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A COMPARISON OF PUBLIC  
EDUCATION IN GERMANY AND  
IN THE UNITED STATES

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## LETTER OF TRANSMITTAL

DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR,  
BUREAU OF EDUCATION,  
Washington, D. C., April 7, 1913.

SIR: For many years American students of education have studied more or less carefully the schools of Germany. From these studies they have brought back many valuable ideas which are gradually changing for the better, let us hope, courses of study and methods of teaching in American schools and to some slight extent their organization and management. Studies of American schools by German educators have been less frequent. Recently, Dr. Georg Kerschensteiner, whose ideas and work as director of the schools of Munich are more or less familiar to all students of education in America, spent some time in the United States for the purpose of studying our elementary and secondary schools. The accompanying manuscript, a translation by Mr. W. Carson Ryan, jr., of an article recently published in the *Monatshefte für deutsche Sprache und Pädagogik*, Milwaukee, Wis., gives in some detail Dr. Kerschensteiner's opinion of American schools of this grade. By comparing our schools with the German schools, point for point, he emphasizes their weakness and strength very effectively. Such a comparative study of the schools of two great nations, by a man of Dr. Kerschensteiner's ability and knowledge of educational processes, has unique value. I therefore recommend that the manuscript be published as a bulletin of the Bureau of Education.

Respectfully submitted.

P. P. CLAXTON,  
Commissioner.

The SECRETARY OF THE INTERIOR.

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## A COMPARISON OF PUBLIC EDUCATION IN GERMANY AND IN THE UNITED STATES.<sup>1</sup>

To examine in detail the educational systems of Germany and the United States is no easy task, for it involves the study of a very complicated administrative function on the part of nations which possess no central machinery for it, as in France, but in which every individual State exerts sovereign power. Had not old traditions, common living conditions, and certain other centrally-regulated public functions produced various similarities in the educational systems of the separate States, a comparison between the educational systems of the two nations would be impossible. The most we could do would be to compare the school system of Bavaria, for instance, with that of Massachusetts, or education in Prussia with that in New York or some other State; but we could not compare the system of education in the United States with the system of education in the German Empire.

If the feeling of nationality is alive among a people, unifying forces appear of themselves, without compulsion from any central authority, even in decentralized governmental functions. This is true of the little Swiss federation as well as of Germany and America, and it is an indication that healthy organization, adapted to the living conditions of a nation, will make its own way everywhere.

Voices are occasionally heard in Germany to-day demanding imperial laws for public education. I should consider any such imperial control a misfortune. The Cantons of the much smaller Swiss union are already opposing a uniform law, and the same opposition may be observed in the German States. Much less likelihood would there be of assent on the part of the separate States in America, should some one step forward with a proposal to unify the school system of the nation. For this jealous insistence by the States upon their sovereign power in school affairs I have only praise. Nothing is more dangerous for the schools than an all-inclusive system that reaches out over broad domains, having no regard for territorial conditions, much less for purely local demands. Freedom in administration is one of the most important requisites for the success of the public schools.

<sup>1</sup> Translated by permission from *Monatshefte für deutsche Sprache und Pädagogik*, Milwaukee, December, 1912.

In this particular there is an important difference between the individual States in Germany and those of the United States of America. Within the individual States in Germany the school system is much more uniformly arranged than in those of the United States. The tendency of the German to uniformity has, in my opinion, even gone beyond the bounds of necessity, while in America, on the contrary, many an individual State concerns itself too little with the administrative duties of the local communities. As everywhere, here, too, the golden mean is the best.

The dangers of too great freedom on the one hand and of too great paternalism on the other are evident. They can nowhere be better studied than with respect to the excessive freedom in the United States and the paternalism in Germany. Excessive freedom leads to the development of private educational institutions to an unusual degree, and, since these are frequently established for profit rather than for cultural aims, or in other cases are denominational in purpose, they may become a real disadvantage to the State. Excessive freedom of educational control allows certain irresponsible communities to neglect their school systems utterly, a condition which is impossible in a system even measurably controlled by the State. Thus we see in the United States to-day the sharpest contrasts between school systems that are incredibly bad and others of the highest possible type that would do credit to the finest civilized nations of the globe.

On the other hand, an excessive paternalism obstructs the development of education to a considerable extent. New ideas, which are taken up with enthusiasm in American cities, elaborately tested as to their practicability, and ultimately discarded as worthless, or, if found good, developed further in exemplary fashion, make their way with difficulty in paternalized school systems, or languish for lack of a fair attempt at realization. A gifted educator who has the direction of a city school system in America, by years of efficient service may gain the entire confidence of the people and by the exercise of wisdom and originality may make astounding progress in the development of the public schools, as the example of St. Louis shows. In the standardized school systems of the German cities there is far less chance of this, because it is necessary to overcome too many traditions that are sanctified by law and always vigorously defended.

Even in this respect a wise governmental regulation involves fewer disadvantages than excessive freedom, because it deprives the impractical enthusiasts, of whom there are so many in the field of education, of the possibility of doing too great harm through experiments that fail. Such reasonable governmental regulation also compels negligent communities to do their duty and furnishes the less wealthy communities with needed support.

Just as the first difference that is revealed to the educator who knows both countries is between freedom and constraint in the educational systems, so a second difference is to be found in the distribution of authority between the people on one hand and the Government on the other, with respect to the carrying out of the educative function. In the United States the affairs of the school are in a much higher degree the affairs of the people than in Germany, where the citizens of a community have little or nothing to say about their school system. The local school boards in Germany are nowhere chosen by vote of the citizens. At most the local government may select some or all of the members of the school board. These men, however, are not chosen for their interest in the schools, but more or less according to their political affiliation or with regard to their ability to cooperate in the other varied tasks of local government.

With us, school questions as such never come directly to the people, and accordingly the people are for the most part accustomed to accept the educational program that emanates from the Government. Only in the legislative assemblies of the separate States can the people find a real voice for their own ideas; and these assemblies are, of course, not made up solely from the school's point of view, but from many other points of view, among which the economic, sectarian, or purely political are conspicuous.

Conditions in this respect vary in different parts of the United States, but not so greatly as in the matter of freedom in school administration. I find three main methods by which the school authorities are chosen in American communities: (1) The boards are elected by direct vote of the citizens; (2) they are named by the mayor, who is himself elected by the people; (3) they are the product of several indirect processes of election, the community being divided into a number of school districts, each of which chooses its district school member, and from among these a member is delegated to the central school board. I can not say that the second or third form of school board organization would prove an advance over present methods for Germany; in fact, as far as my observation goes, it generally proves to be unsatisfactory, since municipal corruption is not yet exterminated in all parts of the United States. But where the local school board is elected directly by vote of the people, I have observed that the best men and women of a community are generally chosen; those, in fact, who possess the liveliest interest in educational questions. The work of such a school board must, assuredly, produce its best fruits in the freedom enjoyed by public education in America.

In any case, the average man of the people in America is much more interested in the affairs of the public school than is the average man in Germany. Not the least of things that brings this about is the fact that school meetings are public and every citizen may take

part in the debate. In the daily press, reports and discussions on educational topics occupy a space which, according to my observation, amounts to fully ten times that which the German newspapers devote to the same subject. To be sure, it must be said that such thoroughly democratic conditions only become a real blessing to the school and contribute to its advancement in higher degree than governmental care alone, when the average education of the citizens from whom the school board is elected is sufficiently high. Otherwise such a democratic arrangement may become the exact opposite of progress, and there are plenty of instances in the United States where this is the lamentable fact.

In a nation like Germany, I believe that free, direct election of school boards by the citizens would not only be unobjectionable in the overwhelming majority of cases, but, given certain limitations of the power of the school boards, would make the public school system a greater boon to the community than it is to-day. Above all, however, the interest of every individual citizen would be aroused in his school system to a much greater extent, and his active sympathy would thereby be much stronger than at the present time in Germany. The development of the school system in old Scotland, which I became acquainted with several years before my studies in the United States, convinced me absolutely of this.

Although in the two differences just described the bright and dark sides of education are almost equally shared by the two nations, there is a third difference in which Germany seems to me to have a distinct advantage over the United States. It is the difference between dependence and independence of the teaching force. In Germany, although most States have no special school law on the subject, and many of the rights demanded by the teachers have not yet been granted (many of them can not be granted, either), the independence of the teacher is incomparably greater than in the United States. This comes, above all, from the employment of the teacher for life, and the privilege of retirement assured him in all the German States from the beginning of his service.

In general, the German teacher, regardless of the kind of school in which he is employed, can not be deprived of his position and livelihood as long as he fulfills his duty and is guilty of no infraction of law. If he gets sick, he continues to draw his salary from the beginning of his employment, either the full amount during the period of sick leave, or a reduced sum in the event of temporary retirement. If he grows old and can no longer render service with his full strength, then a good-sized pension, generally 75 or 85 per cent of his regular salary, relieves him of the fear of having to spend his old age in poverty. Neither the local elections nor the general elections can make any change in his position. Whether he is liked by the *Schüler*

and the inspectors or not has nothing to do with his livelihood, as long as he does his duty and is not a prey to consuming ambition. Thus he is free from the anxiety that occasionally handicaps the professional activity of his American colleague. He does not need to curry favor with his superiors, much less with the citizens of the community, and in case of sickness or other misfortunes he does not have to use up his strength to the point of exhaustion from fear that he may lose his position. More recently, to be sure, in some of the States and cities of the Union, the teachers have also been given life tenure and a claim on a pension after a certain term of service.

It is true that in many German States the pay of the teachers is insufficient, in view of the present high cost of living; but the same is true in the United States. In general, however, besides security of employment, there is the fact that in the big cities, at least, the pay is adequate, and if we consider that the purchasing power of the American dollar, nominally more than 4 marks, is actually only 2 marks (which is the fact quite generally, according to my experience), then the pay of the German teacher in all kinds of educational institutions, including the universities, is on the average distinctly better than in the United States.

In the North Atlantic States at the present time the average salary of the male teacher (city and country both) is \$60 a month; in the South Atlantic States it is \$36, while in Germany the monthly pay of the male teacher amounts to at least \$50 on the average. In Massachusetts, according to the Report of the Commissioner of Education for 1911, the pay of the woman teacher averages \$60. In Bavaria the average pay of the female teacher is \$36; in the city of Munich it is about \$60. In the secondary schools (*Gymnasium, Realschule, Oberrealschule*) the average monthly salary in all Germany is about \$110 for the male instructors. The regular docents at our German *Hochschulen* receive on the average a considerably higher income than the ordinary instructors in the different State universities of the United States. The income from Government funds of the ordinary university teacher, amounting to \$200 on the average in Bavaria, is frequently augmented as much as three times the amount through students' fees.

The same degree of independence that comes to the teacher in Germany through salary and pension provisions is not allowed him in respect to political and religious views. Yet I doubt whether in reality this independence in political and religious matters is guaranteed to any greater extent in the United States, with all its political and religious freedom. The affairs of education are of too delicate a nature to allow those who are intrusted with their execution to be able to differ too loudly and too openly from the political and religious views of those who have employed them. This is just as true in the freest democratic nations as in constitutional monarchies.

I believe that any teacher in the United States who in public meetings or in the classroom would push a vigorous campaign in behalf of absolute monarchy would feel as little security in his tenure of office as a teacher in Germany who publicly demanded the abolition of the monarchy and the introduction of a pure democracy.

Only in one respect is the public school of the United States really independent and free, and that is with respect to religious questions. Here we come to the fourth difference. In Germany the school, at least as far as the elementary school is concerned, is denominational on principle; in the United States it is undenominational on principle. In Germany there is no public school the schedule of which does not call for at least two to four, or even five, hours of religious instruction every week. In the United States instruction in religion is barred from the curriculum. In many German States school supervision is assigned to the local pastor, whether he is equipped for school problems or not. In the smallest community in the United States the local supervision is intrusted to a school board composed of the laity, which delegates the task wherever possible to a technically trained schoolman. These two contrasting conditions are more, or less a reflection of the differently regulated relation between the state and the churches in the two countries.

In the United States, where the complete separation of church and state has been carried out, it is natural that in the performance of a task which in the last analysis serves for the education of citizens, the state should not allow to any church special rights in the public schools. In Germany, where state and church, in accordance with old traditions, are still struggling for mutual subjection, an important institution like the public school is naturally the object of a clerical-political struggle which can not be settled save through compromise. Such a compromise is without danger for the school, if the clergy of the church in question are not at the same time active politically.

The only disadvantage which comes from it is that the teacher of the school has a superior who is frequently insufficiently prepared for the function of supervision. This disadvantage is, however, a sensitive point with the teacher, because he himself can not rise to become a supervisory official. For the school itself, however, this disadvantage is not present if, as is the rule in Germany, the higher school officials are professional educators. But when the supervisory official is at the same time politically active, then there come real disadvantages for the school, into which I can not enter further.

In general, complete separation of church and state is not of itself a good thing for public education. For as a result of it we find regularly, indeed I might almost say necessarily, a large number of private schools, the work of which is entirely removed from the

supervision of the state. I believe that from such conditions certain real dangers arise for the state itself: dangers that are impossible where, thanks to the compromise between the state and the churches, state supervision shines into the furthest corner of the sectarian school. Furthermore, with respect to the complete exclusion of religious instruction from the public schools, we may with justice contend for two sorts of opinions. I for my part take the stand that religious instruction is no less essential to popular education than instruction that is intellectual or manual or moral in a general sense. Thus I consider it the duty of the public school not only to foster the religious needs of the millions, but to develop them into a finer religious life. To be sure, a denominational school is not necessary for that; this aim can be attained in the undenominational school just as well, at least in the kind of undenominational school that has developed in Germany, with its compulsory religious instruction. All that is necessary is teachers of genuine religious feeling.

There is still another difference between the schools of Germany and the United States, less important than those already mentioned. It is the difference between schools where the sexes are separated and schools where they are not. In the United States what is termed "coeducation" generally forms one of the basic principles of school organization. In elementary school and higher institution alike the classes are not arranged according to sexes; in Germany, on the contrary, wherever separation is feasible it is practiced. In the small country communities, where only one teacher is employed, boys and girls are educated together in the same school. In the cities we find the mingling of boys and girls in the same class until the fourth school year, not for reasons of principle, but on administrative grounds. Small classes of boys are filled up by the addition of girls, and vice versa, in order not to have to educate two classes at double expense. But in the cities from the fifth year up the sexes are invariably separated, and the same is true in all *Gymnasien*, *Realgymnasien*, and *Oberrealschulen*.

There are people who consider coeducation a fundamental of school organization. I can not accept this view. In general I incline to the opinion that the behavior and morality of our children, particularly the boys, is better if the two sexes go through school together, assuming, that is, a definite high standard of character for the whole school and its teaching force. But I am still more firmly convinced that in all equality of educational opportunity for boys and girls the method of education and the aim of the education must be shaped according to the nature of the two sexes. This differs more and more the older boys and girls become; and the more this differentiation in nature shows itself, the more necessary does it become to select subjects of instruction accordingly, and even in the same subjects to shape

the instruction in accordance with the nature of each sex. The more necessary these considerations become, however, the more difficult it is to formulate so-called coeducation, or, as it ought more correctly to be termed, coinstruction. There are real difficulties in this, and even the American high school has not solved them.

When we turn our attention to the actual organization of the common school, we notice no fundamental differences between the two nations, but there are certain notable variations. The common school of the United States, which includes elementary and grammar school, is constructed in much the same way as the German *Volksschule*. In both countries it includes normally 8 school years with an average of 25 instruction periods per week devoted to secular subjects. The only essential difference is that in the German States without exception compulsory education covers 10 months of the year, while in many American States the length of the school year falls as low as 8, 6, or even 5 months.

There is still another point in which I have observed a difference, namely, in the age of the pupils in the various classes. Whereas in the large cities of Germany the average age of the class of the *Volksschule* generally corresponds to the age for which it is intended, in the large cities of the United States we find the average age in all the classes essentially higher. Thus in the eighth grade in New York I found only 33½ per cent of the boys at the normal age of the completed thirteenth year. Another 33½ per cent had completed their fourteenth year, 10 per cent the fifteenth, and 4 per cent the sixteenth year. Thus it may be said that in the upper classes of the grammar grades in the larger cities of the United States the teachers work with more mature material than in Germany.

If the difference in the elementary schools of both nations is not an essential one (for even the course of study covers in general the same ground), there is a much greater difference in the secondary schools. The secondary schools in Germany do not connect with the grammar school, as in America, but with the elementary school. Thus only the first 4 school years in Germany are common for all the children of the population. Our secondary schools follow directly these first 4 school years (in many north German States they follow the first 3 years). The secondary schools cover 9 years and lead directly to university studies. In the United States, on the contrary, all the students, whether destined for the university or not, pursue without exception the entire elementary and grammar school course. Generally with the completed fourteenth year, or later, the pupil enters the high school, where he remains only 4 years. Beyond the high school is the college, and not until after he has finished that does the real university work come. In a few cases I found high schools with a course of 6 years, thus connecting with the sixth instead of the eighth school year. This was not at all common, however.

The total number of years of schooling, from the entrance of the 6-year old child into the common school to the matriculation of the 18 or 19 year old youth into the college (in Germany the university), is about the same in both countries, 12 or 13 years. But it is undeniable that the average intellectual maturity of the German pupil at entrance to the university is considerably higher than the average intellectual maturity of the student entering the American college. In my opinion this is due to several causes. In the first place, it is due to the fact that the stricter scientific method that characterizes the work of the secondary school, as compared with that of the elementary school, begins too late, if it is postponed until the fourteenth year, as in the United States. The habit of strict logical thinking can not be inculcated early enough. But the unsifted scholastic material of the common school does not permit the same intellectual demands upon it as the selected material of the secondary schools. Thus the secondary schools of the United States not only start their work too late, but they have to eliminate immediately in their students various habits of purely empirical thinking, a condition with which the German secondary schools do not have to contend. Admittedly, the secondary school in north Germany begins too early, when it starts at 9 years of age; but just as surely does the American secondary school begin too late.

Another reason for the lower productivity of the American high school lies in the inadequate provision by the State for the training of high-school teachers. In Germany the secondary school teacher after leaving the gymnasium has to have at least four years of university study preparatory to his special field. Then he has to undergo a searching examination on his specialty, and with this examination comes a year of pedagogical training. Thus the German secondary schools generally have a reliable guarantee that they are carrying on their work with none but well-equipped teachers, at least in so far as examinations and professional training can furnish such a guarantee. Whether the school is in the smallest village or in the largest city, everywhere it may rely upon having equally qualified teachers.

In the United States, on the other hand, only the largest cities have an available supply of reasonably well-trained teachers for their high schools. The period of training for the American high-school teacher is generally fairly long, for after leaving high school he must spend two years in normal college, or four years in university work if he wishes to obtain the degree of B. S. or A. B. The universities and colleges in the United States, however, are by no means as nearly uniform in their standards as the German universities, and the result is that many American high schools have a very inferior class of teachers.

A third difference between German and American secondary schools lies in the heterogeneity of the intellectual discipline. On

this point I should prefer not to express the results of my own observations, but they tend in the same direction as the observations of President Pritchett in the fifth report of the Carnegie Foundation (p. 64): "The high-school student acquires a superficial knowledge of many subjects and learns none with thoroughness. He lacks the hard fiber of intellectual discipline." I do not wish to disguise the fact that our German university teachers utter numerous complaints of the same tenor with regard to the graduates of the German gymnasium, but it can not be denied that the average demands of the German universities upon their students are much more exacting than those of a large number of American universities.

This lack of severe intellectual discipline in the United States is increased not a little by the fact that in so many of the high schools a large number of the courses are elective. If the student does not like the strict methods of a particular teacher or the difficulties of a certain course, he may in many of the schools choose a different subject the following year and so endeavor to evade severe training. To an entirely too great extent the student in the American high school does only what he likes to do, or what can be accomplished with a minimum of effort, and not what really helps him intellectually. This is utterly impossible in the German schools. Every student without exception must either adjust himself to the regular program throughout the full nine years of study, and satisfy certain minimum requirements therein, or else leave school. Furthermore, many tasks are assigned to him that are in no sense pleasurable; he occasionally execrates these, but in the end he does them under the hard stress of necessity in order to reach his goal, the university. Thus the student of the German secondary schools is held strictly to painstaking intellectual effort and accustomed to it, more so than in the majority of American high schools.

This is a dark side of the picture, doubtless much lamented in America also, and in many cities energetic measures are taken against it. But there is a bright side, too, the lack of which in Germany is very deeply felt. There are features of the American high school that develop certain active qualities of the will which fail to thrive in the German schools with their often much too stringent compulsion. The great freedom of the American high school fosters individual initiative, courage, cheerfulness, good fellowship, human qualities which are just as important as the passive qualities of will engendered in the German schools: Patience, persistence, endurance, thoroughness. The greater freedom which the American high school allows the student likewise forces the teachers in these schools into a service of comradeship with their pupils. The whole intercourse in the good American schools is based more on mutual confidence than with us. This shows itself outwardly in the touching loyalty which the

American student has for his high school, a loyalty which we unfortunately miss in the German student. It is very much to be desired that the German secondary schools learn far more than hitherto from this good feature of the American high school, and on the other hand the American schools would be benefited if they would adopt something of the strictness of our German secondary schools.

The German secondary schools have still another dark side. Their declared purpose is not to educate the people in general, which is the oft-declared aim of the American high school, but to prepare for the university or technical school, and thereby for the Government service. But since in Germany the Government service, because of the lifelong tenure of office, means an absolutely secure livelihood once a position is obtained, more students throng into the higher institutions than are needed for the Government work, and these persons are lost to commercial and industrial vocations. Thus Germany suffers more and more from an intellectual proletariat, a misfortune entirely unknown in the United States. Especially since the widespread development of the manual training high schools, with their careful fostering of technical education (a type of schools which we do not know at all in Germany), it seems to me that this danger has been put off indefinitely so far as the United States is concerned. For I have found a great number of graduates of these institutions working as apprentices in large factories, a phenomenon that would be sought in vain in Germany.

Generally speaking, the schools are in the midst of a rapidly increasing development in both nations. The great advantage that Germany possesses, in addition to the relentless thoroughness of the whole educational work, is in the well-regulated organization of a State-provided school system, which requires in each community a school as good as that of every other community, aside from the possibility of an ill-adapted teaching force, of course. But this advantage has been purchased at the expense of many qualities for which we must envy the American schools. It is to be regretted that the two nations are separated by so broad an expanse of ocean, for this distance tends to prevent large numbers of school men in both lands from making a mutual study of the educational institutions of the two countries. During my visit to the United States I gained the firm conviction that we could learn no less from the American schools than the citizens of the United States could learn from us. This is especially true of the common school, of which I have seen ideal examples in different cities. Indeed, it would be greatly desired that the German Government might arrange to have the American schools studied by German teachers, just as the American school authorities have been doing with us so generously for many years.