

**Education: What is the Best System Today?**

**Epilogue to Tyack's *The One Best System***

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## **Tyack Summary**

David Tyack's book *The One Best System* is a study of the history of urban public education from the 1800's to the early 1970's. The author is an educational specialist in leadership and policy. While *The One Best System* is a historical study, he has also written books on school reform and politics.

Tyack sectioned his book into parts beginning with moving from a predominantly rural community school system in the early 1800's to the urban school system, and discussing bureaucracy, politics, and school reform along the way. Parts I through III deal mainly with the 19<sup>th</sup> century, parts IV and V with the years from 1890 to 1940. Each of these parts covers the changes in urban education through various aspects. The brief epilogue covers 1940 to 1973.

## **What is the Best System Today?**

### ***Introduction***

When we look at the list of essays on key education issues in America today found at the *Education Week on the Web* web site, we find some of the same issues Tyack discussed along with others. Everything from A (Accountability) to V (Vouchers) is out there. Tyack's discussion of the 1940's in his own epilogue includes public education issues as defined by Benjamin Fine, a *New York Times* reporter, in 1947. He lists underpaid teachers, overcrowded classes, a loss of confidence in public schools, and outdated infrastructure (Tyack, 1974). No wonder there was a teacher shortage. It sounds like something that could have been written today, almost 30 years later.

This paper is an attempt to carry forward Tyack's history and look at two issues that have had, and continue to have, profound effect on the educational system. One is desegregation, an issue for more than a century; the other is technology and distance learning. Although a catalyst for change in the previous centuries, technology today is radically changing the field of education, along with the players, the coaches, and the rules of the game.

### ***Desegregation***

Reading Tyack's early discussion of desegregation was disturbing. We all realize that many years after winning their freedom, black Americans still had to fight for equality in different aspects, perhaps almost every aspect, of American life. I was surprised to read here, though, that desegregation in public education meant the majority of black teachers would end up losing their positions to whites and that a lot of African-Americans would have preferred to keep the separate schools. Black teachers were good role models for the black children. Tyack tells us that closing the established black schools did result in educated African-American teachers losing their jobs and not being able to get hired in the desegregated schools: "...for twenty-two years after mandatory segregation was discontinued in 1873, no black teachers were hired in that [New York City] school system" (Tyack, 1974).

In his epilogue at the end of his book, Tyack mentions desegregation again, but when he refers to the *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* Supreme Court ruling, he fails to give the reader the whole picture. Although he admits the 1954 decision did not result in complete desegregation during the next few decades, he concentrates on the

segregation that continued in northern urban schools due to the concentration of the minority population. Even though the focus of the book is urban rather than rural, the fact that some schools like Prince Edward County of Virginia closed their doors rather than desegregate seems too important to omit.

The Prince Edward public schools were closed from 1959 to 1964 and it garnered worldwide attention (Baker, 2001). This case started out as a federal NAACP case, *Davis v. County School Board of Prince Edward County*, but ended up as one of the cases under *Brown*. For the last 30 years, and especially from the early 60's until Tyack's publication in 1974, researchers have published books, journal articles, and theses on the subject. My review of current articles disclosed that authors tend to describe Prince Edward as now having fully integrated schools (Viadero, 1999; Bolger, NPS website). In actuality, Prince Edward public schools have a black majority of over 50% and the private Fuqua school (opened under the name of Prince Edward Academy in 1959 when the public schools were closed) only has a 5% minority, when the population of Prince Edward County is approximately 35% African-American, according to the 2000 census.

As an employee and student of Longwood College in Farmville, Prince Edward County, Virginia, from 1992 until 1997, I knew many people who had attended, or had children who attended Prince Edward Academy/Fuqua. Frankly, I was surprised that some of these families could afford the tuition. It didn't seem to matter if they had to borrow the money to pay for it and I thought at the time that it was likely that some of the children would not be able to go on to college later. Not only was it obvious that it was important to them that their children attend the private school rather than public

school, some of the older citizens were quite vocal about the problems during the early 1960's. One lady described to me how she and her husband packed up and moved their family to Richmond rather than subject the children to the possibility of attending school with African-Americans.

Desegregation continues to be an issue. Today it is discussed more in reference to affirmative action than as desegregation, especially in regard to admissions in higher education.

### ***Technology and Distance Learning***

While society seems to have moved at glacier speed in regard to desegregation, the opposite is true of technology. It is almost amusing to read a description of changing technology at the turn of the century from John Dewey's perspective in 1899, and compare it to the changing technology of the new millennium. I am not that far removed from it, however. I have pictures of my grandfather with his new horse and buggy in the early 1900's, and stories told by my grandmother of being finished with public school and ensconced in the cottage industry of making cigars by hand at age 16. Her grandmother was listed as being unable to read and write on the 1850 census.

When Tyack wrote *The One Best System* in 1974, computers were around, but they were big and expensive. Some school systems were using them by then for administration but stand-alone desktops were a few years away. The experts probably knew what was in store for us – IBM had a 50-year strategic plan – and the researchers and computer gurus at some of the big universities were involved in developing the

internet and listservs. Distance learning was probably still looked upon as mainly correspondence courses.

During the late 1970's and early 1980's, computer programming students were using keypunch machines, carrying around boxes of cards, and scheduling computer lab hours in the wee hours of the morning. As personal computers began to be developed, so too did courses for microcomputers. Eventually curricula expanded so that courses for various disciplines began to be offered through the internet, not just programming classes. Today more and more colleges and universities are offering entire degrees through distance learning, including Harvard.

Distance learning is also beginning to evolve in the K12 sector. Companies have begun offering computer programs for children being home schooled. Will this lead to less desegregation or more? Since distance learning classes can be global and yet somewhat anonymous, race, ethnicity, and even physical challenges may eventually become moot, and the best system of tomorrow may already be here today.

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### ***Additional Websites of Information***

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<http://www.nps.gov/brvb/pages/davis.htm>

Farmville, VA. <http://www.farmvilleva.com/>

Fuqua School, Farmville, VA. <http://fuqua.pvt.k12.va.us/>

National Park Service, description by Bill Bolger.

<http://www.nps.gov/chal/sp/p05new1.htm>

Prince Edward County Public Schools, Farmville, VA. <http://www.pecps.k12.va.us/index.html>

Robert Russa Moton Museum, Farmville, VA <http://moton.org/>

[Separate but Not Equal: Race, Education, and Prince Edward County, Virginia](#) – online exhibit

<http://www.library.vcu.edu/jbc/speccoll/pec.html>