committed "some trifling offense" and then arrested them. But in 1850—two years before school attendance was made compulsory for all children—the state legislature authorized Boston to pass an ordinance empowering courts to commit boys to reform school solely for habitual absence from school. The mayor appointed three truant officers in 1852 to enforce these regulations (not until 1873 did they become appointed and supervised by the school superintendent).[10]

It was clear that the truant officers' functions were primarily those of police; the "order boxes" in which teachers deposited notices of absent pupils, for example, were located in police stations. Their work, however, ran a wide gamut, for people looked on them as responsible for all kinds of juvenile problems. Hear one officer:

> In addition to looking after truants, much other business is required of me, a great deal of which belongs to the regular police force; but somehow, everybody seems to understand, that anything relating to children or schools belongs to the truant officer, and calls on him accordingly,—parents for shoes, clothes, or books for children; to get children into school, and to get them transferred; cases of theft in school, of assault out of school; people complaining of children annoying them out of school by throwing stones, calling names, ringing door-bells, &c. As everybody expects me to serve them, I do the best I can to do so.

This officer said that often parents of truants sent their children to sea, to the country, or to a Catholic refuge rather than have them committed to the feared House of Refuge on Deer Island, but in some court cases the parents testified as witnesses against their own children. Another truant-catcher complained that teachers were often obtuse, provoking the parents by threatening them with the law and then rejecting the child when he returned to class: "subsequently, when I meet the child in the schoolroom, and the teacher in the same threatening tone says, 'I wish you to send him off; I will not have him here,' &c., the child knows that there is no love there, to say the least; and the consequence is, the parent and the child are perfectly indifferent about the school."[11]

Held responsible for dealing with all kinds of children's misdemeanors, used as educational bogeymen by teachers, expected to use courts to commit children to a reform school that had an evil reputation, the truant officer was pinched on all sides. It is not surprising that six of the ten

[10] Schultz, *The Culture Factory*, 292–93, 300–01; *BSR, 1861*, 223; *BSR, 1880*, 255–56.

[11] *BSR, 1861*, 246–47, 249, 251.

Plate 2: Laying Down the Law—A Class for Truants.

officers from 1852 to 1861 served only about one year. The one who lasted the longest was convinced that 90 percent of the time parents were to blame. The superintendent of schools further pinpointed the problem: "the *cause of causes* is the immoderate use of intoxicating drinks. This is the unanimous testimony of the Truant Officers." The words schoolmasters used to describe truants—"vicious," "evil-minded"—showed that they considered truants morally defective; such bad character usually came, they felt, from "want of domestic discipline" or "enticements of bad boys" or the frivolous and immoral amusements close at hand in the city. The superintendent of schools was very upset when a local theater put on a juvenile performance of Gilbert and Sullivan's *Pinafore,* and even respectable parents allowed their children to skip school in order to sing in the operetta. "I have been told," he wrote, "that one of the older girls is bent upon the theater for life, and that a younger sister of hers is in the same state of derangement." Could not parents have foreseen the perils of *Pinafore*?[12]

Boston was one of the pioneers in catching and confining truants and probably took a harder line than most cities. One superintendent, for example, compared attendance officers to military police in time of war whose task was "to act outside the school room, in the highways and by-

[12] *BSR, 1861,* 245, 270; *BSR, 1879,* 49–50.

ways, compelling the deserters, the skulkers, and the shirkers to come in." But the assumptions that bad character was the cause of truancy and that punishment was the remedy were widely shared during the Victorian era. In Brooklyn, for example, gangs of little boys caught out of school were first herded into "Attendance classes" where they met stern discipline and bombardment with moral aphorisms (see Plate 2). If that didn't cure them, they then were locked in a dreaded "Truant Home," which was a combination prison, Marine boot camp, and revival meeting. Together the inmates sang a song that explained their fate:

I met a lad the other day
  That ran away from school.
He doubted all his teacher said,
  And hated every rule.
His books were underneath his coat,
  His dinner in his hat,
And down upon a cheerless stone,
  All sorrowful he sat.
Oh, fie, fie, truant!
  Oh, fie, fie, for shame!
Who can respect an idle boy
  Who can not spell his name?

In Connecticut, as well, the overworked attendance officers relied heavily on intimidation and the object lessons offered by those who were convicted and incarcerated.[13]

In Boston and elsewhere, however, doubts began to grow that punishment was really the most effective deterrent to truancy. Both soft-liners and hard-liners agreed that defects of character created social problems, but the soft-liners sought more humane forms of treatment for nonattenders (see Plate 3). Children, said a Boston School Committee report in 1866, require nurture, not threats and blows:

> neglected of parents; neglected of the State; ignorant of the ordinary facts of science; ignorant in many cases of the commonest principles of right and wrong, of virtue, the obligations of truth; ignorant of all moral and religious precepts, of Christ and the holy beauty of His life; of the Bible,—it is plain that there is no such stony, impassible aggressive wickedness of purpose as to require prisons. . . . They are not like weeds, to be pulled up and cast off into the social refuse; but like flowers, to be selected out from the herbage that shadows and dwarfs them. . . .[14]

[13] *BSR, 1862,* 175; Fryatt, "Compulsory Education in Brooklyn"; *Connecticut School Reports, 1894–1895,* 65–97.
[14] *BSR, 1866,* 307–09.

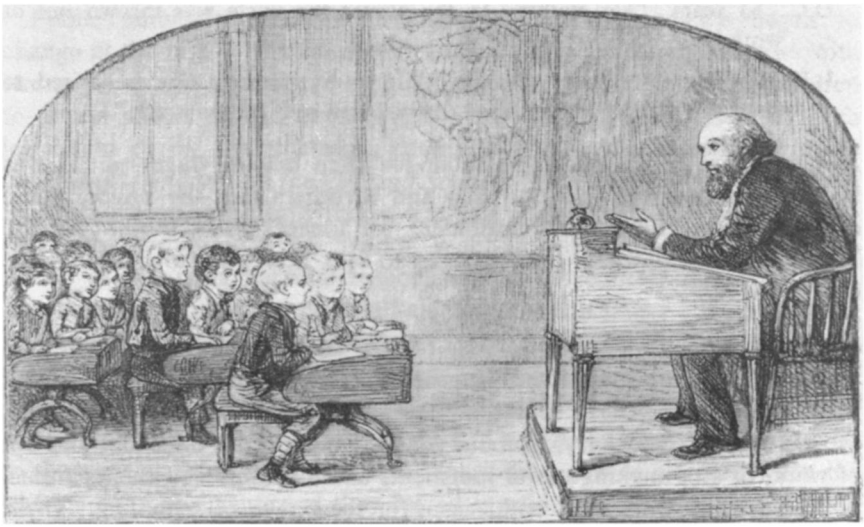

Plate 3: Truant Class Ruled by Love.

Despite this plea, for many years convicted truants continued to be sent to the House of Reformation on Deer Island. Loath to put truants in barred carriages to be driven through the Boston streets with adult criminals, truant officers often walked them down to the steamer themselves; later the School Committee provided a separate carriage for that purpose. But as late as 1890 the superintendent of schools, Edwin Seaver, was still complaining that a new and separate institution was needed "for the detention and instruction of truants." Despite some attempt to separate truants from juveniles convicted of crimes, he wrote, "sending a truant who is not yet a criminal down to Deer Island is a pretty sure way to make him a criminal. In the expressive phrase said to be current there, '*it institutionizes him.*' " Seaver called instead for special "disciplinary Schools" for "those troublesome boys who now so sorely try the patience of even the best teachers" and a "parental school" on the mainland for those who needed to be taken away from their homes.[15]

Boston was one of the first cities to achieve nearly universal school attendance. When casual absentees, employed youth, and convicted truants were accounted for, the rest of the children neither at school nor at work tended to be victims of severe misfortune. In 1885 Seaver gave some examples:

E.B., 13 years. "The father has been dead five years. This girl is out to take care of a sick mother."

[15] *BSR, 1890,* appendix, 15–16.

D.C., 13 years. "No clothes. In the winter the uncle was thrown out of work."

L.H., 11 years. "Mrs. H. has five children to support. She is obliged to keep this girl to take care of the children and do the work."

In later years he continued to catalogue such human tragedies. It was becoming increasingly clear to him and to others that the police model of truancy as crime and punishment no longer made sense. As the Progressive Era dawned, people began to seek new ways to interpret and cure truancy.[16]

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The changes in thought and practice in school attendance which gained momentum in the 1890s represented a gradual departure from the past. People did not stop worrying about young hoodlums out of school and out of work, or stop making moral judgments about truants and their parents, or lose a quasi-evangelical enthusiasm for the power of schooling. These persisted, though often clothed in a new rhetorical dress and expressed in different kinds of institutions. But the progressive advocates for child welfare took a broader, more "scientific," more strategic approach toward the problems of attendance. They used the nascent social sciences to probe the causes of truancy. They recognized that there were close connections between major institutions and agencies of society—families, workplaces, churches, courts, legislatures, welfare agencies, and schools—and showed greater sophistication about how to construct organizations that would actually accomplish social purposes. They saw school attendance not simply or even mainly as a police problem but rather as a matter for wise legislation, organized compassion, and reform and efficient coordination of the institutions that dealt with children and youth.[17]

[16] *BSR, 1885,* 67; Berkowitz, "Truants as People," unpublished seminar paper, Stanford Univ., 1975.

[17] Edward C. Bixler, "An Investigation to Determine the Efficiency with which the Compulsory Attendance Law is Enforced in Philadelphia," Diss. University of Pennsylvania 1913; John F. Bender, "Irregular Attendance—Its Effect and Reduction," *American School Board Journal,* 75 (Dec. 1927), 45–46; Howard W. Nudd, "The Compulsory Attendance Service of New York City," *The Public Education Association of the City of New York, Bulletin,* No. 16 (Aug. 25, 1913), 13–20; and "A Description of the Bureau of Compulsory Education of the City of Philadelphia," (New York: Public Education Association, 1913); Herman Cooper, *An Accounting of Progress and Attendance of Rural School Children in Delaware* (New York: Bureau of Publications, Teachers College, Columbia Univ., 1930); W. F. Doughty, "Compulsory School Attendance," *The Department of Education, State of Texas Bulletin,* 53 (July 1, 1916); Blanche Merry, "Compulsory Education: Related Laws and Comments," *State of Indiana Department of Public Instruction,* No. 110 (1931).

Public ambivalence about compulsory school attendance began to change at the turn of the twentieth century. Legislatures passed laws with strong provisions for enforcement, and the practice of compelling children to attend school spread even to the South, which had passed no such legislation during the nineteenth century. In their classic study *Truancy and Non-Attendance in the Chicago Schools* Edith Abbott and Sophonisba P. Breckinridge noted how recent was this commitment to state intervention into families, quoting Sydney Webb's observation that "any such notion as enforcing parental responsibility is an entirely new thing . . . it is an innovation of the past half-century . . . if a father left his children half-starved, scantily clothed in rags, with the most miserable lodgings, overcrowded and indecently occupied, with every kind of insanitation, so long as the parish was put to no expense, no one took proceedings against him." The advocates of child welfare had a vigorous and optimistic faith in the right and duty of the state to secure the rights of children when the parents were negligent, and they feared inaction rather than meddling on the part of government. To them the old doctrines of laissez-faire and rugged individualism were excuses for cheating children of their birthrights.[18]

During the Progressive Era there were two major developments that shaped the self-conception and work of attendance officers. One was the rapid development of applied social science and psychology within the field of social work and "child welfare" more broadly. The other was the extension of new techniques of bureaucratic organization to the attendance departments, resulting in new theories and practices in "child accounting" and "pupil personnel." The two influences were closely related but emanated from different sources. The interpretation of the attendance service as a form of social work came initially from intellectual leaders in child welfare like Abbott and Breckinridge, and the initial experiments in "school visitors" (or school social workers) were sponsored mostly by private organizations. The development of new specialized attendance bureaus with elaborate systems of child accounting came primarily from the group of university professors of school administration and superintendents in the field who were eager to adapt business models of organization to schooling and who sought to make education a "science."[19]

[18] Abbott and Breckinridge, *Truancy*, 7, fn. 6 and chs. 1–5; S. O. Hartwell, "The Administration of Compulsory Attendance Laws," *National Education Association Addresses and Proceedings*, (1915), 485–89.

[19] Murray Levine and Adeline Levine, *A Social History of the Helping Services: Clinic, Court, School and Community* (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1970), chs. 5–6; Moehlman, *Child Accounting*, ch. 1.

The social scientists and social workers who wrote about and campaigned for child welfare during the Progressive Era recognized the interdependence of urban social institutions and wanted to create organizations that would actually enforce social legislation. They knew, for example, that school attendance was intimately related to child labor laws, workingmen's compensation, public health agencies, aid to dependent families, settlement houses, and other social agencies. They believed that improving attendance required research into causes and concerted action. It was not a matter of simply finding truant children (although that in itself was a massive and important job—in 1913–14, for example, the Chicago attendance department investigated 58,064 cases, prosecuted 67 parents, and brought 826 children into Juvenile Court).[20]

Abbott and Breckinridge discovered that only about five percent of nonattenders were really truants (they defined truancy as "wilful absence on the part of the child without the knowledge and consent of the parent"). They found that the casual absentees mostly came from immigrant homes in poor neighborhoods; frequently parents asked these children to stay home to help out when members of the family were sick, and often pupils could not go to school because they lacked clothes or shoes. It was clear "that poverty is only too frequently the real excuse for non-attendance." Conflicting cultures of home and school contributed heavily to absenteeism. Habitual truants tended to come from multiple-problem families: 80 percent of their sample were poor or very poor; 28 percent had one or both parents dead; about a third were undernourished, and many had serious physical defects or emotional problems. Later studies found similar pathologies.[21]

When reformers became serious about getting all children into school, it became apparent that "juvenile disorderly persons" were only the visible tip of a large social iceberg of deprivation and misery. Some social investigators were still censuring parents and children and waxing lyrical about the corrupting influence of poolrooms and dance halls. But the language of diagnosis was shifting from moral judgments about character to social scientific terminology, from "vice" to "maladjustment." The only effective attack on nonattendance was one which helped families deal one by one with the environmental problems they faced or with their own intra-psychic troubles.

Such an approach required a new type of attendance officer, Abbott and Breckinridge argued. They were disdainful towards the truant officers

[20] Abbott and Breckinridge, *Truancy*, 11–22, ch. 5.

[21] Abbott and Breckinridge, *Truancy*, 136, 148, 158–59, 184–86; Richard Jeffrey French, "A Study of Truancy in the Chicago Schools," Diss. Loyola Univ. of Chicago 1931.

of Chicago, who were, they believed, untrained and even semi-literate, smug about their success in returning children to school, and prepared to deal only with symptoms and not with causes. There was, furthermore, only one officer for every 8,419 children. Simply "to return the child to school today, without trying to deal with the influences that kept him out yesterday," they wrote, "is likely to mean that he will be absent again tomorrow or at some later date, when he may or may not be discovered by an officer of the department."[22]

What was needed was a visiting teacher, a scientifically-trained social worker who recognized underlying causes and was competent to serve as liaison between school and home and as a mobilizer of the resources of the city: medical, vocational, charitable, legal, and educational. Settlement houses had already shown the value of this kind of assistance, reformers believed. Beginning in 1906 in New York and rapidly spreading to other cities, private and philanthropic groups outside the schools sponsored social workers to perform such a task. Paid from private funds, these early "visiting teachers" were mostly college-trained women from prominent families. Because their salaries did not come from the school system, these early visiting teachers had a certain independence which enabled them to look on schools as part of the problem as well as part of the solution. Some of them called for changes to adapt the classroom to the pupil as well as to make the pupil more regular in attendance and tractable in behavior. But when visiting teachers became employees of the schools, pressures shifted toward meeting the administrative needs of the system.[23]

Although nationwide there were relatively few visiting teachers who worked intensively with a few "cases,"—perhaps 100 by 1920—the general image of the truant officer as social worker proved attractive to the people who ran attendance departments. Here was an escape from the old image of truant officer as hookey cop. Describing shifts in the New York City Bureau of Compulsory Education, School Census and Child Welfare in 1914, an observer wrote that

> The old truant officer was regarded as an object of dread and fear by children; his visits to any home shamed parents and children alike, for his presence in any household was evidence of habitual truancy or juvenile delinquency. He was a roving officer who spent his days running down truants and effecting their commitment to truant schools or custodial homes.

[22] Abbott and Breckinridge, *Truancy,* 226, 233.

[23] Abbott and Breckinridge, *Truancy,* ch. 16; Levine and Levine, *Helping Services,* ch. 6; Lester K. Ade, *Home and School Visitor Manual* (Harrisburg: Pennsylvania Department of Public Instruction, 1939).

> This truant officer has been supplanted today in spirit as in title by an attendance officer who is a social investigator for the school system.

This "social field worker" was interested in prevention rather than police work, in helping rather than punishing children or parents.[24]

In the years after 1920 the ideal of individual case work increasingly followed a psychological model. Roy Lubove and others have pointed out that in their search for professional identity and expertise social workers shifted from a social scientific diagnosis of problems—which stressed environment and demanded progressive social legislation—towards a psychological mode of explanation which located the cause of trouble in the individual. Murray and Adeline Levine have hypothesized that this attribution of intra-psychic rather than situational causes signifies a departure from political and social reform. In large measure the meetings of the National League of Compulsory Education Officials reflected this change in thinking. Numerous psychologists and psychiatrists attempted to diagnose truancy in terms of emotional disorders or low intelligence. Attendance officers were inundated by advice about mental hygiene (their reactions were often ambivalent, as when one of them introduced Dr. William Nelson of the Psychiatric Clinic of St. Louis as a "sickiatrist").[25]

The realities of the job of truant officers, however, bore only slight resemblance to the intensive case work that was the goal of the social worker or therapist. Sheer numbers of clients made such individualized attention unlikely. In 1925 there was only about one truant officer for every 7,500 children of school age nationwide. An official of the U. S. Children's Bureau warned attendance officers in 1923 that "under present conditions . . . your primary interest must be in putting [the truant] back into his school seat. If you should stop to study him, there would be so many other children escaping that the school might be depopulated." Although the truant officer had little time or training for psychological study of individual children, school districts did little to supplement them with specialists. A study of 62 cities with populations over 100,000 in 1937 discovered that such districts averaged 2.82 psychologists, .54

[24] Paul Klapper, "The Bureau of Attendance and Child Welfare of the New York City Public School System," *Educational Review,* 50 (Nov. 1915), 369–91; Harriet M. Johnson, *The Visiting Teacher in New York City* (New York: Public Education Association, 1916); J. J. Oppenheimer, *The Visiting Teacher Movement* (New York: Public Education Association, 1925); Nudd, "The Purpose and Scope of Visiting Teacher Work" in Mary B. Sayles, *The Problem Child in School* (New York: The Commonwealth Fund, 1926); Jane F. Culbert, *The Visiting Teacher at Work* (New York: The Commonwealth Fund, 1929).

[25] Roy Lubove, *The Professional Altruist: The Emergence of Social Work as a Career* (New York: Atheneum, 1969), chs. 2–3; Levine and Levine, *Helping Services,* 8–9; NLCEO, *Proceedings, 1929,* 39.

psychiatrists, and 27.55 school social workers per 100,000 pupils. There was much talk of individualized psychological care but little commitment of resources to it.[26]

* * *

Changes in ideology are difficult to measure. As we have suggested, social science and psychology gave truant officers a new vocabulary to describe or explain behavior. This "scientific" language gave the occupation a more professional tone, some thought. But older attitudes persisted. Two ways to trace both continuities and shifts in ideology are to examine the questions asked in civil service examinations for attendance officers (which usually reflected an official line) and to analyze the diverse and often frank talk of the speakers at the meetings of the National League of Compulsory Education Officials.

One study of questions used in examinations for truant officers in Philadelphia from 1914 to 1930 concluded that the conception of attendance officer changed "from that of police officer of no particular educational or personality qualifications, to that of a social worker and educator, ranking close to teachers in the grade and high schools." In 1914 the questions focused on the justification and provisions of the law. Until 1920 applicants were examined on grammar, spelling and punctuation. The 1917 test used a case in which the examinee was asked to assess whether the child or the parent was at fault. By the 1920s the rhetoric of social service and psychology became more prominent. Then applicants were asked about child labor laws, interview techniques, social agencies, and terms like "social diagnosis," "mental age," "retardation," and "mental testing." New questions appeared:

> It has been said that truancy is frequently a symptom of educational or social maladjustment. Discuss the statement fully.
>
> Explain and illustrate what is meant by the casework method in social service.[27]

A New York test manual of 1914 talked of "raids" to round up truants, "Child Welfare Squads," and emphasized the legal-bureaucratic phases of the work. Character and morality were still stressed as the key variables. To the question "What should an Attendance Officer know in his or her relation with school boys and school girls?" the proper answer was "The Attendance Officer should find out what ethical and moral training the

[26] NLCEO, *Proceedings, 1925,* 61–62; *Proceedings, 1923,* 21; *Proceedings, 1937,* 18.
[27] Frank G. Davis and Charles A. Wheeler, "The Development of the Work of the Attendance Officer," *Vocational Guidance Magazine,* 11 (Apr. 1933), 310–13.

child lacks or possesses." How should an officer treat a boy who succumbs to the influence of a gang of bad boys?—by pointing out his weakness to him and by encouraging him "to strengthen his power of resistance against such influences." In the case of the sensitive boy who is ashamed to come to school because his clothes are patched, the truant officer should say that "clothes do not make the man" and should "appeal to his pride by pointing out his good qualities, and tell him that character was superior to any material possession; how, by attention to his studies, he could so educate himself so as to be able to advance to success." The example of Abraham Lincoln should inspire him. The truant officer should seek out his prey in "vacant lots, livery stables, warehouses and cellars, where he is likely to find and associate with companions from whom he is very apt to learn of vice and crime." The truant's parents were apt to come from families that had been destitute for generations and were often mismated, drunken, and cruel.[28]

Later manuals shifted language away from such blunt moral talk to a more euphemistic jargon mostly derived from psychology and progressive education. One published in 1950, for example, announced that the attendance department of New York "sees its goal as the furnishing of a treatment service for the school absentee that meets the need of each such child and which is based upon the principles of mental hygiene, sound human relationships, social work findings, and the principles of modern education." In official doctrine the truant no longer was vicious or weak; he was maladjusted and needed help.[29]

Rhetoric about the causes of truancy and appropriate remedies followed a similar shift in the proceedings of the truant officers' League, although throughout the years of the organization from 1911 to 1940 much of the nineteenth-century moralism persisted. One of the chief spokesmen for the old morality was the long-term president of the group and head of the Chicago Attendance Department, William L. Bodine. To him Huckleberry Finn was a menace to American youth, "a product of the improvident and intemperate home." He saw the parents of the 1920s as "slackers," people who raised "bad citizens instead of good ones, slackers in everything except making their homes mere breeding pens for corrective institutions. We are becoming a nation of institutionalized children because infernalism of the home is expanding paternalism of the state."

[28] Julius Hochfelder, *Attendance Officer Examination Instruction Supplement: 200 Additional Questions and Answers . . . 50,000 Words of Simple Instruction* (New York: Civil Service Chronicle, 1918), 17, 24–26, 33.

[29] D. M. Kelly, ed., *Manual for Attendance Officers* (Chicago: Civil Services Book Sales, 1950), 1; Edward C. Gruber, ed., *Attendance Teacher: Teacher's License Training Text* (New York: Arco, 1961).

Bodine kept alive the old evangelical notion of attendance work: "our work, like the work of the preacher, and the teacher, is a labor of love; we are the Samaritans of the schools with pitying hands or charity and correction—to redeem the nation's young." Others agreed with him that sin was appearing in new forms in the 1920s—movie houses, rumble seats, painted lips, short skirts, "adolescent grown-ups"—and that children were paying for their parents' delinquencies. What was needed, said one speaker in 1926, was "more *praying mothers* who will teach their children love, service and responsibility along with morality, ethics, and religion" (not surprisingly, his speech was rebroadcast on a Baptist radio station). Old notions of original sin cropped up still: "Many years' dealings with truants almost made a Presbyterian of me," confessed one speaker. "I almost concluded that they were foreordained to be damned. . . ." The chief attendance officer of Boston listed these in 1925 as major causes of truancy: "lack of conscience . . . insufficient will power . . . weak parental control." This attitude of moral superiority towards their clients may have given some truant officers a comforting sense of distance from the people they condemned, but coupled with denunciation was often a genuine sympathy for the rejects and victims of society. Earnestness also gave a certain dignity to otherwise distasteful work. Surely they could not be accused of taking their job lightly, for humor rarely marred their ceremonies.[30]

But earnest moralism alone did not produce "professional" standing, at least in the twentieth century, and in their League meetings more and more attendance officers turned to disciplines like psychology and sociology and to cognate fields like social work to conceptualize their occupation and to raise it above the common image of truant officer as decrepit tyrant. Psychologists and psychiatrists were invited to speak; names like William Healy, Miriam Van Waters, Bernard Glueck, and even Sigmund Freud popped up in talks; and the blunt old words like "vice" tended to disappear. A new jargon, a new technology of "social casework," a new specialization of function—might these not only make attendance departments more effective but raise officers in the esteem of the public? Leaders in the occupation called on states and local districts to set higher standards for employment, including courses in social casework, psychology, and sociology.[31]

A number of attendance officers called on their colleagues to be sales-

[30] NLCEO, *Proceedings, 1923,* 7; *Proceedings, 1926,* 31–33; *Proceedings, 1939,* 25; *Proceedings, 1925,* 89.

[31] NLCEO, *Proceedings, 1923,* 35; *Proceedings, 1926,* 52–54; *Proceedings, 1930,* 10; *Proceedings, 1925,* 93.

men of education to their clients and to use public relations techniques to sell their work to the public. The truant officer, said one, "is the school's salesman whose business it is to sell to the public that great and necessary commodity—EDUCATION." They advocated the use of posters with messages like these:

> The precise business of the attendance officer is the absent child and any causes of absence. He is not only the law officer of the school dep't. but also a social service worker and interpreter of social forces and conditions.
>
> The attendance officer is not only a friend to the child but also a guide to the foreigner.[32]

But every now and then members of the League suggested that it was important to square ideology and reality. Most school people, said the head of the New York Bureau of Attendance, look down somewhat on truant officers as mere police officers who simply need "good wind and strong limbs." Their job as often unpopular middlemen requires them "to meddle in all sorts of affairs." Since most people look on truant officers as a kind of police, it is difficult to get them to accept a broadened conception of them as professional agents of child welfare. And whatever hopes the leaders of the occupation had for higher standards of training and eligibility, the great majority of non-urban truant officers worked part-time and most had no more than a high school education. Even full-time workers often earned less than elementary school teachers.[33]

* * *

Developing new ideology was only one way to transform the status of an occupation, and it was of more interest, probably, to the elite of attendance officers who constituted the members of the League than it was to the rank and file. Another and ultimately more important method of altering the nature of the occupation was changing the organizational context within which people worked. Here again elites led the way in bureaucratizing the attendance service and creating a new technology of enforcement during the twentieth century. The architects of this redesigning of the occupation were mostly experts in educational administration in the universities, in foundations, and in some of the larger school systems. The inspiration for these changes in "child accounting" and "pupil personnel" came mostly from two sources: a new "educational science" and new modes of business administration adapted to schooling. The

[32] NLCEO, *Proceedings, 1925,* 93; *Proceedings, 1926,* 39, 73.
[33] NLCEO, *Proceedings, 1930,* 26–28.

university professors were creating a new specialty which gave them courses to teach, monographs to write, and consultancies and surveys to perform. The new attendance bureaucracies within city systems offered career ladders to aspiring child accountants. Despite this obvious element of self-interest and despite a certain harshness in their rhetoric of human efficiency, however, these architects of compulsion believed that they were serving the needs of children. They took *universal* education seriously.[34]

This bureaucratization of attendance departments was part of a larger realignment of urban schools that took place in the early years of the twentieth century. The leaders who spearheaded the centralization of control of city systems under small boards of education also advocated internal differentiation and specialization of function within the schools. This, they felt, would remedy the inefficiency of previous urban education. During the latter nineteenth century many schoolmen had complained about inadequate methods of finding children, enrolling them, securing good attendance, and reporting results in a standard statistical format. Cities had often vied with one another to report high attendance rates, but to do so they had often ignored non-enrolled children and had dropped pupils from the registers if they missed four or five days. This had assumed a high percentage of attendance but had excluded tens of thousands of children from the system. Truant officers had usually been few in number, had been loosely located in the school system, and had acted mostly as independent operators; their chief function had been to keep the streets free of disorderly youth. By the turn of the century, however, reformers were eager to attract or push *all* children into school and felt that attendance departments needed a major overhaul.[35]

New York had done more than many cities to secure universal attendance, but a survey of the truant department by Jesse Burke in 1911 revealed serious organizational problems. The census and investigatory reports were often sloppy; practices in apprehending or committing children varied enormously from district to district of the city; there was no clear-cut assignment of responsibility, little supervision of truant officers, little coordination with other agencies, and "undue emphasis of police

[34] Hollis P. Allen, *Universal Education* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford Univ. Press, 1934). It is interesting to note that a Communist writer of the 1930s criticized American schooling precisely because it was *not* universal; cf. Rex David, *Schools and the Crisis* (New York: International Pamphlets, 1934).

[35] Moehlman, *Child Accounting,* ch. 2; Heck, "A Measure of the Comparative Efficiency of Public-School Systems," *Educational Research Bulletin,* 4 (Oct. 7, 1925), 304–10, and "Enrollment and Attendance Figures in the Annual Reports of City Superintendents," *Educational Research Bulletin,* 4 (Oct. 7, 1925), 298–304.

functions." In effect, every administrative officer was responsible for attendance, and therefore no one was really responsible. Ill-trained truant officers were too autonomous and dealt mostly with symptoms rather than causes. Instead of separate agencies conducting the census, enforcing attendance, and issuing work certificates, one department should perform these interrelated functions. Each district should have its own supervisor of attendance responsible for overseeing the work of the field workers and conducting hearings on truancy charges. In a city the size of New York the problems of attendance were staggering. In just one year there were "over 580,000 changes in the school population due to new admissions, transfers, and discharges." The census takers found 22,509 children illegally absent and thousands more out of school because they were ill, neglected, and deserted. Only a scientifically organized, expertly staffed, specialized bureau could deal with such a challenge.[36]

Following the New York study came many other surveys and monographs on the attendance service, beginning with Leonard Ayres' influential study of Cleveland in 1915, *Child Accounting in the Public Schools.* The burgeoning field of "personnel management" in business and the experience of the draft and the testing and assignment of soldiers in World War I gave new impetus to the bureaucratization of attendance and the application of "science" to "pupil personnel." "If what we read of the application of business methods to the winning of the war may be even measurably accepted as true," said a director of attendance, "we have an example on the largest scale known to history of the systematic use of cumulative records of individual human beings as an indispensable means of complete adaptation of means to ends." It was time, he said, for school people to accept "the principle of accountability for results" and "the doctrine that the machinery of registration should be so perfected that no child in the community can escape the processes of education." University scholars and school administrators developed a complex new technology of enforcement to replace the old haphazard arrangements: a continuing census to find and register every child of school age (often including youth to age eighteen who attended continuation schools while working); hierarchical attendance bureaus which specified roles for supervisors, vocational placement officers, visiting teachers,

[36] Jesse D. Burke, "The Compulsory Attendance Service," in *Report on Educational Aspects of the Public School System of the City of New York to the Committee on School Inquiry of the Board of Estimate and Apportionment* (New York: City of New York, 1911–1912), 710–11; Nudd, "Compulsory Attendance Service of New York" and "How New York City Registers Its Children," *The Survey,* 27 (February 17, 1912), 1777.

clerks, and attendance workers; and massive arrays of new forms, forms, forms.[37]

If all children had to go to school, new niches had to be created for those previously excluded because they were exceptional or rebellious. Thus school systems created specialized classes or schools: ungraded classes for "backward" children; disciplinary classes for unruly youngsters; special facilities for handicapped or sick children; and parental schools for hard-core truants. In addition, many school systems set up part-time "continuation classes" for teenagers who went to work early but who still came under the compulsory education laws as supervised and licensed young workers. Sometimes attendance departments also served as vocational placement bureaus. Often the enlarged "pupil personnel" or "child accounting" or "attendance and child welfare" departments were charged with supervising this whole variety of agencies for nonmainstream children. Organizational charts grew more and more complicated. At the top of the new bureaucratic pyramid, said Arch O. Heck, "it become possible to secure as director of attendance a highly qualified school man" who had the prestige "to secure the cooperation of the businessmen and manufacturers."[38]

So now there was added to the images of truant officer as policeman, minister, salesman, psychologist, or social worker a new metaphor: an executive who presided over child accounting. This may have been a comfortable identity for those at the top of urban attendance divisions, but the hookey cop stereotype still clung to the thousands who patrolled city streets and tenements or who worked singly in towns or countryside. Daily they were forced to deal with society's misfits and rejects, with the "human tragedies" they wrote about in their reports. Again and again in the twentieth century, studies of children out of school reported

[37] Leonard P. Ayres, *Child Accounting in the Public Schools* (Cleveland: The Survey Committee of the Cleveland Foundation, 1915); John W. Davis, "The Need of a Continuing Census of Children of School Age," National Education Association, *Addresses and Proceedings* (1918), 665–68; John Dearling Haney, *Registration of City School Children* (New York: Teacher's College, Columbia Univ., 1910); Frederick Earle Emmons, *City School Attendance Service* (New York: Bureau of Publications, Teacher's College, Columbia Univ., 1926); Joseph LeMart Schultz, "An Analysis of Present Practices in City Attendance Work," Diss. Univ. of Pennsylvania 1938; George D. Strayer, *Report of the Survey of the Public School System of Atlanta, Georgia* (New York: Teacher's College, Columbia Univ., 1922), II; Pennsylvania State Department of Public Instruction, *Report of the Survey of the Public Schools of Philadelphia* (Philadelphia: The Public Education and Child Labor Association of Pennsylvania, 1922), II.

[38] Heck, *The Administration of Pupil Personnel,* 93; Irvin Simon Noall, "Administration of Compulsory School Attendance," Diss. Univ. of California, Berkeley 1938; *BSR, 1913,* 107–14, 177–79.

the same dreary tale heard since compulsory schooling began: the nonattenders were disproportionately the poor, the neglected, the objects of discrimination, the sick, the mentally or emotionally handicapped, the culturally different.[39]

One way of explaining both the fate of these clients and the negative stereotype of the truant officer would have been to declare the basic social order unjust. After all, was it coincidental that generation after generation of poverty and social decay destroyed families, that poor children felt rejected in mainstream schools, that unemployment and dead-end jobs helped produce crime, and that courts pressed heavily upon people who had the misfortune to be born into the wrong social stratum or ethnic group? Was not the truant officer just a scapegoat for the inequities of the larger society? Could the situation of the victims really change without radical reform?

These questions were rarely asked by those who enforced compulsory schooling. A few child advocates in the Progressive Era and a few educators in the Great Depression called for major social change. The architects of the new bureaus of attendance, however, argued that education was the most beneficent way to improve society because it was incremental and safe, not radical. Schools had to be on guard against the menace of bolshevism, said Bodine, and Heck claimed in 1933 that universal education was a main reason why Americans endured four years of a desperate depression without "serious radical demonstrations." And if the leaders saw no reason to question the basic structure of society, neither did the rank and file. Like police and social workers, truant officers came into daily contact with human misery, but these "street-level bureaucrats," empowered to regulate the poor and the deviant, normally believed in the authority of the existing social order. They sought to maintain that edge of respectability that distinguished them from those they encountered in their work. They thought that the system offered hope to those who aspired and behaved as they did. Despite the stereotypes that clung to them, they were, as one school superintendent said, "Evangels of Education."[40]*

[39] Newton Edwards, *Equal Educational Opportunity for Youth* (Washington, D.C.: American Council on Education, 1939). An eloquent study by the Children's Defense Fund, *Children Out of School* (Cambridge, Mass.: Children's Defense Fund, 1974) indicates that the characteristics of nonattenders in the 1970s closely fit those discovered in earlier research.

[40] NLCEO, *Proceedings, 1924,* 8; *Proceedings, 1940,* 22; *Proceedings, 1933,* n.p., mimeographed.

* David Tyack would like to acknowledge assistance for this study from the Carnegie Corporation and the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences.