Useful for Life: Women, Girls, and Vocational School Reform in Chicago, 1880-1930

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USEFUL FOR LIFE: WOMEN, GIRLS, AND VOCATIONAL SCHOOL REFORM IN CHICAGO, 1880–1930

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INTRODUCTION

“A SCHOOL BUILT AROUND THE GIRL”

Marie Burtin was the first member of her family to graduate from high school. She was born in Chicago in 1913 to Jewish immigrant parents from Russia who spoke little English. Her father was a skilled woodturner. Her mother, who worked in the home, expected Marie to get a job and help support the family when she turned fourteen rather than continue her education. But Marie convinced her parents to let her enroll in a two-year millinery program at Chicago's Lucy Flower Technical School for Girls. She learned to make felt hats while her classmates trained as dressmakers, beauticians, cooks, and housekeepers. When Marie graduated in 1929 at the age of sixteen, a vocational guidance counselor found her a position as a hat saleswoman at Marshall Field department store in downtown Chicago. Marie earned enough money to support herself as a single working woman for eleven years in a rooming house on the westside of the city. Her earnings were far less than the Hungarian printer who lived next door and the Polish tinsmith down the street, but she made more than the waitress with whom she roomed. Marie was proud of her job and grateful for her vocational training. “People joked that all the old maids come from Lucy Flower,” she later recalled. “I was just glad to get a chance to go to school.”1

“Useful for Life” is a history of girls like Marie who prepared for work in Chicago schools and the women who shaped their vocational education between 1880 and 1930. A quarter

1 Marie Burtin, interview with Nancy Green, August 31, 1983, Nancy Green Papers, Chicago History Museum (CHM), Chicago, IL; 1940 United State Census, Chicago, Cook, Illinois; Roll: m-t0627-00986; Page:13A; Enumeration District:103-2037. Digital Image s. v. “Marie Burtin,” Ancestry.com (Name has been altered).
of American women and girls worked for wages by the time Marie graduated from high school in 1929. Like Marie, most of these workers were young single women and girls between the ages of ten and twenty-four. Where and how women and girls earned a living in industrial cities like Chicago shifted between 1880 and 1930. In the late nineteenth century, many Chicago women filled domestic positions as housekeepers and laundresses. A growing majority of immigrant women and girls from Southern and Eastern Europe earned wages outside the home operating sewing machines in factories or stitching gloves, corsets, and petticoats in sweatshops. Their daughters also supported the garment industry as dressmakers and milliners in the early twentieth century while others, like Marie, filled sales positions in shops and department stores. First-generation immigrant women increasingly moved into the white-collar sector after World War I and left the lowest-paid positions in Chicago's female economy – domestic service and factory work – to newly-arrived African American migrant women from the south. In total, the number of working women and girls in Chicago increased eleven-fold between 1880 and 1930.²

The mass entrance of women and girls into the waged workforce concerned middle-class observers. Some social reformers in Chicago argued that women and girls were physically unfit for manufacturing jobs due to the health hazards posed by industrial labor. The workforce in

general was considered morally dangerous terrain for young single girls, particular native-born white and European immigrant daughters. According to Jane Addams, a mixed sex workforce put vulnerable female workers in daily contact with litigious men who could easily “exploit the virtue of an immigrant girl.” Addams wrote in 1912 that many working girls pursued “illicit methods of earning money” with “evil companions” out of financial instability or lack of vocational guidance. Girls who remained chaste in the workforce were still a source of concern for women like Addams. When would these girls learn to cook, clean, and care for children if their youth was spent working outside the home? When would working girls prepare for their careers as homemaking women?

This dissertation explores how Chicago women addressed their concerns for the working girl through education reform. By the turn of the twentieth century, women's groups founded vocational institutions to train troublesome girls for “wholesome” work in domestic service and brought sewing and cooking classes into the public elementary schools. Some women established evening schools to prepare working girls for motherhood, while others pushed the public schools to protect girls from dangerous sweatshops by teaching them trade skills like dressmaking. By the 1910s, women brought vocational guidance counseling into Chicago public schools to help some female students find stable employment after graduating from schools like the Lucy Flower Technical School for Girls. Between 1880 and 1930, reformist women

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introduced new types of vocational programming “built around the girl” in Chicago and transformed how female students used a public school education to prepare for work.4

Historians of education typically credit male administrators, intellectuals, and “district progressives” for expanding the influence of public education in the daily lives of American children near the turn of the twentieth century.5 Enrollment in American public schools increased seven-fold between 1900 and 1930 as school officials tightened compulsory attendance laws, diversified the curriculum to include vocational programs, and established powerful school bureaucracies. Early historians of education from Ellwood Cubberley to Lawrence Cremin celebrated these reforms for democratizing public education to meet a diversity of student needs in the twentieth century. Revisionist scholars, notably Michael Katz and David Tyack, offer more critical interpretations of the progressive-era school officials who attempted to create “one best system” of public education that only reinforced existing economic inequalities between students based on race, class, and ethnicity.6

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These scholars underemphasize the contributions of women as school reformers in progressive-era cities, particularly as shapers of the evolving school curriculum. “Useful for Life” builds on the scholarship of historians like William Reese who demonstrate how progressive-era schools were shaped from the outside in by parents and labor activists as well as from the top down by school administrators. According to Reese, progressive-era schools were “multifaceted institutions” reflecting “the economic, political and cultural tensions of local communities.” Important studies on grassroots school reform in the progressive era by Reese, Julia Wrigley, and David Hogan highlight how class, religious, and ethnic tensions shaped new course offerings and school restructuring in urban education. “Useful for Life” focuses on women’s educational activism specifically and explores how gender ideologies impacted their goals and strategies as progressive-era school reformers.7

The role of women and gender is particularly absent in the literature on vocational education in progressive-era schools. Vocationalism is widely considered one of the most successful school reform movements of the early twentieth century by historians of education. In the 1880s, all students in Chicago public high schools studied classic literature, world history, astrology, and Latin to prepare for college or professional careers. Thirty years later, Chicago

public high schools offered over a dozen specialized vocational programs for male and female students. Male students most often learned trades and industry skills like carpentry, foundry, and engineering in new types of classrooms outfitted to resemble factories. Vocational programs like cooking, sewing, and dressmaking prepared their female counterparts for work in the garment trades and for the job of skilled homemaker. Male and female students both enrolled in stenography and accounting programs in Chicago schools to prepare for employment in offices and stores. These skill-based programs designed to prepare students for specific fields of work all entered urban school systems between 1880 and 1930. They are broadly defined as “vocational education” throughout this dissertation.⁸

Many historians frame vocational education as a movement championed by progressive educators who hoped to better connect public schools with the economy. To use Herbert Kliebard's terminology, male school officials and business leaders joined forces to “vocationalize” public education in the late nineteenth century to provide employers with better workers.⁹ Indeed, business leaders in cities like Boston, Milwaukee, and Chicago invested heavily in early vocational programs for male students by funding the construction of trade schools and donating equipment to build new shop classes. Vocational education reflected the


⁹ Kliebard, Schooled to Work, xiv.
broader dedication of progressive educators to make schools more “efficient” by linking education and industry. Yet historians of education have largely explored these themes in relation to the vocational training of male students rather than programs designed for girls.

Historians of education have argued that vocational programs were a response to “the boy problem” in turn-of-the-century cities. By 1900, Chicago public schools were filled with 300,000 immigrant children from Southern and Eastern Europe who often spoke little English and dropped out of school by age thirteen to join the workforce. Dropout rates were particularly high among immigrant boys who spent school days selling newspapers, working in factories, and loitering in alleyways rather than attending class. Scholars like Julia Grant contend that vocational education was one of many attempts by urban reformers to curb juvenile delinquency and vagrancy by educating “uncivilized and lawless boys” for productive employment. In Learning Together (1990), David Tyack and Elizabeth Hansot similarly credit these concerns about boys for gendering the public school curriculum for the first time in American history because school officials created new boys-only classes like carpentry and welding to keep male students engaged in their school work.10

These important studies underemphasize how “the girl problem” shaped the development of gender-specific vocational programming in equal measure. The daughters of immigrants also dropped out of school before high school to enter low-paid positions as string cutters, errand runners, and seamstresses at rates alarming to social reformers and educators alike. By 1913, a third of Chicago students who left school by age fourteen to join the workforce were female.\textsuperscript{11} While social reformers worried about vagrancy and petty crime among young working boys, young working girls incited a different set of concerns about moral corruption and sexual delinquency. Historians of women and gender have analyzed how assumptions about vulnerable “women adrift” in turn-of-the-century cities shaped the legal system and ideas about criminality. This dissertation contends that cultural assumptions about young working girls in the city led Chicago women to spearhead vocational school reforms as well.\textsuperscript{12}

“Useful for Life” pushes women school reformers and their concern for “the girl problem” to the center of the vocational education movement in Chicago from 1880 to 1930. In doing so, this study advances three interventions in the scholarship on American school reform and women's reform. First, I argue that women social reformers, trade unionists, and educators


were active vocational school reformers responsible for new vocational schools, curricula, and policies specifically designed to prepare female students for work in Chicago. These women were not united in their goals for girls' vocational education. Women in the settlement house movement like Florence Kelley wanted public schools to prepare female students for the work of homemaking and motherhood. By contrast, labor activists like Margaret Dreier Robins argued public schools should help working girls advance in the manufacturing sector by allowing female students to learn trade skills alongside boys. “Useful for Life” explores how women’s conflicting views on what constituted “vocational education” for girls shaped the public school curriculum in Chicago schools between 1880 and 1930.

This dissertation builds on previous studies of girls’ vocational education by emphasizing the work of women reformers. In his landmark study of girls' vocational schooling in American public schools, *Education and Women's Work* (1991), John Rury argues that vocationalism reinforced existing disparities within the female labor force between native-born white, immigrant, and African American women who did not have equal access to work-training programs. Karen Graves has provided a detailed analysis of how gender-specific subjects like cooking and sewing promoted a new vision of the ideal female student as “domesticated citizen” in progressive-era St. Louis. “Useful for Life” contributes to the limited scholarship on girls' vocational education by uncovering the motivations and implications of women's involvement in vocational school reform in progressive-era Chicago.13

Secondly, “Useful for Life” situates vocational school reform within the broader context of the women's reform movement in Chicago. Gender historians have argued that women created their own “female dominion of reform” through women's clubs and settlement houses in turn-of-the-century cities.¹⁴ Studies by Dolores Hayden, Maureen Flanagan, and Sarah Deutsch demonstrate how reformist women applied their “vision of the good city” in the realm of municipal politics and urban planning. Historians have paid less attention to how women's goals for social and urban reform shaped education. In Chicago, settlement house workers argued that teaching female students to cook and clean would solve public health issues like malnutrition and the spread of contagious disease. Club women reasoned that vocational guidance in the public schools would curb sexual delinquency among girls and reduce prostitution. These women petitioned school officials to reform course offerings and demanded seats on the Board of Education to oversee the vocational instruction of female students. In sum, this dissertation argues that education and school reform were central to the broader social reform agendas of progressive-era women.¹⁵


¹⁵ Dolores Hayden, The Grand Domestic Revolution: A History of Feminist Designs for American Homes,
“Useful for Life” builds on the work of historian Jane Bernard Powers who suggests school reform was a tool for social reform for progressive-era women. In *The “Girl Question” in Education* (1991), Powers explores how national women's organizations promoted different versions of vocationalism for girls that aligned with their goals for women's social and economic roles in the twentieth century. “Useful for Life” sheds new light on the specific strategies, motivations, and accomplishments of individual women reformers by focusing on the local history of Chicago. Rather than highlight the competing platforms of national organizations like the American Home Economics Association, this dissertation uncovers the local activism of women who vied for control over the girls' vocational curriculum in one major American city. My attention to local actors in Chicago reveals that women's promotion of vocational programs was based on specific assumptions about girls and girlhood as well as their hopes for women. In Chicago, women in the vocational education movement believed a girl required special training and guidance so that “her future usefulness” was not ruined by “wrong choice at the brink of womanhood.”

This dissertation foregrounds two competing visions of girls’ vocational education in particular. Reformers in the settlement house movement – mostly college-educated and native-born white women – argued that vocational programs for girls should emphasis “domestic education” like cooking, sewing, and cleaning. These women did not oppose women's work

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outside the home, but worried that girls would exit the labor force unprepared for motherhood without dedicated coursework in the “domestic arts.” Labor activists disagreed. Leaders of Chicago Women’s Trade Union League fought for vocational programs that emphasized wage-earning trades like dressmaking rather than the unpaid work of mothers in the home. Both groups of women in Chicago were united in their support of progressive platforms like factory regulations, child welfare reform, and women’s suffrage throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Their competing goals for girls’ vocational education reveals where branches of the women’s reform movement splintered on the subject of women and work.

Lastly, “Useful for Life” demonstrates how female students embraced, resisted, and negotiated the vocational curriculum in Chicago between 1880 and 1930. Previous studies of vocational school reform have not examined the perspectives of actual students in part because student experience is difficult to uncover in the historical record. As a result, historians of education often imply that students were passive recipients of new vocational programming in public schools rather than active participants in the vocational education movement. This dissertation uses letters, court transcripts, and oral histories to uncover how girls experienced the rise of vocational education in progressive-era Chicago. I argue that female students made independent choices about their vocational training that often directly contradicted the interests and goals of Chicago's various women school reformers.17

The most successful women vocational reformers argued that public schools should prepare girls for jobs as dressmakers, saleswomen, and stenographers as well as for the life-long duties in the home. Women social reformers and school officials created these vocational programs with native-born white and European immigrant girls specifically in mind who were likely to leave the workforce in their twenties and commit themselves to the unpaid labor of homemaking and motherhood. Indeed, less than a quarter of working women in America were married in 1920 and the average working women only earned wages for five to seven years. Yet the assumptions of women school reformers that female students would only earn temporary “pin money” before marriage disadvantaged working-class and African American female students who did not have the financial luxury of planning for futures of full-time homemaking. These students in particular often challenged or ignored the vocational reform efforts of progressive-era women. Their experiences demonstrate the important role of student agency in the vocational education movement and the limitations of women-led vocational school reforms in the early twentieth century.

This dissertation uses the term “girls” to describe female students rather than “teenagers,” “young women,” or other possible categorizations. The women reformers covered in this study consistently used the term “girl” in reference to female students and workers under the age of twenty. A young woman in her twenties could also be called a “girl” by middle-class reformers if she was unmarried and living at home. “Useful for Life” builds on recent scholarship in the field of girlhood studies that interrogates “girl” as a socially constructed category in order to better understand the unique experiences of those classified as such in different historical moments.

18 Wiener, From Working Girl to Working Mother, 6.
My intention is not to condescend young women in this study by relegating them to girlhood regardless of age or experience. Rather, my goal is to uncover how cultural perceptions of what it meant to be a girl preparing for womanhood shaped the vocational education of female students in progressive-era Chicago.¹⁹

“Useful for Life” is organized in five chapters. Chapter one, “Habits of Industry and Virtue,” explores how upper-class white club women and social reformers in Illinois created a network of vocational boarding schools to prepare wayward and “delinquent” girls for domestic service between 1879 and 1899. In the two decades proceeding the creation of the nation's first juvenile court system in Chicago, these women argued that vexing social and moral problems in the city including prostitution and sexual abuse could be curbed by removing girls from city streets and educating them for employment as servants, cooks, and laundresses in private homes. Absent in other studies of vocationalism, this chapter integrates the reform school movement into the history of girls' vocational education in progressive-era Chicago.

Chapter two, “The School-Bred Mother,” examines how a group of social reformers, club women, and educators pressured school officials to train girls for homemaking and motherhood in Chicago's public elementary schools between 1890 and 1915. The school reformers highlighted in this chapter believed that the burdens of poverty had prematurely pushed

immigrant daughters into the workforce and alienated them from domesticity. These privileged white women fought for roles in school leadership in the 1890s and outfitted classrooms with stoves and sewing machines so girls could learn to cook nutritious meals and make their own dresses. This chapter argues that early advocates of domestic education were not traditionalists who intended to advance “the cult of separate spheres” through vocational school reform. Rather, these women were motivated by specific concerns for the safety of girls working in factories and women raising families under new conditions of urbanization and industrialism.

Chapter three, “A Superior Kind of Working Woman,” uncovers the efforts of labor activists affiliated with the Women's Trade Union League to expand vocational programs for female students in Chicago's public high schools between 1900 and 1915. Labor women in Chicago argued that public high schools should allow female students to enroll in male-only trade programs so they could later support themselves as working women. Activists like Agnes Nestor also argued that female students should study existing labor legislation, learn the philosophy of collective bargaining, and take courses on the history of capitalism to better protect themselves in the manufacturing sector. Their goals were challenged by middle-class women working within the school system who believed domestic skills like cooking and sewing were of equal importance to a girl's vocational training. This chapter considers how these conflicts shaped the high school curriculum, and analyzes how female students responded to new school programs designed to prepare them for work both in and outside the home by 1915.

Chapter four, “To Prevent Girls from Going Astray,” uncovers the work of women who brought vocational guidance counseling into Chicago's public schools between 1910 and 1929. A group of well-known social reformers including Sophonisba Breckinridge and Edith Abbott
spearheaded the vocational guidance movement in Chicago by organizing the Vocational Supervision League in 1910 dedicated to investigating work opportunities for girls leaving school between the ages of fourteen and sixteen. This chapter argues that early advocates of vocational guidance believed public schools should supervise a girl's transition from school to work in order to curb child welfare issues like vagrancy, delinquency, and prostitution. Historians of education have framed vocational guidance as a male-led movement by focusing on the formation of national organizations like the National Vocational Guidance Association. This chapter argues that women institutionalized vocational guidance on the local level in order to address their concerns for the physical and moral dangers facing future working girls.

Chapter five, “A Girl's Preparation for Life,” analyzes the intersection of vocational education and citizenship training for girls in Chicago's public high school between 1917 and 1929. This chapter devotes significant attention to how women shaped the Federal Vocational Education Act of 1917 – popularly known as the Smith Hughes Act – and how the resulting legislation impacted female students after World War I. By allocating federal funds to “vocational home economics,” the Smith Hughes Act supported a new emphasis in the postwar curriculum on homemaking and motherhood as the primary occupations for good American women. This chapter explores how a growing minority of African American female students in Chicago experienced vocational home economics classes intended to prepare immigrant daughters for citizenship. This chapter asserts that the vocational curriculum after World War I solidified race-based conceptions of citizenship and labor for women in the public school curriculum.
These five chapters use Chicago as a case study for exploring the role of women and girls in the early history of vocational school reform. Chicago is a particularly useful city for the study of progressive-era reform movements due to its active settlement house workers, labor activists, and reform-minded educators. Chicago was nationally unique in some respects. The city appointed one of the first female superintendent of schools in 1911, Dr. Ella Flagg Young, who was arguably the most politically powerful woman in America at the helm of the nation's second-largest school system. Yet school reform initiatives led by women in Chicago were also representative of national trends in vocational education. Particularly middle- and upper-class white women throughout northeastern and midwestern cities addressed their concerns for the working girl through getting involved in school governance, funding vocational schools and evening classes, and advocating for vocational guidance programs. When possible, “Useful for Life” addresses parallel and divergent trends in the development of girls’ vocational education in other American cities. Yet the focus of this dissertation is largely local in order to highlight the individual voices, contributions, and experiences of Chicago women and girls in the American vocational education movement between 1880 and 1930.
CHAPTER ONE

“HABITS OF INDUSTRY AND VIRTUE”

INDUSTRIAL SCHOOLS FOR WAYWARD GIRLS IN ILLINOIS, 1879-1900

On March 10, 1895, Mamie Davis started a riot. Sixteen years old with bobbed black hair, Davis had been locked in the “strong room” of the State Training School for Girls in Chicago for acting “incorrigible.” There she was allegedly chained to the floor and denied food and water. After the house matrons and their sixty inmates sat down for dinner that evening, Davis's co-conspirators turned off all the lights and immersed the dining hall in darkness. Girls smashed dishes, chairs, and tables as a distraction while a handful of inmates liberated Davis from the strong room by splintering its door open with broken table legs. The school erupted in rebellion when Davis emerged. Her fellow inmates, all between the ages of thirteen and seventeen, shattered over half the windows in the three-story building and threw broken furniture, dishes, and books onto the street below. When the police arrived around eight o'clock, some of the girls begged for arrest. Davis was one of them. “Yes, take me to the station!” she pleaded to an officer. “I would rather go to the bridewell than stay here.”¹

Mamie Davis was born in Chicago in 1879 and spent most of her young life moving through the city's network of “industrial schools” for troubled and troublesome girls. By age eleven Davis lived at the Illinois Industrial School for Girls in Evanston, a boarding school intended to prepare homeless girls for work as domestic servants through lessons in sewing.

¹ “Girls in Wild Riot,” Chicago Daily Tribune (CDT), March 11, 1895, 1; “No Sham Riot This,” CDT, March 29, 1895, 1.
cooking, laundry, and housekeeping. The Illinois Industrial School for Girls was one of many boarding schools founded by upper-class white women who felt a personal responsibility to educate “dependents” like Davis for respectable work. By the 1890s, some of these women argued that the state should support separate industrial schools for “delinquent” girls who committed crimes, had serious behavioral issues, or were sexually “immoral.” Davis was transferred to the Illinois State Training School for “female juvenile offenders” in 1894 shortly before her riot. For at least two years she learned to sew a perfect hem, launder linens, and set the table before administrators most likely placed her in a strangers' home as a live-in domestic servant.\(^2\)

The industrial schools movement is underemphasized in studies of vocational education. Historians of education have demonstrated how prominent business leaders were early promoters of vocational education for boys and funded the creation of private trade schools during the 1870s and 1880s. These scholars often suggest that work-oriented programs for girls like sewing and cooking came later, at the turn of the twentieth century, and were modeled after existing schools for boys.\(^3\) The industrial schools movement complicates this narrative. Industrial schools for so-called delinquent and dependent girls as well as their male counterparts – often

\(^2\) Testimony of Mamie Davis, March 20, 1895, Secretary of State, Governors Reports Index: State Board of Commissioners of Public Charities, Home for Juvenile Female Offenders, 115/17A/F4, Illinois State Archives (ISA), Springfield, IL.

called “manual training schools” – provided one of the earliest systems of vocational schooling in Illinois. These institutions were founded by upper-class white women who believed wayward children would benefit from a work-oriented education. Histories of vocational reform have overlooked these women as early advocates of vocational education and their motivations for educating wayward girls for work.

Figure 1. Drawing of Mamie Davis, 1895. Image shows Mamie Davis standing on a chair and heating her curling irons at the State Industrial School for Girls. “At the Cross Roads of Her Life,” Chicago Daily Tribune, March 13, 1895, 3.
Programs that prepared adolescents for wage-earning went by many different and often incongruous names in the nineteenth century. The term “manual training” usually applied to hands-on programs that taught male students trades like woodworking, welding, shoe making, and tailoring. “Industrial schools” and “industrial education” were popular terms for programs that prepared adolescents for any type of wage-earning usually in or near cities. Industrial education was popularized by the reform school movement half a century before public school officials adopted similar programs. “Industrial” was a catch-all that suggested instruction in a specific set of modern skills as well as modern values like industriousness and efficiency. The meaning of industrial education for girls was even more complex. In Illinois and elsewhere, industrial schools for dependent girls offered instruction in cooking, home sewing, and housekeeping to shield girls from industrial life rather than prepare them for careers in industry.\(^4\)

Industrial schools were shaped by specific cultural anxieties about girls and the city. While urban reformers were concerned about all wayward children, women in the industrial schools movement argued that female adolescents were particularly unfit for urban life and required their guidance. Without close supervision, these women feared that girls who lived and worked in the city would be easily corrupted, sexually abused, and ill-prepared for motherhood. Nineteenth-century industrial schools were therefore intended to provide moral protection in addition to practical preparation for work in the field of domestic service. As one industrial

school official argued, education for domestic labor ensured that struggling Chicago girls were both “better paid and better shielded from evil.”

The upper-class white women who founded industrial schools and reformatories in the late nineteenth century thought they could solve some of the city's most vexing social issues through teaching troublesome girls “the habits of industry and virtue.” These women argued that the city would suffer from less prostitution, sexual abuse, and crime by removing girls from unsafe working and living conditions. They reasoned that educating the “dangerous classes” of girls for domestic work would prepare them for motherhood and therefore reduce future rates of unwanted pregnancy, divorce, and child neglect. These arguments proved powerful. By 1899, before the creation of the nation's first juvenile court system, Illinois had at least ten state-subsidized boarding schools for girls and a new legal framework for placing “dependent” and “delinquent” children under their guardianship. This chapter provides a social history of these early vocational institutions, the women who founded them, and the girls they hoped to reform.


“A Place of Protection”

Reformers and philanthropists in northeastern cities first created a system of institutional care for boys and girls during the 1820s. Early juvenile institutions were known as “houses of refuge” or “houses of reformation” and took in children under the age of sixteen who were found soliciting, begging, stealing, sleeping in alleys, wandering the streets alone, or considered without proper parental care by police or local courts. Most state-run institutions founded in this era offered rudimentary education in reading and writing along with vocational subjects like shoemaking for boys and housekeeping for girls. Antebellum reformatories were modeled after prisons, however, rather than schools. At the New York House of Refuge, the first state-run juvenile reformatory in America, inmates slept in prison-style cellblocks and were often disciplined harshly with physical punishment. The warden's use of corporal punishment and solitary confinement at the Boston House of Reformation was so notorious that the city's judges refused to commit children there for their own protection by the 1850s.7

Child welfare activists in the mid-nineteenth century criticized antebellum state refuges for treating street children as hardened criminals in need of punishment rather than waifs worthy of education and care. This shift in attitude stemmed from new cultural and psychological understandings of childhood. Parents, educators, and intellectuals increasingly viewed childhood as a distinct stage of life that needed to be nurtured and protected over the course of the

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nineteenth century. A new generation of mainly middle-class Protestant reformers argued that children were not fully formed individuals like adults and were therefore impressionable and vulnerable to outside influences. These self-appointed “child savers” pointed to environmental factors like poor housing, negligent parents, and lack of education as the cause of youthful misdeeds rather than blaming children themselves. In both England and the United States, child welfare advocates made it their mission to protect children – especially white native-born children – from what they considered the corruptive influences of urban life.  

One of these “child savers” was the English educator and social reformer Mary Carpenter who helped pioneer a new form of juvenile reformatory in the 1850s. Born to a Unitarian minister in 1807, Carpenter argued that homeless and neglected children should be cared for in a new type of institution called the “industrial school.” Unlike the punitive reformatory, industrial schools housed children in a comfortable home-like setting with a shared living room, dining room, and bedrooms. Large industrial schools would group children not in cellblocks but “families” where children could develop communal bonds as sisters and brothers by sharing housekeeping responsibilities. Children learned vocational skills for self-sufficiency while living in industrial boarding schools from experienced blacksmiths, shoemakers, dressmakers, and housekeepers. Carpenter believed that an emphasis on manual work would moralize vagrant children as well as prepare them for employment. She stated that industrial work could “excite a healthy moral energy” and “a habit of conformity to duty” among neglected and homeless

adolescents. For more troublesome delinquents, engaging in manual labor would act as a “safety-valve for their untamed energies.”

Carpenter argued industrial boarding schools were particularly important for vagrant girls. Although punitive methods were damaging to all children, she believed that boys could better withstand the harsh punishment of prison-style reformatories due to “the greater vigor of their natures.” In contrast, girls had “tender” physical and mental characters that needed to be nurtured in a domestic boarding school. In her widely read book *Juvenile Delinquents* (1854), Carpenter argued that higher rates of repeat offenses among institutionalized girls demonstrated they were more easily “ruined” by life in the punitive reformatory. In one example, she cited a reformatory in Scotland where 191 girls were re-committed after their release on charges like vagrancy, theft, and prostitution compared to only 27 male repeat offenders. Carpenter viewed this as evidence that girls required closer guidance and more nurturing reform methods to remain chaste and law-abiding.

Unreformed girls posed a serious threat to the social order for Carpenter and middle-class reformers on both sides of the Atlantic. Prevailing gender norms of Victorian culture suggested that girls were by nature innocent, pure, and protected from public life. Girls who appeared homeless to middle-class reformers were thus a sign of social chaos. Unsupervised urban girls conjured images of broken families, single mothers, unwanted pregnancies, and, above all, prostitution. Many urban reformers assumed that girls without homes or constant supervision would inevitably turn to prostitution out of financial necessity or coercion. Thus, any girl who

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10 Carpenter, *Juvenile Delinquents*, 88; 106.
wandered the alleys or begged on street corners was often viewed as both socially deviant and sexually “immoral.”

Carpenter argued that industrial schools – also called “ragged schools” in England – protected the sexual purity of poor girls in industrialized cities. In *Juvenile Delinquents*, she asserted that learning skills for self-sufficiency like dressmaking or housekeeping would make destitute girls less likely to turn to sex work for support. The home-like setting of an industrial school also taught girls to “love virtue” by emphasizing the comforts of home, family, and domestic duty. Carpenter asserted that emphasizing “the habits of domestic life” could both prevent and correct sexually deviant behavior. By teaching girls the joys of domesticity, Carpenter asserted that industrial schools could reform “low and degraded girls” into “chaste, useful, and respectable members of society.”

Carpenter’s principles of industrial education quickly gained popularity among American educators and reformers. Calls for industrial schools for girls in the United States were often motivated by the increasing visibility of young women and girls migrating to northern cities in search of work in the two decades following the Civil War. In Chicago, these girls and “women adrift” included both native-born whites from rural areas as well as recent immigrants from Ireland, Germany, and Sweden. American child welfare activists argued that single girls entering

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cities to find work in needle trades or domestic service were in a far more dangerous position than their brothers. Urging the city of Boston to invest in an industrial school for girls, suffragist Eliza Archard wrote in 1867: “Take an average city girl with her weak, white hand, her colds, her headaches, her nervousness, her everlasting tendency to 'burst into tears' at any moment...What, then, will become of this helpless potato sprout?”

At least a dozen states established industrial boarding schools for “wayward” girls by 1880. Almost all were located in the Northeast and Midwest near large manufacturing centers in states like Massachusetts, New York, Pennsylvania, Ohio, and Illinois. Some of these early industrial schools were large state-run institutions like the Lancaster Industrial School for Girls in Massachusetts which opened in 1854. The first state reformatory for girls in America, the Lancaster school was organized in a “family system” composed of a central schoolhouse and chapel surrounded by cottages that each housed a “family” of girls. Each family was overseen by a house matron who instructed the girls in their daily laundry, cooking, and housekeeping responsibilities. Large state-funded industrial schools that used this family system (also known as the cottage system) were often located on the outskirts of cities to remove girls from urban temptations and emphasis the morality of country living.


Many of the nation's early industrial schools were far more informal. In cities like Chicago and New York, industrial schools were first established in existing charitable institutions during the mid-nineteenth century like veterans' homes, orphanages, and rooming houses for abandoned widows. Some were boarding schools where children resided, while others only offered food, vocational lessons, and clothing during the day. Many urban industrial schools catered to both boys and girls by offering classes in carpentry, shoemaking, and tailoring as well as sewing and housekeeping. While diverse in form, industrial schools in American cities reflected the vision of Mary Carpenter by resembling homes rather than prisons and emphasizing education over punishment.16

A group of wealthy Chicago women affiliated with the city's various Protestant churches brought the industrial schools movement to Illinois in 1854 by organizing the Ladies' Industrial School Association (LISA). Their mission was to operate and raise public support for a network of industrial schools that would prepare homeless and vagrant children “for future usefulness” through vocational classes like tailoring and shoemaking for boys and sewing and housekeeping for girls. By 1856 the Association opened four industrial schools for boys and girls near downtown Chicago: two on the south side, one to the west, and one on the northern sands of Lake Michigan. These schools were each attended by roughly one hundred students of primarily Irish and Norwegian descent who, according to one school official, lived and worked “near the filth and dust of our coal and lumber yards.”17

16 By the turn of the twentieth century, state officials took over the operations of many small charitable industrial schools and relocated them to the countryside. For example, the New York Training School for Girls originally opened in a former home for widowed women in Manhattan before relocating to the countryside in Hudson, New York in 1904. See The New York State Training School for Girls at Hudson, NY (Albany, NY: J.B. Lyon Co., 1904). Digitized by Cornell University Library.

17 “The Ladies' Industrial Association of Chicago,” CDT, Feb 15, 1855, 2. Also see Mary Burch, “Ladies' Industrial
The privileged society women of the Ladies' Industrial School Association were particularly concerned about protecting the sexual purity of young European immigrant and native-born white girls arriving to Chicago in search of work. In the 1850s the Association asked for donations to establish an industrial boarding school that would offer safe housing and vocational training for domestic service to girls under eighteen years old. In their annual report of 1858, the group's secretary explained that girls migrating to Chicago in search of work needed “a place of protection” where they could be cared for by respectable women and found safe employment as maids or cooks. These girls were living “without parental counsel or moral restraint,” she wrote, and were therefore “falling daily into sin and temptation.”

The first industrial schools run by LISA were a short-lived experiment and all closed during or by the end of the Civil War. However, their work was reinvigorated in the wake of the Great Chicago Fire of 1871 which rendered nearly one-third of the city homeless. Some of Chicago's most famous women joined the Association after the fire and assumed leadership positions including Myra Bradwell, the first female lawyer in America, and Helen Mar Judson Beveridge, wife to Governor John Lourie Beveridge. New members of the LISA agreed that homeless and “adrift” girls in the city needed shelter and vocational direction. With financial support from their fellow “women of influence,” the Association purchased a former Civil War veterans' home in Evanston, Illinois and converted the three-story building into a boarding school for future domestic servants.

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19 “Girls' Industrial School: Meeting of the Managers,” *CDT*, June 2, 1877, 8; Alfred Theodore Andreas, *History of
The Illinois Industrial School prepared girls for domestic service positions through lessons in cooking, sewing, and housekeeping. Industrial schools in other states like New York and Massachusetts also focused on taking in homeless girls and preparing them for domestic service, which remained the largest employer of American women by the 1880s. Members of the LISA generally agreed that manufacturing work was dangerous for girls who would be better cared for in private homes as cooks and maids. Thus, sewing lessons at the school focused on making and mending items for home use rather than needle skills for garment trades. Girls living in the Illinois Industrial School typically devoted their mornings to academic classes including reading, spelling, arithmetic, geography, and American history and spent their afternoons learning domestic skills. All residents attended Sunday school and participated in morning prayers.

Members of the Ladies' Industrial School Association believed that girls adrift in the city without proper guidance would become sexually promiscuous and, by extension, immoral. Middle-class reformers often blamed the sexual autonomy of working-class girls in particular for a host of social issues in the late-nineteenth century city including divorce, adultery, and single motherhood. In the words of one county judge, promiscuous girls were also responsible for a general uptick in “crime, disease, sin and misery” in Chicago. The Ladies Industrial School Association hoped to curb this perceived rise in sexual immorality by removing vagrant or troublesome girls from city streets and educating them for wholesome domestic labor.


20 In spite of women's growing presence in the manufacturing and commercial sectors, over sixty percent of wage-earning women still worked as domestic servants by 1870. Meyerowitz, Women Adrift, 2.

Administrators at the Illinois Industrial School often argued that the foundations of the American family were at stake. Without their guidance, one school official argued, “an impure girl left to grow up and become a mother is likely to increase her kind three to five fold.”

The Ladies' Industrial School Association became a powerful lobbying force for the expansion of industrial schools for girls throughout the state of Illinois. In 1878 their president Helen Mar Judson Beveridge drafted a bill that outlined the pentameters of industrial schools to receive state accreditation, funding, and parental power over female inmates. Her bill stated that industrial schools should receive $10 each month per inmate to be paid by the county from where girls were sent. County funds would also help support industrial schools by covering girls' travel to the school, food, and clothing. With support from her husband, Governor John Lourie Beveridge, the Girls' Industrial Schools Act passed in 1879.

Beveridge's bill ensured that all subsequent industrial schools for girls in Illinois adhered to the same conventions. To receive accreditation and funding, the new state law required industrial schools teach girls “domestic vocations” like sewing and housekeeping so they could “assist in their own support” presumably as domestic servants. A group of at least seven women, like the Ladies' Industrial School Association, were required to found industrial schools and place girls in the homes of “respectable citizens” upon their release. Echoing the sentiments of


23 Mr. and Mrs. McKinnis, “Suggestions as to Executive Power of Supervision of Illinois Industrial School for Girls in Evanston,” Sept 24, 1895, Secretary of State, Executive Department Records, Misc. Manuscripts, Dependent Children, 1886, 115/17A/D6, ISA.
Mary Carpenter, Beveridge specified in the bill that industrial schools must serve as “a home and school” rather than treating girls “as criminals in disgrace sent to prison.”

Figure 2. Helen Mar Judson Beveridge, c. 1870. Photo printed in Jennie M. Patten, *History of the Somonauk United Presbyterian Church* (Chicago: Privately Printed by J.M. Patten, 1928), 96.

In the Girls’ Industrial Schools Act, Beveridge provided the state’s first legal definition of a “dependent” child. The Act included three conditions that qualified girls for commitment to an industrial school as a dependent ward of the state. First, a girl was considered dependent on the state if she lacked parental guardianship due to abandonment, drunkenness, or death. Second, a

girl was deemed dependent if she was found wandering the streets or alleys, hanging out in brothels, or “consorting with vicious persons.” And third, any girl begging or “selling any article in public” was categorized as a dependent ward in need of institutional care. In sum, the Girls' Industrial School Act set the precedent for a broad conception of juvenile dependency that encompassed nearly all unsupervised public behavior among adolescents.25

In 1883 the state legislature passed a similar bill supporting the creation of vocationally-oriented boarding schools for dependent boys. The Boys' Manual Training School Act reiterated the state's earlier definition of a “dependent” girl but allocated less financial support for their care – only seven to nine dollars per boy between the ages of ten and eighteen. Manual training schools for boys were not required to have female founders but were expected to prepare boys for employment upon their release through vocational classes. Notably, the Act gave school administrators authority to discharge a boy at any time if release was “for the good of the boy.” Girls could be placed out as domestic servants in “respectable homes” at any age by industrial school officials. Yet otherwise female inmates were required to remain in industrial schools until their twenty-first birthdays.26

Shifting boundaries between girlhood and womanhood in American society shaped these subtle but important distinctions in the two laws. In the late nineteenth century, middle-class reformers successfully raised age of consent laws for girls from ages ten or twelve in some states to sixteen or eighteen. In doing so, “purity reformers” advanced a legal definition of girlhood


that extended through the teenaged years and ended when girls presumably were ready for marriage and motherhood. The Girls' Industrial School Act reflected a widening conception of girlhood among middle-class reformers. State law allowed male inmates to leave manual training schools throughout their teen years if they demonstrated an ability to remain lawful and self-sufficient. In other words, male inmates could prove their manhood through action at varying ages. The Girls' Industrial School Act, in contrast, suggested that all female inmates required parental guidance from school matrons until the age of twenty-one when they were ready to find husbands.27

Local courts and bridewells throughout Illinois increasing relied on state-subsidized industrial and manual training schools to address child welfare issues after 1879. Before the Girls' Industrial School Act, the Illinois Industrial School housed roughly 60 white and native-born girls between the ages of five and fifteen who often came and went as they pleased. Some lived in the boarding school for weeks, others for multiple years. Most girls were referred to the school by family members or neighborhoods who thought they should be removal from “unhealthy influences” such as neglectful mothers, abusive fathers, or extreme poverty. Some parents sent their own children to the Illinois Industrial School willingly for temporary housing or vocational training.

The fluid function of an industrial school hardened after 1879. Family members and teachers still suggested girls to the Illinois Industrial School in the 1880s. But girls were increasingly sentenced to the school by court officials rather than referred by concerned citizens.

The Girls' Industrial School Act empowered court officials to forcibly remove “dependent” girls from their families on the grounds of improper housing or parental neglect and place them in private homes as domestic servants. This shift towards institutionalization began decades before the creation of a juvenile justice system in Illinois. When the Cook County Juvenile Court opened in 1899, the Illinois Industrial School already housed 500 female inmates under the age of eighteen committed by local courts throughout the state.28

“Useful Womanhood”

Industrial schools provided one of the earliest systems of vocational training for girls in Illinois. The Illinois Industrial School had dedicated workrooms to teach girls baking, knitting, laundry, sewing, and housekeeping. A large sewing room for afternoon lessons in mending and hemming was competed in 1881 along with a dining room for inmates to practice meal service and place setting. Similar methods of teaching domestic skills were incorporated into the built environment of public schools in American cities by the turn of the twentieth century.29

Women who worked in industrial schools developed specific pedagogies to prepare girls for domestic labor that were also later adapted by public school administrators. Girls below the age of ten were taught the basics of cooking and cleaning through “kitchen garden” classes in many industrial boarding schools. Invented by Emily Huntington of the Wilson Industrial School for Girls in Manhattan, kitchen gardens were intended to engage girls as young as three years old in domestic duties through the use of play. Lessons were designed to simulate games and


included seating the table for a tea party, serving a pretend meal to a table of peers, and sweeping a room.30

Administrators of the Illinois Industrial School found inmates positions usually as live-in domestic servants through their Home and Indenture Committee. Most inmates at the Illinois Industrial School were considered desirable domestic servants among middle-class families who preferred young, white, and English-speaking help. As head of the Indenture Committee, Helen Mar Judson Beveridge reviewed applications from potential employers and local help wanted ads from families in search of affordable domestic help. Sometimes the school received adoption requests for younger girls who could be useful daughters in the home. Applications and help wanted ads often indicated preferred personality traits for girls such as “neat,” “respectable,” or “reliable.”31

A dedicated textbook industry arose to help industrial school matrons prepare girls for the requisite social customs of working and living amongst middle-class families. One textbook used at the Illinois Industrial School, *Familiar Lessons for Little Girls* (1882), explained the courtesy of speaking in a hushed voice during the evening and reminded girls to close doors gently when leaving a room. The textbook included an entire chapter on the proper method of answering a door bell. Author Harriet Willard instructed future housekeepers to make sure their hands were

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cleaned and their sleeves rolled down before opening the door to inquire, “Who shall I say wishes to see the lady?”

The efforts of wealthy white women to train struggling girls for domestic labor were in part motivated by self-interest. The women who founded industrial schools in northern cities like Chicago, Boston, and New York employed domestic servants and were concerned about the

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quality of their own labor force. Working girls, particularly those of white and Western European
descent, were leaving the drudgery of domestic service behind for new opportunities in stores,
offices, and factories. This exodus had created a serious drain in the pool of suitable servants that
well-to-do women called “the servant problem.” By establishing industrial schools, organizations
like the Ladies’ Industrial School Association ensured their own communities retained access to
well-trained staff.33

On the other hand, members of the Ladies' Industrial School Association believed they
were addressing a serious social need by educating girls for domestic work. Women in the
charity community like Beveridge felt a maternal responsibility to remove motherless children
from the streets and poorhouses and find them “comfortable homes” under “good influences.”34
From their perspective, domestic service was an obvious choice to provide girls with safe
housing and protection from sexual corruption. Furthermore, these women believed that all girls
needed domestic training for their future roles as mothers and homemakers. Domestic service
kept girls focused on matters of the home and prepared them for motherhood. Thus, the
educational mission of the industrial school was twofold: to train girls for domestic servants and,
in the process, prepare better mothers.

Leaders of the Ladies' Industrial School Association were less concerned with finding
safe housing and stable employment for the handful of African American girls sent to the school
by local courts. African American migration to Illinois was low before the turn of the century;

33 See Daniel E. Sutherland, Americans and Their Servants: Domestic Service in the United States from 1800–1920
(Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1981); Linda Martin and Kerry Segrave, The Servant Problem:

black residents accounted for less than two percent of Chicago's population in 1890. Vagrant and impoverished African American girls were sent to the Illinois Industrial School in small numbers before 1900. Applications and local wanted ads for domestic servants often discriminated against African American girls by specifying a desired race and ethnicity such as “GIRL – Swedish or German” or “GIRL – no negro.” As a result, African American girls often remained in the Illinois industrial School usually until they were twenty-one and worked to maintain the institution. The Ladies' Industrial Schools Association generally ignored the potential home and job prospects of black inmates and focused on sending white European girls to live with middle-class families.35

The domestic training offered at industrial boarding schools was generally unpopular among female inmates who found housework arduous and isolating. Inmates frequently ran away from the Illinois Industrial School before they were placed in private homes as servants and preferred to fend for themselves as garment workers or factory hands. Mamie Davis, a former inmate at the Illinois Industrial School during the 1880s, later explained that she and her peers resented how much of their school day was devoted to housekeeping lessons rather than regular school subjects like reading and writing. “We didn't like to sew all the time,” she recalled. “We got tired of it.”36

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36 Testimony of Mamie Davis, March 20, 1895, Secretary of State, Governors Reports Index: State Board of Commissioners of Public Charities, Home for Juvenile Female Offenders, 115/17A/F4, ISA.
Manual training schools for boys had more diverse vocational programs than their sister schools. While industrial schools were required to educate girls specifically for “domestic vocations,” the Manual Training School Act of 1883 gave a broader mandate that boys be prepared for “some trade or industrial pursuit.” Manual training schools in rural areas often focused on agricultural work including farming, daily, and livestock. Urban manual training schools offered trade programs in printing, carpentry, and steam engineering. Administrators of manual training schools offered programs that reflected local economics and often arranged apprenticeship for inmates upon their release.\[37\]

Manual training schools took additional steps to ensure male inmates were prepared for self-sufficiency. The Glenwood Manual Training School was a Protestant institution in the south suburbs of Chicago supported by many of the same philanthropic women who founded the Illinois Industrial School for Girls. The Glenwood Manual Training School paid boys for their work baking bread, mending shoes, building furniture, and fixing plumbing problems on school grounds. Administrators argued that compensating inmates for their work taught boys “the real value of money” and better prepared them for outside employment.\[38\]

No such programs existed for female inmates who also contributed to the daily maintenance of the Illinois Industrial School for Girls by cooking meals, washing laundry, and sewing bed linens. School matrons argued that this work itself would bring value to girls by teaching them the comforts of home and domestic ritual. Helen Mar Judson Beveridge argued


38 Superintendent Leo A. Phillis, “The Institutional Care of the Normal Dependent Child,” *The Institution Quarterly* (1914), 81.
that the institution-supporting labor of female inmates prepared girls for a lifetime commitment to personal service and domestic duty. Beveridge and her colleagues were devout Protestants who often suggested domesticity was akin to female piety. As Beveridge wrote in 1880, neglected girls “of Christ's blood” would grow into moral women through learning the value of “finished work and sure reward.”

“A Semi-Prison”

The use of public funds to support private industrial schools for girls was controversial and contested throughout the progressive era. The Illinois Industrial School was threatened with closure in the 1890s by leadership of the Children's Home and Aid Society of Illinois (CHASI) who argued industrial schools were just prisons for needy children disguised as schools. The CHASI was modeled after the Children's Aid Society in New York, which was founded by Protestant minister Charles Loring Brace in 1853 to provide adoption services for homeless children. Brace founded the organization to avoid all forms of institutionalization for dependent children by placing “waifs and strays” directly into “Christian homes” as foster children or permanent adoptees. Brace and his followers argued that homeless children would be best cared for by rural families away from the negative influences of urban life. By 1890, the Children's Aid Society had sent some 84,000 children out of the city on “orphan trains” to live with foster families in the countryside.


The Children's Home and Aid Society of Illinois was also founded on the conviction that all forms of institutionalization were harmful for dependent children. In 1895, CHASI officials sent a series of letters to Governor John Peter Altgeld urging him to shut down the Illinois Industrial School for Girls and release all girls into their custody. In one letter, the Society's president Harvey Hurd described the school as “a semi-prison” that kept girls “isolated from ordinary family life.” While the school claimed to prepare girls for domesticity, he argued, their isolation from real homes left girls unprepared for “the duties of approaching womanhood.” Hurd asserted that girls would receive a better education by living in private homes as foster daughters rather than spending months or years in an industrial boarding school studying domestic trades. Hurd argued “it would be an excellent plan” if all girls were released from the Illinois Industrial School immediately.41

Under pressure from Hurd and his colleagues, Governor Altgeld ordered the Illinois Industrial School to immediately release more than 200 inmates on October 14, 1895. School officials protested the governor's order. The president of the school board, Mrs. M. R. M. Wallace, maintained that Altgeld had been misled about the nature of the Illinois Industrial School and its ability to prepare girls for womanhood. Refusing to close the school, Wallace told the Chicago Tribune that Altgeld was ignorant to the educational needs of their inmates. It is not “a new revelation,” she argued, that a home is superior to an institution. But many of their inmates came to the Illinois Industrial School because they “could not get a home on account of America,” OAH Magazine of History (Summer 2001), 66. Also see Clark Kidder, “West by Orphan Train,” The Wisconsin Magazine of History (Winter 2003-2004): 30-39.

41 Harvey B. Hurd to Governor Altgeld, October 8, 1895, Secretary of State, Executive Department Records, Misc. Manuscripts, Dependent Children, 1886 (115/17A/D6), ISA.
their ignorance and neglected habits.” Wallace argued that the mission of the Illinois Industrial School was “to give them enough training” so girls could become eligible for adoption or employment as domestic servants. She feared that many inmates would end up back on the streets if the school was forced to close.42

Wallace's prediction proved accurate. The Children's Home and Aid Society of Illinois was only willing to arrange adoptions for girls younger than age ten living at the Illinois Industrial School. After Altgeld's order to close the school was publicized, letters poured into the governor's office from Illinois residents requesting young, white, and American-born girls for adoption. A Chicago lawyer wrote to Altgeld that he wanted to adopt a “young, good girl” as his housekeeper. A Civil War veteran asked for a “a bright, intelligent girl, 12 years old, American” to help his wife with chores. By the 1890s many inmates at the Illinois Industrial School no longer fit these descriptions. New inmates were immigrants from Poland and Germany who spoke little to no English. Others were older girls in their late teens committed by county courts who were considered to have discipline problems and bad temperaments. The press reported that hundreds of older inmates might be roaming the streets of Evanston if the school was forced to close. Altgeld rescinded his order as a result and the Illinois Industrial School for Girls remained open.43

The Children's Home and Aid Society continued to arrange adoptions for young dependent children in Illinois for the next three decades. Ironically, they too founded industrial

42 Governor Altgeld to Superintendent of Illinois Industrial School, October 14, 1895, ISA; “To Close School: Gov. Altgeld to Let Out the South Evanston Girls,” CDT, October 1, 1895, 8; “Will Run Spite of All: Mrs. Wallace Says Industrial School Will Not Close,” CDT, October 17, 1895, 7.

43 Correspondence from Rev. George Hoover to Gov. Altgeld, October 8 1895; Correspondence from Richard Werner to Gov. Altgeld, October 16, 1895. Secretary of State, Executive Department Records, Misc. Manuscripts, Dependent Children, 1886 (115/17A/D6), ISA.
schools in the early twentieth century to prepare teenaged girls for domestic service. In 1908, the Society opened the Mary A. Judy Industrial School in Potomac, Illinois to provide “intellectual and industrial training” for girls considered too old for traditional adoption. Administrators of the Mary A. Judy Industrial School echoed the founders of the Illinois Industrial School for Girls by arguing that education for domestic service would best prepare these girls for “useful womanhood.”

The new state laws subsidizing industrial and manual training schools started a wave of Catholic institution building that Protestant organizations like the Ladies' Industrial School Association found troubling. Many Catholic nuns already offered housing and education to dependent children out of orphanages and homes for widowed women decades before the Girls' Industrial School Act. After 1879, some nuns encouraged their parishes to establish dedicated boarding schools for dependent girls and applied for accreditation. One of the first to do so were the German Poor Handmaids of Jesus Christ who founded the Katherina Kasper Industrial School for Girls in 1879 on Devon Avenue in Chicago. Nuns at a nearby Polish parish established the St. Hedwig Industrial School for Girls that same year at the corner of Harlem and Touhy Avenues. A network of boarding schools for dependent boys developed alongside

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44 The 378-acre school grounds were donated to the CHAS by Civil War veteran Ambrose B. Judy in 1908. See “Report to the Board of Directors of the Illinois Children's Home and Aid Society,” March 9, 1935, Box 3, Folder 22; Ruth Eleanor Ranck, “The Mary A. Judy School for Girls,” (Thesis, University of Chicago, 1935), 82, Box 3, Folder 29, Children's Home and Aid Society of Illinois Records, Special Collections and University Archives, University of Illinois at Chicago (UIC), Chicago, IL; Correspondence from Martha P. Falconer to R.J. Bennett, May 3, 1909, Box 3, Folder 24, Children's Home and Aid Society of Illinois Records, UIC; “Report to the Board of Directors of the Illinois Children's Home and Aid Society,” 1.

industrial schools after 1883 throughout Chicago's ethnic communities. These included the Bohemian Industrial and Manual Training Schools, the Norwegian Industrial and Manual Training Schools, and the Jewish Industrial and Manual Training Schools of Chicago. Similar networks of publicly-supported religious schools for dependent youth also appeared in Chicago suburban towns like Addison, Lisle, and Lake Bluff, Illinois.46

Girls living in Catholic industrial schools had similar daily routines to those in the Protestant-run Illinois Industrial School. After Bible study, girls between the ages of eight and eighteen spent their mornings on basic reading, writing, algebra, and geography lessons. In accordance with state law, afternoons were spent learning “domestic vocations” including cooking, embroidery, laundry, plain stitching, and dressmaking. The school day ended with afternoon prayers. Perhaps in an effort to appease state inspectors, many Catholic industrial schools also taught patriotism to their immigrant residents through lessons in American civics and daily recitations of the “Star Spangle Banner” and “My Country Tis of Thee” by the 1890s.47

Catholic industrial schools were more welcoming to African American children than their Protestant counterparts. In 1885, the Sisters of the Good Shepherd opened the Chicago Industrial School for Girls in their Lincoln Park neighborhood that welcomed dependent girls of any “race, nationality or creed.” In the early twentieth century, the Sisters opened another industrial school


specifically for girls of color. African American parents and reformers were suspicious of these schools that welcomed black children and, often, converted them to Catholicism. But the Sisters of the Good Shepherd argued they had a spiritual responsibility to guide their “erring sheep” into salvation in addition to providing shelter and education. The Sisters of the Good Shepherd were less focused on ensuring inmates find work as domestic servant upon their release. Rather than place inmates in homes as domestic servants, the Irish nuns of the Chicago Industrial School expected girls to take their training and pursue waged work on their own.48

This network of subsidized Catholic care faced immediate resistance from the Cook County Treasurer's Office, which argued the provisions of the Girls' Industrial Schools Act violated the constitutional separation between church and state. The Treasurer's Office was particularly hostile to industrial schools because they placed a heavier burden on county funds than manual training schools for boys. In 1889, Cook County refused to pay the Sisters of the Good Shepherd for girls committed to the Chicago Industrial School for Girls. In *Cook County v. Industrial School for Girls*, Cook County lawyers argued that the school's physical location in the House of Good Shepherd – surrounded by “candles, crucifixes, pictures of saints and sinners” – made it a sectarian institution rather than an industrial school. The Illinois Supreme Court ruled in favor of Cook County and revoked the school's accreditation.49

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49 Cook County Attorney Bliss, “That School for Girls,” *CDT*, Feb 7, 1888, 3; “Opinion of the Supreme Court of Illinois in William H Dunn vs. Chicago Industrial School for Girls,” 3, General Correspondence, rec. 4 1917 5 75, AAC.
The Sisters of the Good Shepherd were not deterred. They raised money from church members to purchase a plot of land at 49th and Prairie Avenue and built a new Chicago Industrial School for Girls. In 1890, the school reopened in a two-story brick building with sleeping quarters on the second floor and classrooms on the first. The Sisters still served as house matrons but hired six secular teachers to lead vocational courses in dressmaking, plain sewing, cooking, and housekeeping. The Sisters also appointed a new Board of Directors composed entirely of Catholic laymen and laywomen rather than members of the clergy. With a dedicated schoolhouse and secular staff, Cook County was bound by state law to financially support the Catholic Chicago Industrial School for Girls and its 200 inmates.\textsuperscript{50}

Cook County lawyers continued to file injunctions against Catholic industrial schools for the next three decades. But the city relied on Catholic boarding schools to care for and educate dependent youth. By 1920 the Archdiocese of Chicago oversaw a dozen industrial and manual training schools in the city that housed over 4,000 adolescents each year. Later lawsuits against Catholic schools for dependent children were less successful for this reason. In 1917 the Sisters of the Good Shepherd were again brought to trial for using public funds for a sectarian industrial school. This time the Illinois Supreme Court upheld the state's right to support Catholic industrial schools on the basis of financial practicality. Delivering the ruling in \textit{Dunn v. Chicago Industrial School for Girls} (1917), Justice Jessie A. Baldwin argued that it was cheaper for the state to subsidize Catholic industrial schools than to care for dependent girls in state-run reformatories. He ruled: “It is the State, and not the industrial school, that is benefited by the payment.”\textsuperscript{51}

\textsuperscript{50} “Large Real Estate Transfer” \textit{CDT}, April 13, 1889, 8; Hoy, \textit{Good Hearts}, 64-65.

\textsuperscript{51} “Summary of the Children Admitted and Committed to the Catholic Dependent Institutions of the Archdiocese of Chicago, Fiscal Year ending December 31st 1921,” General Correspondence, rec. 6 1921 C 40, AAC; “Opinion
Figure 4. Chicagoland Schools for Dependent and Delinquent Youth, 1903 (not exhaustive)

Industrial and manual training schools demonstrate a public-private partnership at the heart of the progressive-era child welfare system. In Illinois and elsewhere, these schools were overseen by public boards of charities and inspected regularly to ensure a standardized system of care outlined by the state. Yet privately-run and often religiously-affiliated industrial schools still enjoyed a great deal of autonomy in determining the education and eventual placement of thousands of dependent girls into homes as domestic servants. Historians usually foreground the many state-funded solutions to child welfare issues advanced by progressive reformers and

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of the Supreme Court of Illinois in William H Dunn vs. Chicago Industrial School for Girls,” 3; Rowe, “Religious Instruction – Industrial Schools – Donation of Public Finds,” 239.
women in particular. But well into the 1920s, state officials and social reformers viewed vocationally-oriented schools as both a private service and a public responsibility.  

“Girls of Mistakes”

Not all wayward girls were welcome at privately-run industrial schools in Illinois. Girls who were picked up for prostitution or vague charges of “immorality” were usually turned away from institutions for dependents like the Illinois Industrial School for fear they would corrupt their fellow inmates. Local courts near Chicago usually referred these girls to the Chicago Refuge for Erring Women. Founded in 1863, the Protestant women's home provided shelter, religious counsel, and vocational training to former prostitutes and “sexual delinquents.” By the 1890s the Refuge introduced vocational programs specifically for dependent girls including laundry, dressmaking, housekeeping, and cooking. Other girls accused of sexual immorality were sent to live with the Sisters of the Good Shepherd at their home for widowed women in Lincoln Park. Both religious homes relied only on charitable donations, however, and had limited resources.  

A lack of resources coupled with Chicago's mushrooming population increasingly brought girls of “unruly conduct” to the Illinois Industrial School. In the 1890s neighbors of the


school in Evanston complained that many of the school's new inmates were “very foul and indecent” and constituted “a disgrace to the neighborhood.” Inmates in their teens were heard yelling at men from their windows and talked to local children using “obscene and profane language.” Some neighbors were particularly concerned about the influence of these older girls on the younger, more innocent inmates. According to one report, the younger girls were overworked, underfed, and poorly cared for by school matrons who were preoccupied with disciplining rowdy teenaged inmates. One neighbor wrote to Governor Altgeld about these concerns after speaking with a ten-year-old girl who worked in the dining room baking eighty loaves of bread a day without assistance from her unruly peers. The girl allegedly begged her neighbor: “In God's name, get me out of here!”

Administrators at the Illinois Industrial School dismissed these reports in the press but privately agreed that female wards of the state should be “separated by different ages and morals.” The school's superintendent by 1895, Ophelia Amigh, argued that the state should establish a dedicated reform school for girls who were guilty of criminal offenses like prostitution, larceny, and public disorder rather than sending them to industrial schools for dependent children. Amigh organized a group of women affiliated with the Illinois Industrial School to lobby for the creation of a state-run institution for “female juvenile offenders” between the ages of ten and sixteen. Calling themselves the State Guardians for Girls, these women drafted a bill that gave their organization complete control in determining the location, staff, and

54 Correspondence from George Burchard to Gov. Altgeld, Sept. 8, 1985, Mrs. Gertrude M. Singleton to Gov. Altgeld, Sept. 8, 1985; Mrs. Shacklefold to Gov. Altgeld, n.d.; Correspondence from L. Wellman, to Gov. Altgeld, Sept. 8, 1985, Secretary of State, Executive Department Records, Misc. Manuscripts, Dependent Children, 1886 (115/17A/D6), ISA.

55 Mrs. Gertrude M. Singleton to Gov. Altgeld, Sept. 8, 1985, ISA.
educational program of a proposed state-run industrial school for criminal girls. Much of the bill was modeled after the Girls' Industrial Schools Act written by their predecessors. The State Guardians wrote that the proposed school must teach “domestic vocations” such as sewing and housekeeping so girls could be placed in respectable homes as servants when released.56

The state legislature allocated $75,000 to the State Guardians for Girls to purchase a piece of land for a state-run industrial school. While the State Guardians for Girls searched for a suitable location, they opened a temporary school for female juvenile offenders in a three-story brick building south of downtown Chicago. The school had only 34 inmates in its inaugural year. Most of the school's early inmates were white native-born girls in their teens who transferred to the temporary home from the Illinois Industrial School, the Chicago Refuge, and the House of Good Shepherd. Girls lived at the temporary school for two years before the official State Industrial School for Girls opened in Geneva, Illinois, a rural community 35 miles west of Chicago. For most of the twentieth century it was known as the Illinois State Training School for Girls.57

County courts throughout Illinois could commit girls to the new State Training School for any crime that would result in incarceration if they were adults. A girl could be committed for no less than one year and could not legally be confined past her twenty-first birthday. Teenaged girls committed to the Illinois State Training School had diverse criminal and disciplinary histories. Many girls were convicted for infractions like vagrancy, petty larceny, and prostitution. Others


57 “Report by the State Board of Commissioners of Public Charities,” 1894, Secretary of State, Governors Reports, Index: State Board of Commissioners of Public Charities, Home for Juvenile Female Offenders, (115/17A/F4), ISA.
shoplifted, trespassed, or committed arson. Yet the majority of inmates were ultimately considered “delinquent” due to sexual activity. In 1898, school doctors reported that nearly 50 percent of new inmates had venereal diseases and almost all were sexually active. County courts in Illinois often committed girls to the State Training School for these reasons alone under the vague criminal charges of “immorality”, “lewdness”, or “incorrigibility.” Victims of rape or incest were also sent to the State Training School by judges who blamed girls for their own abuse. This trend continued into the early twentieth century. By the 1910s, “delinquency” among girls was nearly considered synonymous with “sexual deviance” in the juvenile justice system.58

The State Guardians for Girls argued that sexual delinquency could be corrected if girls lived under the right educational influences. Middle-class reformers in the 1890s generally blamed girlhood delinquency on environmental factors like bad home lives, neglectful parents, or abusive men rather than viewing sexually active girls as inherently deviant. As one school official explained in 1895, inmates at the State Industrial School were “girls of mistakes” who needed education and motherly guidance rather than “hardened criminals” who deserved punishment. Middle-class reformers like Amigh had faith that the State Training School could reform bad behavior through educational programs that taught girls the value of hard work and domestic duty. In her inaugural report as superintendent, Amigh argued that any “fallen girl” could become a respectable woman if “educated in the right direction.”59


59 Testimony of Margaret A. Wickins, questioned by Dr. B Boerne Bettman, March 16, 1895, Secretary of State, Governors Reports, Index: State Board of Commissioners of Public Charities, Home for Juvenile Female Offenders, 115/17A/F4, ISA; Ophelia Amigh, Biennial Report of the Illinois State Training School for Girls,
Members of the State Guardians for Girls worried that the school's temporary location near downtown Chicago made their efforts futile. According to the organization's secretary, Charlotte Holt, the school was located on a busy intersection at 31st Street and Indiana Avenue where men could speak to the girls through the windows and pass them cigarettes. Girls reportedly yelled at men on the streets and harassed neighbors to throw them food and treats from their bedrooms. Many girls snuck out at night to meet friends in the city, sometimes starting small fires in the school to serve as a distraction. Holt lamented that their attempts to engage inmates through “the comforts of home life” were no match for the excitement of the city outside.60

School matrons resorted to cruel tactics to limit girls' access to their urban surroundings. Matrons locked inmates in their rooms at night and allegedly chained some girls to the floor to prevent their escape. These harsh disciplinary measures came to a head on the night of March 10th, 1895, when Mamie Davis led a rebellion of inmates that resulted in considerable property damage. Following the riot, Holt blamed the city, rather than Davis, for as the source of the chaos. Despite their “hard work and good intentions,” she explained, school matrons were forced to rely on “military discipline” to keep girls safe from outside influences. Holt concluded that such problems would be solved when the school relocated to Geneva, Illinois. Girls did not need

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60 Testimony of Charlotte C. Holt, questioned by Julia Lathrop, March 15, 1895, ISA.

to be watched as closely in the countryside, she reasoned, allowing inmates to “feel that this is a Home with some freedom and not altogether a prison.”

The official State Training School opened with seventy inmates in 1895. The school was home to more than 200 girls ages ten to seventeen by the turn of the century. More than 65 percent of inmates were white and native-born, and 20 percent were immigrants of mostly German origin. In 1902 the remaining 15 percent of inmates were a quickly growing minority of African American girls. Similar to other large state-run reformatories for girls, the school at Geneva was organized in a “family plan” where 20 to 25 inmates lived in cottages scattered across the school grounds. At the center of the 94-acre campus sat a schoolhouse and chapel for Sunday services. For the next 85 years, the training school at Geneva was the only state-run institution for delinquent girls in Illinois.

61 Ibid.

62 Biennial Report of the Illinois State Training School for Girls, 1902-1904, (Springfield, IL: Phillips Brothers, State Printers, 1904), Box 121.5, Geneva Historical Society (GHS), Geneva, IL; The Illinois State Training School officially closed in 1978 and was bulldozed shortly after to make room for the Fox Run housing subdivision.
Figure 5. Layout of the Illinois State Training School for Girls, c. 1920. Like many state-run reform schools, the State Training School for Girls in Geneva, IL was organized in a “family plan” where girls lived in residential cottages surrounding two school buildings and a chapel at the center (highlighted in yellow). Geneva Historical Society.
The Illinois State Training School for Girls focused on preparing inmates for work as domestic servants in an effort to help girls “earn a livelihood.” Ophelia Amigh was appointed school superintendent, a position she held for two decades. In the mornings, all girls were given “a good English education” by two former Chicago public school teachers. House matrons oversaw their training in domestic trades like sewing, laundry, and cooking during the afternoons. Inmates contributed daily to the maintenance of the school by ironing bed linens, serving meals, and sewing night gowns and sanitary napkins. Administrators in the school’s Indenture Department placed inmates in homes as domestic servants and conducted monthly checkups. The Indenture Department gave employers a list of rules for overseeing girls on parole. In a pamphlet titled “Suggestions for Employers,” the school advised potential matrons to show “a motherly care in the girl's welfare” and to pay her weekly in cash.63

The assumption that most girls at the State Training School were sexually delinquent shaped how the State Guardians for Girls prepared inmates for domestic work. Administrators argued that sexually-active girls were “childlike in lack of self-control and reason.” Thus inmates were thought to need training in self-restraint and to be watched closely on parole. School officials required employers to submit monthly reports on whether girls in their care were “improving morally.” In their pamphlet to new employers, school administrators offered general warnings to ensure that girls remained “moral” outside the State Training School, such as: “don't talk about the past with her” and “don't tempt her.” The pamphlet explicitly warned that girls should have limited interaction with men in their capacity as domestic servants. If men lived in

the house where a girl was paroled to work, school officials advised that her room should be as far away as possible from the man and inaccessible without the matron's knowledge. On the subject of isolating girls from men, the pamphlet was clear: “This is the most important feature in all your duties.”

Chicago parents protested the forced removal of their daughters to the State Training School for Girls in Geneva. In the 1890s, mothers asked local officials to write character references on their behalf in order to gain back custody of their daughters. In 1895, for example, a lawyer wrote to Governor Altgeld requested the release of fifteen-year-old Bella, stating that her mother was “abundantly able to care for her.” Mothers also requested character references from teachers and aldermen who wrote letters to the governor's office vouching for their parenting abilities. According to Amigh, the influx of requests to release inmates from the State Training School caused her “a great deal of annoyance.” Amigh felt she and the State Guardians for Girls had the right to remove girls from “their old dangerous surroundings” and educate them for useful lines of work. Despite the good intentions of some mothers, she reasoned, many were simply too poor to ensure their daughters were protected from negative influences. In response to one request, Amigh explained how poverty led to the delinquent behavior of sixteen-year-old Nora. Rather than attend public school, Nora supported the family income by working in a factory where she “fell into bad company.” Amigh argued that Nora could still become “a respectable woman” under the watchful eyes of house matrons at the State Training School. But

64 Testimony of Margaret A. Wickins, ISA; “Suggestions for Employers,” 26.
if released into the care of her working mother, Nora would again be unsupervised in the city and "thrust in the way of temptation."  

The State Guardians for Girls contributed to a growing consensus among upper-class charity workers that poor immigrant families were incapable of caring for their own children. Amigh and her colleagues believed that girls should only labor in the home and should be shielded from outside influences. Any mother who allowed her daughter to wander the city streets unescorted or work alongside men, they reasoned, was unfit for motherhood. These privileged women failed to appreciate the economic circumstances that led immigrant parents to rely on their children's labor in turn-of-the-century cities. Instead, they often blamed poor families – and poor mothers in particular – for the conditions of their own poverty.

Amigh argued that separating daughters from their families was necessary to not only save vulnerable girls from abuse but to protect the social fabric of the city. Without proper parental supervision and guidance, the State Guardians feared that these daughters could cause unforeseeable social problems. They could become single mothers unable to care for their own children and, in the process, disgrace the sacred institutions of marriage and family. Without training for respectable work, girls could exacerbate sexual crime in the city by becoming vagrants and prostitutes. These women believed that unsupervised girls not only needed their protection from the city; the city needed protection from girls, too.

65 Correspondence from A. O. Schnieder to Gov. Altgeld, Dec, 8 1896; Correspondence from Ophelia Amigh to Gov. Altgeld, Dec 12, 1896; Correspondence from O. L. Amigh to Charlotte Holt September 14, 1896, Secretary of State, Governors Reports, Index: State Board of Commissioners of Public Charities, Home for Juvenile Female Offenders, 115/17A/F4, ISA.


67 Amigh became a key figure in the movement against the so-called “white slave traffic” in the following decade. See Ophelia Amigh, “More About the Traffic in Shame,” in War on the White Slave Trade, ed. Ernest Albert Bell
Delinquent boys posed a lesser threat to the social order. Boys who lived their lives on the streets of Chicago or committed petty crimes indeed concerned child welfare activists. Middle-class cultural norms suggested that all children, not just girls, should lead private lives in the domestic sphere. But boys were seen as naturally more self-possessed than girls and therefore less vulnerable to corruption and abuse by outside influences. Cultural ideas about “boy nature” in the late nineteenth century also suggested that it was healthy for boys to be independent, rambunctious, and even mischievous. And above all, unescorted boys on the city streets did not generate the same moral hysteria about sexual deviance, prostitution, and promiscuity.68

Perhaps for these reasons, fewer resources were devoted to reforming boys' delinquent behavior in late-nineteenth century Chicago. While delinquent girls were committed to the “motherly care” of the State Guardians for Girls or the Sisters of the Good Shepherd, Chicago boys charged with theft or public disorder were thrown in county bridewells with adult offenders. In 1896, some women's clubs pushed the Cook County House of Corrections to establish a manual training school for male prisoners under sixteen years old. These women argued that delinquent boys could be corrupted by the negative influences of adult inmates and required separate care, similar to delinquent girls. Unlike manual training schools for dependent boys, however, the John Worthy School at the House of Corrections was organized as a prison where boys slept in cellblocks, ate meals in a mess hall, and were often physically punished for their

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State officials established a “family system” reform school for law-breaking boys nearly a decade after the State Training School for Girls opened in Geneva. The State Training School for Boys was built in 1903 in St. Charles, Illinois, a rural farming community three miles north of Geneva along the Fox River. The school at St. Charles was modeled after its sister school in Geneva. Male inmates between the ages of ten and sixteen were housed in cottages scattered throughout the school grounds and overseen by housefathers. Boys were required to participate in military exercises and competitive drills to discipline their unruly energies and make them eligible for adoption or apprenticeships when released. Boys spent their afternoons learning “useful trades” like carpentry, blacksmithing, shoemaking, steam fitting, plumping, and farming to prepare for future employment. According to the school's founding superintendent, N. W. McLain, these programs were intended to turn delinquent boys into well-behaved sons and capable breadwinners. Like the State Guardians for Girls a decade earlier, McLain argued that delinquent boys could also be reformed into productive citizens through practical education and fatherly guidance.

“*She is Herself a Danger*”

Child welfare activists in the late-nineteenth century viewed some children as incapable of reform. State law prohibited the commitment of any “idiot,” “imbecile,” or child

69 Albert Lane, *Forty-Third Annual Report of the Board of Education* (Chicago: John F. Higgins Print, 1897), 48, Chicago Board of Education Archives (CBEA), Chicago, IL.

“incapacitated for labor” to the State Training School for Girls in Geneva. Industrial and manual training schools also explicitly barred children who, according to nineteenth-century medical professionals, had “feeble minds.” So-called “feeble-minded children” were those considered unable of thriving in a traditional educational environment due to mental slowness or deficiency. This broad medical classification included a diverse range of children who suffered from learning disabilities, epilepsy, speech impediments, and poor hearing. Often included in this list were immigrant children whose unfamiliarity with American customs and the English language were interpreted as evidence of mental impairment. During the era of industrial schools, most child welfare reformers argued that examples of “feeble-mindedness” made children ineligible for adoption or indenture.71

Child welfare reformers established separate institutions for children with “feeble minds” in the late nineteenth century. The Illinois Asylum for Feeble-Minded Children, founded in 1877, was one of the nation's first state-run institutions for children with intellectual disabilities and became one of the largest.72 Like many state institutions for dependent youth, the Illinois Asylum followed the industrial school model. Originally built to house 500 children between the ages of six and eighteen, the state asylum adopted the family system of residential cottages by


72 The Illinois Asylum first opened in 1865 as an “experimental school” in Jacksonville, Illinois, supported entirely by private donation. The asylum was taken over by the state and relocated to Lincoln, Illinois in 1877. Remained the Lincoln State School and Colony in 1910, the institution remained in operation until 2002. See “What the State of Illinois is Doing for Her Feeble-Minded Children,” CDT, Dec 25, 1878.
the turn of the century to accommodate a growing population of inmates. Male inmates spent their afternoons learning trades like shoe making, carpentry, typesetting, and farming. Female inmates meanwhile engaged in weaving, basket making, dressmaking, plain sewing, laundry, and housekeeping. Similar industrial programs were offered to children who lived at the state-run Illinois School for the Deaf and Dumb and the Illinois School for the Blind, both also established in the 1870s in the southern Illinois countryside.73

The work-oriented curriculum at the State Asylum for Feeble-Minded Children was intended to have pedagogical rather than economic benefits for inmates. Special educators believed that manual work was engaging for children who were unable to adapt to traditional “book learning.” Administrators at the asylum in Illinois also argued that the rhythm and repetitiveness of manual work was soothing to children with perceived mental defects and could help tame violent tempers. Unlike other schools for dependent children, administrators at the state asylum in Lincoln did not regularly place inmates in homes or find them employment upon release. According to the Juvenile Protective Agency, industrial education was intended only to keep inmates “busy” rather than to serve as “training for life outside the school.”74

Administrators and state officials at the asylum assumed that most inmates with learning impediments could not be trusted to conduct themselves “with ordinary prudence” in the outside world. The dominant psychology of the late nineteenth century suggested that mental


defectiveness was closely linked to social deviance. According to medical professionals, a “feeble-minded child” was more likely to become a criminal, a pauper, or a homosexual. Some male inmates were placed out to work on nearby farms in southern Illinois. But most children with supposed “feeble minds” were thought to require constant custodial care and state supervision. Inmates without family support spent their lives at the state asylum in increasing numbers, which contributed to its mushrooming population in the early twentieth century. By World War I, the state asylum had over 2,000 inmates between the ages of four and sixty-five.75

Girls who were considered to lack “ordinary prudence” were particularly worrying to reformers and special educators. According to one representative of the Juvenile Protective Agency, girls with “feeble minds” were often “sexually precocious and perverted.” Because of mental slowness, these girls were considered to lack the necessary “moral restraints” to protect themselves from sexual abuse and prostitution. Girls with intellectual disabilities were often described by child welfare reformers as a threat to themselves as well as to others. For example, the Juvenile Protective Agency reasoned that an unsupervised “feeble-minded” girl could encourage immorality among her peers by corrupting them with lewd language and uncontrollable behavior. Thus, they warned: “she is herself a danger.”76

Reformers reasoned that these girls became “a recognized menace to the community” when they reached child-bearing age. New pseudo-scientific research supported cultural assumptions that feeble-minded mothers would inevitably bear socially-deviant children. In his


influential study *The Jukes* (1877), Robert L. Dugdale traced a pattern of “deviant social behaviors” among five generations of a New York family to demonstrate that crime and immorality were hereditary. Dugdale calculated the financial burden that five generations of Jukes inflicted on the state with their criminal activities and concluded that if the original Juke mother had been prevented from bearing children, New York would have saved more than one million dollars. Special educators frequently cited Dugdale's study to support arguments that “a single feeble-minded woman” would produce “many generations of paupers and criminals.”

The Illinois Asylum for Feeble-Minded Children treated female inmates as permanent custodial wards of the state since its founding in 1877. Like other industrial reformatories, girls at the asylum were taught needle trades, cooking, laundry, and housekeeping skills. But according to the asylum's superintendent, Dr. C. T. Wilbur, these classes were not designed for outside use. In 1880, Wilbur argued that female inmates were “unsafe when thrown out into the world alone to pursue the vocations of seamstress or domestic.” Rather, girls were taught to sew, launder, cook, and clean to provide free domestic labor for the asylum. Two years after the asylum opened in Lincoln, the trustees asked the state for additional funds to build a permanent home for its female inmates who lived and filled “household occupations” for the asylum. Echoing Dugdale's eugenic study, Wilbur argued that allowing female inmates to return to society would eventually be “more expensive” for the state of Illinois than paying for the girls to live on the school grounds indefinitely.

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Conclusion

Illinois women in the late nineteenth century established a network of boarding schools that removed delinquent and pre-delinquent girls from the city and prepared them for domestic employment. Through organizations like the Ladies' Industrial School Association and the State Guardians for Girls, upper-class white women advanced their personal convictions that girls who wandered the streets alone and challenged sexual norms were a danger to themselves and others. These women achieved substantial legislative reform by the turn of the century designed to educate most girls, but not all, for useful and moral womanhood.

The nation's first juvenile court system expanded the role of industrial schools as a method of reform for girls in the early twentieth century. Many of the same women involved with the industrial schools movement helped establish the Cook County Juvenile Court in 1899. These women included wealthy philanthropists like Lucy Flower, who helped found the Glenwood Manual Training School for Boys in 1883, and middle-class social reformers like Julia Lathrop, who inspected industrial schools on the State Board of Charities. In the early twentieth century, juvenile court justices were more than twice as likely to institutionalize girls than boys due to the assumption that female law-breakers were either in moral danger or morally dangerous. As one Chicago judge explained, the conditions that brought girls to the juvenile court were always “of a more serious nature” than boys, thus it was “important that she be removed entirely” from her environment. Illinois increased subsidizes to industrial schools for

girls by 50 percent in 1911 to address these higher rates of institutionalization while funds for manual training school for boys remained stable. Eight new industrial schools for girls opened within a year and existing industrial schools like the Illinois industrial School expanded to accommodate more inmates.79

Industrial schools were a response to a specific set of cultural concerns about girls growing up under the forces of urbanism and industrialization. While they emerged in tandem with manual training schools for boys, industrial schools for girls had a distinct educational mission that reflected the preoccupation of upper-class white women with policing and protecting poor immigrant girls. Histories of vocational education have neglected the gendered motivations of women in the industrial schools movement by suggesting men first promoted work-oriented schooling for the benefit of boys. On the contrary, women and girls were central to the early history of vocational education in American cities like Chicago.

79 Quote from Charles Clinton Berkey, “The Delinquent Child and the School or, What Educators May Learn from the Juvenile Court” (M.S., The University of Nebraska - Lincoln, 1913), 30. From 1904 to 1910, 51 percent of girls who came before the Cook County Juvenile Court were institutionalized compared to only 21 percent of boys. See Knupfer, Reform and Resistance, Table 5, 189. After 1911, expenditures to industrial schools for girls in Cook County alone increased by 200 percent. Over 40 percent of that money went to Catholic-run industrial schools. See Arlien Johnson, “Subsidies from Public Funds to Private Children's Institutions and Agencies in Chicago” Social Service Review (1929): 187.
CHAPTER TWO

“THE SCHOOL-BRED MOTHER”

DOMESTIC EDUCATION IN CHICAGO ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS, 1890-1915

Helen Cusack, a twenty-five-year-old “lady reporter” for the Chicago Times, went undercover as a poor working girl in the summer of 1888. Disguised in “the rags of poverty,” Cusack spent a month working alongside girls who supported Chicago's garment industry by stitching corsets, trimming winter cloaks, and sewing buttons on jersey shirts. Cusack witnessed young seamstresses with “deathly pale faces” who worked elbow-to-elbow on a diet of cold coffee and black bread. She met girls like Annie, a sixteen-year-old Irish immigrant, who made 65 cents a day cutting dress reeds to support herself and her mother. In another “slave-grinding hell-hole,” girls as young as twelve stood on her feet for ten hours a day in precarious shoes held together with thread and tape. Cusack's accounts of “miserable girlhood” appeared daily on the front pages of the Chicago Times and the New York World from July through August under the sensational title “City Slave Girls.”¹

Cusack's investigative journalism brought national attention to the harsh realities of young women and girls in the waged economy. Between 1890 and 1915, women and girls between age sixteen and twenty-four were the fastest growing portion of the American

workforce. Domestic service was the primary waged occupation of women and girls in the late nineteenth century. But by the turn of the century the number of women and girls in domestic service dropped from 61 to 40 percent as new positions opened in the manufacturing and commercial sectors.²

In Chicago, the luckiest female wage workers were native-born white women whose appearance and familiarity with the English language secured them higher-paid positions in downtown stores and offices. The vast majority of Chicago's female workers – more than 40,000 by 1890 – worked in the light manufacturing sector as seamstresses, milliners, trimmers, confectioners, machine hands, and meat packers. Most of these girls were recent immigrants from Southern and Eastern Europe and the daughters of Irish and German day laborers who helped support their family income. Others were self-sufficient “women adrift” who boarded together in the city’s crowded rooming houses. Together, these female workers held some of the lowest paid and most exploited positions in the industrial economy.³

The “City Slave Girls” exposé galvanized urban reformers to address the working girl problem through enforcing factory inspections and advocating for child labor laws.⁴ Cusack herself, however, said nothing about labor legislation in her 23-part series. Instead, she


concluded “City Slave Girls” with a call for educational reform. In her final article, Cusack argued that Chicago's elementary schools needed to prepare future working girls for marriage and motherhood. She asserted that public schools should replace academic subjects with hands-on classes that taught girls “to cook, to sew, to mend, to mind their children, and care for their own health.” Without this “practical education” for domesticity in the elementary schools, Cusack warned that girls would exit the workforce completely unprepared for their ultimate careers as wives and mothers. “What the shop-girl and factory-girl needs and must have if her welfare concerns society is training,” she argued, “a training that the scholastic stuffing of our public schools does not supply.”

This chapter explores how female reformers, educators, and philanthropists in Chicago spearheaded a movement to educate working-class girls for motherhood. In the late nineteenth century, many middle- and upper-class observers shared Cusack's concern that the burdens of poverty had prematurely pushed girls – particularly immigrant daughters – into the workforce and alienated them from domesticity. Like Cusack, these women believed the urban elementary schools should be outfitted with stoves, sinks, and sewing machines so female students could receive instruction on how to cook a nutritious meal, wash dishes, and sew a petticoat. When male school officials resisted, some of Chicago's most influential women fought for roles in school leadership to ensure “the needs of the girls” were considered in the public school curriculum.

5 Cusack, “City Slave Girls,” (part 23), Chicago Times, August 26, 1888, 19.
6 Ella Flagg Young, “Urges Schooling for Girl Workers,” Chicago Daily Tribune (CDT), September 28, 1909, 22. For the social and educational reformers studied in this paper, “girls” could refer to female students from ages four to eighteen. For more on progressive-era conceptions of girlhood, see Jane Hunter, How Young Ladies Became Girls: The Victorian Origins of American Girlhood (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003).
I use the shorthand “domestic education” throughout this chapter to refer to a collection of school programs intended to make female students more proficient in the home. Classes that taught girls to sew, cook, care for children, sanitize, and balance a household budget went by many names between 1890 and 1915. Various pedagogies in the domestic education movement were referred to by advocates as “domestic science,” “domestic arts,” “household science,” “household arts,” and “household economics.” All terms reflected a desire among reformist women to prepare girls for the work of motherhood and homemaking.  

Historians have studied the development of domestic education programs in high schools and women's colleges during the early twentieth century. But in northern cities like Chicago and Boston, domestic education first appeared in elementary schools for girls under the age of fourteen. Less than 10 percent of students attended Chicago's public high schools at the turn of the century. The city's elementary schools, in contrast, were crowded with the children of recent immigrants who left school in their teens to join the workforce. For these reasons, progressive reformers originally focused on the elementary school curriculum as a resource to better prepare working-class children for industrial life.

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9 The first high school household arts program in Chicago appeared in 1907, a decade after similar classes appeared in elementary schools city-wide. Cooking and sewing classes remained unpopular among high school students into the 1910s. In 1913, for example, less than 3 percent of female high school students enrolled in
The efforts of reformist women to integrate domestic education into the elementary school curriculum were not just motivated by sentimentalism about women's work in the home. Rather, Chicago women hoped to address serious social issues effecting women and families in the turn-of-the-century city through reforming the public education of girls. Jane Addams and Florence Kelley, for example, argued that fewer children would die from malnutrition and disease if immigrant daughters were taught to sanitize their kitchens and cook nutritious meals. Other women wanted to transform cooking, sewing, and cleaning into rigorous academic subjects so that homemaking would be respected in industrial society. Like the founders of industrial schools, these women were informed my traditional ideologies of “feminine work.” But their activism for domestic education in public schools was also a modern response to modern problems faced by women and girls in industrialized cities.

Advocates of domestic education helped alter the social function of urban education between 1890 and 1915 by insisting public schools invest in the maternal development of female students. Most educational historians have argued that sewing and housekeeping classes were a form of “handwork” that was based on earlier programs for male students. While growing in

10 This article builds on the foundational work of Dolores Hayden who has argued that, like feminism itself, domestic education was shaped by both traditionalism and radicalism. See Hayden, The Grand Domestic Revolution: A History of Feminist Designs for American Homes, Neighborhoods, and Cities (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1981). Also see Stage and Vinceti, Rethinking Home Economics.

tandem with programs in woodworking and foundry, domestic education developed from distinct concerns about urban working girls and the work required to best serve their future families. School reformers like Lucy Flower and Ella Flagg Young argued that industrialism had forced the public schools to take on the new social responsibility of preparing young girls for motherhood. These women were initially derided as dangerous “faddists” who threatened the foundations of public education in Chicago. But by the 1910s, their ideas were integrated into public elementary schools across the country.

*The Sewing Fad*

In the late nineteenth century, wealthy women in Chicago's charitable community tried to slow the tide of girls entered the waged workforce by interesting them in the field of domestic service. Members of the city's most influential women's organization, the Chicago Woman's Club (CWC), created a network of free evening schools in 1883 to train girls who worked during the day in factories and stores for more “wholesome” work as domestic servants. These “kitchen gardens schools” were spearheaded by Ellen Martin Henrotin, a well-known philanthropist, suffragist, and wife to the former president of the Chicago Stock Exchange. Henrotin and her Kitchen Garden Association (KGA) hoped to stop girls from “crowding into the labor force” by preparing them for work in private homes as cooks, maids, and laundresses.12

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Many of the women involved with the KGA, including Henrotin, were involved in the industrial schools movement and designed the kitchen gardens along similar principles. These women oversaw at least five free kitchen garden schools by 1890 that convened in Mission churches on the west and south sides of Chicago on weekday evenings. The kitchen garden classes were led by industrial school teachers who instructed girls ages six to thirteen how to cook, launder, sew, mend, and clean. Like industrial schools, the kitchen gardens were intended to demonstrate to young girls that domestic work count be personally fulfilling as well as a stable source of employment. These evening schools also taught customs of working in middle-class homes to immigrant girls, many of whom spoke little to no English. At one west-side kitchen garden school, for example, students practiced answering doorbells, requesting calling cards, and escorting guests to the parlor.

The efforts of wealthy white club women to excite interest in domestic labor among working girls were largely unsuccessful. In spite of being free of charge, the city's kitchen garden schools were unpopular among Chicago girls and usually capped at only twenty or thirty students per week. In 1890, the KGA established a kitchen garden school specifically for girls who already worked as domestic servants in an attempt to foster a new appreciation for their work. Women affiliated with the Chicago Woman's Club were encouraged to send their own servants to the school to learn new cooking skills, sewing techniques, and “civilized” decorum for middle-

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13 Ellen Martin Henrotin (1847-1922), wife of the president of the Chicago Stock Exchange, Charles Henrotin, helped found the Illinois Industrial School for Girls and later served as the school's president. Henrotin was also a member of the State Guardians for Girls and was at the Home for Delinquent Girls during Mamie Davis' rebellion in 1893. See “Board of Trustees,” First Biennial Report of the State Guardians for Girls (Springfield, IL: Ed. F. Hartman, State Printer, 1894), Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum (ALPLM), Springfield, IL.

14 See “How to Keep House: What the Kitchen Garden Association is Doing,” CDT, April 29, 1885, 8; “Little Housekeepers: How They Are Taught Their Duties,” CDT, March 27, 1885, 8.
class service. The school closed after less than a year because too many servants refused to attend.  

The upper-class members of the Chicago Woman's Club believed that girls laboring in garment trades would be unprepared for motherhood and homemaking after they left the workforce. Outside of domestic service, these women assumed that working-class girls had limited opportunities to learn essential homemaking skills. The KGA hand-delivered petitions to the Board of Education through the 1880s demanding the inclusion of kitchen garden classes in the elementary schools. In one petition from 1888, the Association urged the Board of Education to protect “National morality and physical well-being” by ensuring female students were able to properly clean, cook, and clothe their future children when they left the public schools. The wealthy membership of the KGA offered to cover all expenses if the Board would simply give them classrooms to conduct their work.

The Board of Education ignored these requests. Since its founding in 1872, Chicago's public school board was composed entirely of wealthy merchants, lawyers, and bankers appointed by the Mayor who focused on the business aspects of school governance like purchasing school sites and negotiating building contracts. In matters of school reform, these men cared most about adapting the curriculum to better engage boys who were outnumbered in the public schools by an average of seven to one students by the 1890s. The Board often blamed the feminized student body, an increase in female teachers, and “soft” subjects in the high schools like Greek and Latin for causing boys to lose interest in their studies. Boys dropped out

16 “Cooking in the Public Schools: The Kitchen Garden Association Wants a Chance to Teach it There,” CDT, May 30 1888, 1.
of school early, they reasoned, because their natural “restlessness” could not be satiated by reading literature in a room full of girls. In other words, the public schools were already too feminized without classes in cooking and sewing.¹⁷

The Board's resistance to reform pushed influential Chicago women to seek school leadership positions of their own. Delegations of women affiliated with Chicago Women's Club and the Kitchen Garden Association delivered petitions to the Mayor's office requesting their immediate appointment to the Board of Education in 1887. They argued that an all-male school board ran the school system as a business dictated by supply and demand. According to Henrotin, the public schools deserved the permanent involvement of “the best women in the community” who were better equipped to make decisions about the needs of parents and children. Advocates of female membership on the Board agreed that women would clear the cigar smoke, breakup boardroom politicking, and bring “dignity, intelligence and courtesy” to public school leadership.¹⁸

Republican Mayor John A. Roche was initially skeptical that women were prepared to handle “the complicated financial problems” of the Board of Education. But after a series of

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interviews with club women in the summer of 1888, Roche appointed a former public school teacher and Chicago club woman Ellen Mitchell to the Board of Education. Pressure from club women also pushed Roche to hire two other members of the CWC as assistant superintendents in the city's expanding school system which, at 300,000 children, had recently become the nation's second largest. Many male Board members were hostile towards these female appointees and the reformist shift in school governance that their presence represented. The businessmen-board members argued that their roles were limited to conducting, as one member put it, “financial and business matters.” These women disagreed. Mitchell, Henrotin, and their colleagues in the Chicago Woman's Club believed the power of the Board could be used as a vehicle for reform.19

The first major reform initiative lead by women was to enforce the state's toothless compulsory attendance law. Since 1883, Illinois' attendance law required children enroll in school from ages eight to fourteen for at least twelve weeks of the year. Chicago's Board of Education never enforced this law, however. Most parents did not even know it existed.20 Helen Cusack's undercover reporting in the summer of 1888 galvanized women's groups to advocate for a tighter attendance law for Chicago children. Two months after her series concluded, a cross-


class coalition of women joined together to discuss solutions for “the conditions surrounding our working girls.” Composed of various club women, labor activists, teachers, and reformers, the new Woman's Alliance decided to put pressure on school officials to enforce attendance so children would be protected from the abuses exposed in the “City Slave Girls” series.21

These anti-child labor activists feared for the physical safety of girls who worked in shops and factories. While reformers were concerned about all young children in the waged economy, cultural assumptions about the inherent vulnerability of girls made them a particular focus of concern. Florence Kelley, the chief state factory inspector of Illinois and a Hull House resident, argued that factory work caused irreparable damage to girls' backs and hands due to their natural “unfitness for industry.” Girls in factory positions were forced to “assume taxing muscular positions” and “to spend their strength beyond reason,” she argued, which resulted in distorted posture, hand cramps, and persistent back problems. Many reformers assumed that these physical strains on young girls would lead to moral degradation. “The lowered vitality which results from premature ill-regulated work,” one of Kelley's contemporaries argued, “is universally believed to be a potent cause of moral evil.”22


22 Kelley's position was created in part as a reaction to the “City Slave Girls” expose. See Kelley, “Unreasonable Industrial Burdens on Women and Children,” The Child Labor Bulletin, vol. 1, (June 1912), 165, Box 1, Folder 12, Florence Kelley Papers, Special Collections and University Archives, University of Illinois at Chicago (UIC), Chicago, IL; Robert Archey Woods and Albert Joseph Kennedy, Young Working Girls: A Summary of Evidence from Two Thousand Social Workers (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1913), 3-4.
Lewis Hine's famous photographs of mill workers taken for the National Child Labor Committee between 1907 and 1908 demonstrate the concerns of anti-child labor activists surrounding girl wage workers. As historian Julia Grant notes, Hine often photographed groups of boys standing together, shoulder-to-shoulder, staring collectively into the camera lens. While these group shots suggested the magnitude of the child labor problem, they also conveyed a sense of “boys' camaraderie, shrewdness, and even pride.” In contrast, Hine usually photographed girls alone on the factory floor surrounded by rows of heavy machinery. These images implied the isolation, vulnerability, and immense physical burdens of industrial work experienced by girl workers.

Urban reformers believed that young girls in the waged workforce were also more vulnerable than boy workers due to the threat of sexual abuse by managers and foremen. Writing in *The Child Labor Bulletin*, Kelley explained that girls who worked in shops, stores, and factories were “at the mercy of the men” who managed shop and factory floors. These men possessed an “appalling power for evil” over destitute female workers who relied on the wages to support themselves and their families. The potential for sexual abuse in public places weighed heavily on reformist women who worked closely with young working girls. Child welfare activist Sophonisba B. Breckenridge explained the unstated sexual fears for working girls she shared with her colleagues: “All around them are dangers of which we dare not speak, but which are on our minds.”

With representation on Board of Education, the Woman's Alliance asked for a special committee to investigate and reform attendance regulations in Chicago schools to protect children from dangerous working conditions. The committee resulted in a new state bill for a compulsory attendance law named after then-superintendent of Chicago schools, Richard Edwards. Passed in 1889, the “Edwards Law” empowered school boards throughout Illinois to hire truant officers to make house visits, tally attendance, and even arrest children who were considered vagrant or delinquent. In Chicago, the eleven truant officers hired by the Board proved ineffective at wrangling the 20,000 children who reportedly skipped school daily. Nevertheless, the Edwards Law was the state's first serious step towards universal school attendance. The new law also established a relationship between education law and child labor

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law that expanded throughout the 1890s. By the turn of the century, truant officers were not only empowered to make house visits but conducted factory inspections to ensure that boys and girls were not working when they should be in school.25

Chicago's club women used their leverage on the Board of Education to integrate domestic education into the elementary school curriculum. Lucy Flower, president of the Chicago Woman's Club and the Board's newest member in 1891, argued that the public schools needed to compete with the city's “free sewing schools” that operated out of Protestant churches each weekend.26 Usually overseen by Pastors' wives, the free sewing schools were charitable initiatives that first appeared in the 1870s to uplift poor children by teaching them to mend their own tattered clothing and make fresh garments. Fewer boys attended the free sewing schools and many were open only to girls. The sewing school at Moody's Evangelical Church, one of the city's largest, instructed 300 young girls each weekend how to hold a thimble, work a needle, and stitch a canvas patch.27

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25 Provasnik, “Compulsory Schooling: From Idea to Institution,” 267. The Edwards Law also established a legal framework for Americanizing immigrant children through mandated school attendance. The law stated that children must attend any school, public or parochial, so long as that school was taught in the English language. The Board of Education printed 55,000 pamphlets describing the new law which were distributed to students in public and parochial schools throughout Chicago. Students were instructed to deliver the pamphlets to their parents, which were published in nine different languages including German, Italian, Swedish, Polish, and Yiddish. See Florence Kelley, “The Illinois Child-Labor Law,” American Journal of Sociology 3: 4 (Jan 1898): 490.

26 Lucy Flower (1837-1921) was a well-known reformer and child welfare activist who later helped found the nation's first juvenile court. For more on the reform career of Lucy Flower, see Harriet S. Farwell, Lucy Louisa Flower, 1837-1920: Her Contribution to Education and Child Welfare in Chicago (printed privately, Chicago, 1924).

27 Most sewing schools were supported by Presbyterian, Episcopalian, and Baptist congregations. At least one was supported by a Jewish synagogue on the westside of the city. See “Sewing-Schools,” CDT, March 30, 1881, 8; “The Sewing School,” CDT, Sept 5, 1886, 7; “Free Sewing Schools for Chicago's Poor,” CDT, Jan 20, 1895, 34.
Many girls viewed this sewing instruction as vocational training for work in the garment industry as dress-hemmers, corset-stitchers, and glove-makers. Girls with limited employment options generally preferred needle trades to the drudgery and isolation of domestic service. One teenaged seamstress told Cusack that she'd rather sew all day and night in a garment factory than work as a domestic servant, explaining: “for I have more self-respect.” For these reasons, girls as young as six years old regularly attended the free sewing schools to prepare for garment work. The most popular free sewing schools in Chicago offered dressmaking programs lead by experienced seamstresses who taught girls how to cut, fit, and construct whole garments. According to the *Chicago Tribune*, there were at least 25 free sewing schools in Chicago by the 1890s attended by nearly 10,000 girls each week.²⁸

Flower, a veteran educator and child welfare activist at age 54, argued that the popularity of the free sewing schools was interfering with girls' regular school attendance. In one Jewish neighborhood on Chicago's westside, she noted, girls in the upper elementary grades left schools two hours early every Friday to travel to a free sewing school at a nearby Mission church. Many female students who would later work in needle trades viewed sewing education as more practical than their academic studies. “I went to school and learned numbers and geography, but I can't sew very well,” explained a young Chicago seamstress in 1888. “The forelady says that's why I don't make more.”²⁹


Figure 8. Lucy Flower, c. 1900. Illinois Training School for Nurses Collection, Special Collections and University Archives, University of Illinois at Chicago Library.

In contrast, Flower viewed sewing as an essential skill for mothers and homemakers rather than wage workers. She argued that the public schools should include sewing classes so girls could improve their appearance, mend clothes for their siblings and future children, and make household items. Flower believed that educating girls for competent homemaking was as important to their education as reading, writing, and arithmetic. “Mothers really want their daughters to sew,” she argued in 1891, “and the children, too, are willing and ready.”

30 “To Teach Girl to Sew,” CDT, Nov 7, 1891, 10.
Flower convinced her fellow Board members to open one Saturday sewing school per neighborhood district if at least 50 girls expressed interest. Their estimate was far too conservative. In the winter of 1891, more than 30,000 female students asked to enroll in the proposed weekend sewing schools. The unforeseen demand for sewing classes among girls pushed the Board of Education to scrap their plan for Saturday schools and instead integrated sewing “into the regular schoolwork” of female students. Flower lobbied for sewing in the elementary schools as a domestic skill for girls. But female students' demand for sewing as a labor skill was largely responsible for its inclusion in the curriculum. As the Chicago Tribune summarized: “The Board wishes to teach sewing because a number of girls want to learn it.”

The Board of Education introduced woodworking classes for boys a year after sewing entered the elementary schools. Richard T. Crane, the wealthy owner of a brass empire, built the city's first “manual training room” in the basement of Tilden Elementary School in 1893. Seventh and eighth grade boys at Tilden and six nearby schools took turns using the room once a week for two-hour lessons in construction drawing and carpentry. Three years later Cyrus H. McCormick Jr. financed a second manual training room in Hammond Elementary School which he equipped with power machinery, screw-cutting engine lathes, and work benches for carpentry lessons. Manual training rooms for woodworking, stone-cutting, and drafting continued to expand in elementary schoolhouses throughout the 1890s with financial donations from some of


32 The former Tilden Elementary School was located at Elizabeth and Randolph Streets in West Town. Over the next decade, Crane founded and helped pay teachers salaries for at least six of the city's manual training centers. See “Big Offer to Schools,” CDT, May 23, 1905, 7; “How Educational Problems Have Been Solved in Chicago Schools,” CDT, September 1, 1912, G2.
Chicago’s most famous businessmen\textsuperscript{33}

The sewing program was criticized by the press as a useless “fad” subject for girls. Between 1892 and 1893, editors at the \textit{Chicago Tribune} published over a dozen editorials criticizing sewing for “crowding out writing” and other traditional subjects in the curriculum. These critics argued that other school “fads and frills” like woodworking were also a waste of time and taxpayer dollars. But the introduction of sewing classes for female students was particularly controversial. The \textit{Tribune} accused the Board of Education of neglecting their male students, who were already outnumbered in classrooms, and contributing to the feminization of public schools. In one article, a \textit{Tribune} editor offered an unfortunate scenario: “While the distracted teacher is showing Mary how to hold her needle, Nettie how to hem, and some one else how to unravel a succession of knots and tangles, poor John and Henry will probably condole with each other by whispering, talking, or laughing at the attempts of the girls.” The author concluded: “If the girls must sew, let their mothers teach them as girls were taught in our day – at home.”\textsuperscript{34}

In a letter to the \textit{Tribune} editor later that week, Lucy Flower argued that this critic missed the point. Most girls in the elementary schools could not learn sewing at home, she retorted, because their mothers often worked and were unable to pass down this essential domestic skill to their daughters. Flower believed that working-class girls needed to learn practical homemaking

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\textsuperscript{33} The former Hammond Elementary School was located at the southwest corner of Cermak Road and California Avenue. See “For the Work with Muscle,” \textit{CDT}, December 7, 1895, 3; Hollis W. Field, “The Multimillionaires of Chicago, II. R. T. Crane” \textit{CDT}, June 9, 1907, E1.

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skills like sewing to be better clothed, have cleaner homes, and help care for their young siblings. “Those who live in a good locality, where children are carefully watched and trained at home, think sewing a useless waste of time,” Flower explained to a group of reporters. She continued that only those “who live in a poor neighborhood or who study the needs of such” could understand the importance of domestic education in the public schools.  

The controversy surrounding “fad” subjects lead the Board of Education to reconsider some of their recent additions to the curriculum. In spite of Flower’s protests, her fellow Board members voted unanimously to remove all sewing classes from the elementary schools in 1893. While Flower’s “sewing experiment” was deemed a failure by her fellow Board members, manual training was viewed as a success worth expanding throughout the elementary schools. Manual training centers equipped for woodworking, foundry, and stone cutting were installed in 34 elementary schools by the turn of the century. The press generally agreed with Board members that manual training was a productive use of school time that would de-feminize public education and foster more “self-confidence and dignity among boys.” In 1895, Tribune editors celebrated the expansion of manual training centers in neighborhood school for educating a new generation of “healthy, robust men who earn their living by the sweat of their brow.”

35 Lucy Flower, “Present Needs of Chicago Schools: Mrs. J. M. Flower Discusses the Educational Problem,” CDT, Jan 31, 1892, 30; “Sewing in the Public Schools: Arguments on Both Sides at a Meeting of Women,” CDT, January 30, 1892, 3.


Flower was frustrated that so many of her critics failed to see a place for domestic education in the public school curriculum. In another impassioned letter to the Tribune, Flower questioned how the editors could attack a program designed to benefit the social institutions of home and family: “Can you justly call anything a 'fad' which is an absolute essential to the decent maintenance of life for every man, woman, and child? Which is the foundation of comfort in the home life of all?”

*The Science of Domesticity*

Flower and her colleagues failed to articulate the value of domestic education for Chicago girls during the 1880s and 1890s. As a result, sewing classes were deemed a sentimental “fad” of little value to the public school curriculum. But reform-minded club women's interest in domestic education was also a response to real public health crises that seemed to stem from poor immigrant households. In the late nineteenth century, industrialized cities experienced rising rates of death and disease caused by overcrowding, pollution, and poor sanitation. The dense tenement districts of manufacturing centers like Chicago had the highest epidemics of smallpox, cholera, scarlet fever, and typhoid that were particularly deadly for children. One in five infants died before their first birthday due to the poorly-understood dangers of disease, infection, and malnutrition. Members of the Kitchen Garden Association wanted the Board of Education to teach girls sewing and cooking not only for their personal home training but to protect “the health of our rapidly increasing population.”

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The scientific discovery of germs and bacteria in the late nineteenth century supported women's arguments about the importance of domestic education. In the 1870s scientists in Europe and the United States discovered that invisible microbes could live in and spread between organisms and cause disease. “Germ theory” was initially controversial and widely disputed among professionals. But by the 1890s both the scientific community and the general public largely accepted that “invisible enemies” could grow in their meat, live on bathroom floors, and fester in dirty bed linens.40

A group of privileged middle- and upper-class white women in the late nineteenth century established successful careers spreading “the gospel of germs” across the country. These women included Dr. Mary Green, the first women accepted to the New York Medical Society, and Ellen Shallow Richards, the first woman to earn a Bachelors of Science degree in 1873.41 Richards and Green had professional success in part by studying new scientific subjects that fell comfortably within the feminine sphere. Green, a national authority on dietetics and hygiene, argued that women should be educated on the process of digestion, the causes of malnutrition, and the benefits of sanitation to better protect their families. Richards, a chemist at M.I.T., believed that a basic understanding of the chemical properties in foods and fuels would make women “better housekeepers, better cooks, better wives and mothers.” In asserting the importance of “domestic science,” Richards and Green suggested that women's traditional work


41 Green earned her medical degree from the Women's Medical College of Philadelphia in 1968, and Richards received her B.S. in chemistry from M.I.T. in 1873.
in the home could be professional and scientifically rigorous. “Sweeping and cleaning and
laundry work are all processes of sanitation,” Richards argued, “and not mere drudgery imposed
be tradition.”

Richards brought national attention to the nascent field of domestic science during the
World's Columbian Exposition of 1893 in Chicago. She was invited by the wealthy club women
on the fair's Women's Auxiliary, including Henrotin, to give a demonstration of how chemistry
could make women better cooks. Richards’ “Rumford Kitchen” sold scientifically-prepared
meals to 10,000 visitors for 32 cents a plate. The meals were served in a small dining room with
menu cards on each table that listed the exact weight of each dish, measurements of ingredients,
the number of calories, and nutritional value. Her exhibit brought serious discussions of nutrition
and physiology into the domestic sphere and demonstrated women's professional authority in
matters of family health and cooking.

In the months following the Fair, the Women's Auxiliary organized a series of meetings in
Chicago to discuss how they could help promote the science of domesticity demonstrated by
Richards. From these conversations emerged the National Household Economics Association
(NHEA), a new women's organization to function as a “bureau of information” to collect and

135. For more on Richards' role in the domestic science movement, see “Women Everywhere Will Celebrate
Home Economics Day,” New York Times, November 17, 1912, 12. The domestic science movement was
international. See: Kerreen Rieger, “All but the Kitchen Sink: On the Significance of Domestic Science and the
Silence of Social Theory,” Theory and Society (July 1987): 497-526; Caroline Lieffers, “The Present Time is
(Summer 2012): 936-959.

43 For more on the Rumford Kitchen, see Hayden, The Grand Domestic Revolution, 151; Tomes, The Gospel of
Germs, 136; Edward C. Kirkland, “Scientific Eating: New Englanders Prepare and Promote a Reform, 1873-
the Science of Nutrition at the USDA: Ellen Swallow Richards and Her Allies,” Agricultural History 64, no. 2
(1990): 122–33.
share “a more scientific knowledge” of food, textiles, and sanitation. Members of the organization included wealthy club women like Ellen Henrotin, progressive educators like Marion Talbot, settlement house workers like Jane Addams, and medical professionals like Dr. Mary Green. Beginning in 1894, these women met annually to discuss a broad range of issues effecting mothers and housekeepers like kitchen sanitation, the proper disposal of trash, and the best systems of household plumbing. They sponsored lectures on how to cure diarrhea, properly wash fruit, balance a budget, and remove indoor mold. Women in cities from Boston to San Francisco organized additional chapters of the NHEA after 1894, creating a nationwide conversation about the value of homemaking to the health, economy, and safety of families.44

One of the NHEA's founding missions was to establish schools and support educational programs that taught “household science and service.” Some wealthy club women hoped that these schools would finally solve the vexing “servant problem” by educating a new generation of professionally-trained housekeepers. Members of the NHEA founded private “schools of housekeeping” in cities like Boston, New York, and Philadelphia to teach domestic servants the science behind dusting, cooking, and washing. These schools offered similar training as industrial boarding schools for “wayward” girls. In Chicago, the NHEA formed a Committee on Industrial Schools which visited industrial reform schools and kept administrators informed of the latest domestic science pedagogy. By the 1890s many industrial schools also used domestic

science textbooks to teach the chemical properties of food and cooking fuels to their inmates.45

Other schools of household science in the late nineteenth century resembled finishing schools for future homemakers rather than training schools for domestic servants. Chicago's School of Domestic Arts and Sciences, founded by Bonnie Withrow Evans, was dedicated to preparing teenaged girls “in the poorer families” for the career of housewife. Evans was the wife of a wealthy state congressman with middle-class roots who believed a professional school for homemaking was essential for girls who married shortly after spending their teenaged years in “stores, factories or even in lower walks of life.” Evans told the Los Angeles Times that “inexperienced girls” who worked in stores and factories were unprepared to safely care for their children or run “even the least pretentious home” without specialized education. For the next thirty years, Evans oversaw the education of girls in cooking, hygiene, nursing, sewing, laundry, and home management. By 1910 the School of Domestic Arts and Sciences had nearly 1,500 students under the age of twenty, many of whom worked in the city's department stores and dressmaking shops.46


46 The School of Domestic Arts and Sciences moved between various commercial high-rises in the Loop until 1935, when it relocated to a larger facility in Lincoln Park at Belden and Halsted Avenues. The school was absorbed by Northwestern University into its new home economics department in 1942. See Mrs. Edson B. Fowler, A History of the School of Domestic Arts and Sciences 1901-1942, (Pamphlet, 1946), 6 Records of the School of Domestic Arts and Sciences, Box 1, Folder 1, Charles Deering McCormick Library of Special Collections (CDMLSC), Northwestern University, Evanston, IL; Margaret Downing, “Mrs. Lynden Evans: Wife of the Member from the Sixth District of Illinois is One of the Active Workers in the Homemakers' Section,” Los Angeles Times, September 1, 1912, 14
The white women of the NHEA were mostly traditionalists in their views of women's work. But some members like Evans was also motivated by a radical conviction that the unpaid labor of housewives should be valued equally to the breadwinning of their husbands. Evans argued that women's socially-essential labor as mothers and homemakers was increasingly marginalized in industrial society because it functioned outside the waged economy. She believed that professional schools of domestic science demonstrated that housework had tangible value that was “transcendently more important than money.” The School of Domestic Arts and Sciences frequently held public exhibits where students showed their skills as scientific cooks and artistic needle workers. Evans believed that these demonstrations could increase “social respect and recognition” of women's unpaid labor in the home.47

Members of the NHEA also challenged mainstream gender ideology by founding professional schools of domestic science. These women asserted that women were not born with an innate knowledge of childcare, cooking, and cleaning. Speaking at a national conference in 1906, one domestic science advocate explained: “Certain people, both men and women...expect that a young woman will just naturally know how to be a good homemaker.” Women required specialized training, she argued, akin to the professional development of doctors and accountants. Another Illinois club women at the conference, Jennie C. Barlow, agreed that domestic science education challenged assumptions about women's natural fitness for domestic labor. “Many think that homemaking is an instinct,” she argued, “the same that leads young birds to nest building.” While apprenticeships and business schools prepared men for employment,

47 Emphasis hers. See Bonnie Withrow Evans, “The School of Domestic Arts and Sciences: A Statement of its Reason for Existence and its Purposes,” n.d., 4. Records of the School of Domestic Arts and Sciences, Box 1, Folder 1, CDMLSC.
Barlow believed that domestic science schools provided “a more systematic method of carrying out home work.”

African American club women and educational reformers were largely excluded from these national conversations about the value of domestic education. Yet many supported domestic science programs hoping they could help black women overcome racist stereotypes about their maternal interiority and uncleanliness. “A new dignity has been added to the occupations that concern our health, our homes, and our happiness,” Fannie Barrier Williams wrote in 1904. “Through the influence of schools of domestic science, cooking has become a profession...the dressmaker and milliner, by proper training, have become artists.” A middle-class club woman and social reformer in Chicago, Williams urged her fellow black women of influence to embrace the new science of domesticity to uplift their social status as mothers and homemakers. Black women should ensure their homes were “pure, healthful, and sacred,” she argued, not only for their family's safety but to demonstrate their respectability as competent homemakers.

Black women created their own system of spreading domestic science education to mothers and daughters living along Chicago's segregated “black belt.” Largely ignored by the


white reform community, middle-class members of the Illinois Federation of Colored Women's Clubs ran programs in cooking and lectures on home sanitation out of churches, store fronts, and private homes. African American families experienced some of the highest rates of contagious diseases and child morality in the 1890s due to racial discrimination in housing and health care services. These women addressed grave public health concerns impacting black mothers and children by spreading awareness of domestic science in their own communities.50

Williams had mixed feelings about the impact of domestic education on the field of domestic service. By 1890, forty percent of black women in Chicago were employed as domestic servants in private homes, hotels, and rooming houses. On one hand, Williams argued that the science of domesticity gave much-needed social respect to the paid work of black women as maids and laundresses. She hoped that poor and working-class black girls might have better self-esteem if taught that domestic service could be rigorous and socially valuable. “Our girls,” she explained, “must be made to feel that there is no stepping down when they become professional housekeepers.”51

On the other hand, Williams was suspicious of privileged white women who wanted to professionalize their own work as mothers and homemakers while ignoring the harsher realities of paid domestic help. Schools of domestic science in cities like Chicago, Boston, and New York discriminated against black students and focused on training white “lady housekeepers” and


professional housewives. Without access to the same professional training, Williams feared that black women were in danger “of being relegated to the positions of scrub women and dishwashers.” Williams' trepidation was well-founded. Outside of elite black colleges, few institutions at the turn of the century taught African American women that housekeeping could be as artistic as costume design or cooking as rigorous as chemistry. Professional schools of domestic science assigned new social currency to the unpaid labor of white women as guardians of the home. The paid domestic work of black women, however, remained undervalued and stigmatized.\(^52\)

Settlement house workers in Chicago promoted domestic science education as part of their Americanization efforts during the 1890s. Shortly after joining the NHEA, Jane Addams established a public kitchen at Hull House that featured scientific demonstrations on cooking, nutrition, and home sanitation. Shortly after joining the NHEA, Jane Addams established a public kitchen at Hull House that featured scientific demonstrations on cooking, nutrition, and home sanitation. Other social settlements like Chicago Commons offered similar domestic science classes in cooking, childcare nutrition, and “economy of the home.”\(^53\) These programs were intended to improve immigrant living conditions by training mothers to run their homes along middle-class standards of cleanliness and respectability.

The purpose of domestic science education in the settlement house movement was rooted in cultural assumptions about the ignorance of immigrant mothers. Advocates of domestic

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science education often blamed a diversity of health issues from infection to intemperance on the poor domestic habits of “new immigrant” women from Southern and Eastern Europe. Middle-class reformers like Florence Kelley reasoned that poor mothers unknowingly jeopardized their children's health due to lack of information about sanitary science and nutrition. Some domestic science advocates made larger claims that a lack of education in “household economy” lead immigrant mothers to exacerbate their own poverty through ill-informed purchasing. Others asserted that the messy homes of untrained housewives pushed their husbands to go out gambling and drinking. While some of these perceptions were rooted in reality, many were fed by xenophobic ideas about the uncleanliness and parental unfitness of immigrants.54

Settlement houses offered domestic education programs intended to train girls who cared for their younger siblings. These “little mothers,” as they were often called, spent their days fulfilling childcare duties for working mothers or widowed fathers. In addition to providing daycare services, the nurseries at Hull House and the University of Chicago settlements served as training schools for “little mothers” to learn how to clean an infant and give a baby a bottle. These lessons were considered essential for the health of infants as well as their older sisters. According to a study by the Chicago Board of Health, nearly half of the “little mothers” in the city's stockyard district suffered from irreparable “curvature of the spine” due to improper training on how to carry a baby.55

54 For more on the cultural history of domesticity, cleanliness, and immigration, see Susan Strasser, Never Done; Suellen Hoy, Chasing Dirt: The American Pursuit of Cleanliness (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996).

55 “Prepare to Open Ghetto Nursery,” CDT, December 28, 1907, 4; Elias Tobenkin, “Little Women, Wonders of the Slums, Take Up Life’s Burdens Early” CDT, September 27, 1908, 10; “‘Little Mothers’ of Down Town Chicago,” CDT, August 2, 1903, A3. The Little Mothers' Aid Society of New York City provided similar training for girls who worked as the primary caretaker for their young siblings. See “Home of the Little Mothers,” NYT
Figures 9–10. Domestic Education Classes at Hull House, 1908. In evening classes at Hull House, working girls practiced cooking and needlework, sanitizing and sweeping. “Practical Housekeeping Center,” (Pamphlet, 1909), Folder 20, Box 1, Florence Kelley Papers, UIC.

January 8, 1899, 20; “Work for Little Mothers” NYT, March 4, 1900, 8.
Settlement houses also offered domestic instruction specifically for working girls. Because most poor daughters spent their teen years in the workforce, one settlement house workers explained, “training and knowledge, which should be given in the home, have to be picked up in the street.” Three days a week, Hull House provided evening classes for working girls who spent their days in downtown shops and factories. These girls wore white aprons and caps for lessons in how to boil potatoes, sanitize the floor, and mend clothing. Without this education, settlement house workers feared that immigrant daughters could continue the cycles of poverty, disease, and malnutrition in their future families.56

Kelley criticized public school officials for failing to expand Flower's “sewing experiment” in the elementary curriculum. Writing in the progressive monthly The Chautauquan in 1897, Kelley explained that Eastern European girls in Chicago's poorest district spent more school time on arithmetic than any other subject. Kelley argued that such education “would have been valuable, perhaps, for bank clerks” but made little sense for girls who worked in factories and shops before devoting themselves to motherhood. Kelley accused the “stupid curriculum” for encouraging girls to pursue work outside the home. Due to lack of information on the importance of homemaking, she reasoned, girls searched for fulfillment in shops and offices where they suffered from physical degradation and “nervous exhaustion.” She argued that the public schools needed less “words and numbers” and more practical classes like sanitation, hygiene, and nutrition.57

56 Woods and Kennedy, Young Working Girls, 3; “Solving the Problem” CDT, Nov 1, 1891, 33.

The future health of American families rested on domestic education in the public schools for middle-class women like Kelley. She argued that the city's increasing immigrant population would eventually give birth to “native-born citizens” who needed protection from malnutrition and disease. Immigrant daughters needed to learn not to feed their future children “soggy potatoes” with “beer, coffee, cucumbers, and bananas.” Otherwise, Kelley warned, untold generations of American children would perish before their first birthday “poisoned by the hopeless ignorance of their school-bred mother.”

“Beefsteakology” in the Public Schools

Assistant superintendent Ella Flagg Young spearheaded the effort to integrate scientifically-informed domestic in Chicago's elementary schools. At 52 years old, Young had spent the better half of her life working in Chicago public schools and was a vocal advocate of so-called “fad” subjects like woodworking, drawing, and sewing. Like her good friend Lucy Flower, Young believed that these subjects would democratize public education by addressing the future economic and community needs of poor and working-class children.

Young traveled to Boston in 1897 to tour their famously-progressive public schools. Public elementary schools in Boston were the first in America to offer domestic science classes in 1880. Boston popularized the “laboratory model” of cooking instruction in public schools, in which girls in grades six through eight practiced the science of baking and dish washing in

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classrooms lined with gas stovetops, sinks, and ovens. Young was thoroughly impressed by the program, and returned from Boston devoted to bringing domestic science into the Chicago schools.  

Young reasoned that domestic science would have the most success if she followed the “center” model used by manual training advocates. By 1897, Chicago's wealthiest businessmen had helped finance 34 manual training rooms or “centers” in elementary schoolhouses that were attended weekly by more than 15,000 students. Young argued that elementary schools should have their own centers for cooking, sewing, and cleaning instruction and turned to her wealthy associates on the Chicago Woman's Club for assistance. In 1898 she convinced members of the  

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Kitchen Garden Association, Nancy “Nettie” McCormick and Elizabeth Stickney, to convert the unused basements of two elementary schools into domestic science centers. To appease the Board of Education, McCormick and Stickney agreed to cover all expenses.\(^61\)

McCormick paid to convert the basement of Hammond Elementary School into a cooking “laboratory” with sinks lined against one wall and ranges along the other. An adjoining classroom was outfitted like a dining room where girls practiced serving and table setting. Stickney, whose late husband served as president of the Stock Yards National Bank, oversaw the second domestic science center at Kosminski Elementary School in Hyde Park where students worked over their own gas stovetop wearing white aprons, caps, and sleeve protectors. Roughly 250 girls in grades six through eight commuted to the centers from nearby neighborhood schools each week. With donations from the KGA, McCormick and Stickney hired Florence Willard as Chicago's first and only full-time domestic science teacher. A graduate of the Pratt Institute in New York, Willard traveled between the two schools daily lugging bags of fresh vegetables, bread, and meat.\(^62\)

In 1891 Lucy Flower had attempted to integrate sewing as a general life skill for female students. Young, in contrast, argued that this new domestic program was scientific rather than

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general. Speaking to the press in 1898, Young explained that sewing lessons at the domestic science centers taught students to mend clothing as well as “explain scientifically the relative heat absorption of wool and cotton.” Cooking classes both taught girls “the chemical symbols for water and carbon dioxide” in addition to basic nutritional principles. Young was explicit that the domestic science centers were not intended to prepare girls for work in domestic service or needle trades. Rather, their ultimate function was to teach “the values of foods and hygiene” so girls could become more competent mothers and safer homemakers.63

Local school officials and club women argued that the public schools could benefit urban society through financing additional domestic science centers. In a letter to the Board, the principal of Hammond Elementary School stated that the sanctity of the American home was disrupted by “the centralization of population in cities.” He urged the public schools to help correct the social imbalance created by urbanization and “dignify the home arts of woman” by including domestic science in the elementary curriculum. Board member and CWC representative Evelyn Frake agreed that investing in “the future life-work of our school girls” would benefit generations of American children. Public schools could become “most beneficial to the State,” she argued, by ensuring girls were prepared to safely care for themselves and their children without public support.64

The Board of Education voted 18 to 2 to expand domestic science centers in the city’s most crowded school districts after reviewing these recommendations. In addition to her role as


assistant superintendent, Young was placed in charge of the Chicago public schools' new department of “household arts” in the elementary schools. While often used interchangeably, Chicago school officials replaced “domestic science” with “household arts” due to confusion among parents that their daughters were being trained for domestic service. The national domestic science movement also moved away from the phrase by the turn of the century, increasingly relying on the terms “household arts” and “home economics” to describe education for informed homemaking.

The success of the domestic science movement in Chicago public schools inspired rural women in the Illinois countryside to put pressure on their local school boards as well. In 1898 a group of women from Bloomington, Illinois organized the Illinois Association of Domestic Science (IADS) to take domestic science education from their “city sisters” in Chicago and bring it “to the very doors of the farm homes.” In the organization’s first few years, members traveled throughout the state talking to rural housewives about domestic science and asked local mothers to pressure their school boards to introduce cooking and sewing classes in the elementary schools. By 1901, the IADS reported nearly 70 schools in the Illinois countryside that had incorporated domestic science due to their grassroots organizing.

Young’s fledgling household arts department struggled to expand as she had hoped at the turn of the century. Due to what she called “professional discord” with school leadership, Young left her position abruptly in 1899 to pursue a doctorate degree in education at the University of

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65 For an explanation of this misunderstanding, see “How Educational Problems Have Been Solved in Chicago Schools,” *CDT*, September 1, 1912, G2.

Chicago. With no one (or no woman) to assume her responsibilities, the Board of Education merged the household arts department with the existing manual training department in the elementary schools where it received limited resources. Young had envisioned the two departments growing in tandem. But by 1909, the number of manual training centers in elementary schools had mushroomed to 157 (55 percent of elementary schools) while the number of domestic science centers stalled at 38 (13 percent of schools).

The school lives of Chicago girls were complicated by the limited domestic science facilities. All students in grades six through eight who did not have manual or domestic equipment at their own schoolhouses traveled to their closest “center” once a week. Girls' commutes were often much longer because domestic facilities were so few and far between. By 1903, there were only 10 domestic science centers used by over 5,000 girls from 145 schools each week. In some districts, girls spent more than an hour walking to their weekly cooking classes. Teachers and local school officials complained to the Board about the waste of time taken to transport girls to cooking centers. Domestic science classes were ultimately shortened to accommodate the longer commutes.

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67 Young believed that the city's new superintendent of schools, E. Benjamin Andrews, had conservative policies on school governance; mainly, she wanted teachers to have more power in curricular decisions and Andrews disagreed. See Lagemann, “Experimenting with Education,” 175.


Part of this disparity was due to the logistical difficulties of integrating domestic centers into existing schoolhouses. According to the head of the manual training program, cooking rooms were complicated because they needed proper drainage, ventilation, and access to gas for baking and boiling. While manual training rooms required similar considerations, the importance of sanitation in the domestic training of girls placed further burdens on school architects. Like the scientifically-run home, domestic centers needed to be designed with attention to light and airflow. They could not be on the first floor of a schoolhouse because dust and dirt from the nearby street could come through the windows and contaminate food and textiles. Basements had
also proven to be poor environments for cooking classes due to ventilation issues. Manual training centers, like factories and workshops, were acceptable environments for dust, dirt, and smoke. But domestic science centers needed to be spotless.\textsuperscript{70}

The disparity between manual training and domestic science centers also stemmed from the assumption that the daughters of poor immigrant parents needed domestic science education more than others. Most of Chicago's domestic science centers were established in the city's most crowded elementary schools in immigrant enclaves. Five were located in predominantly Czech, Greek, and Bohemian neighborhoods on the city's west side. Three were in working-class Irish and German communities near the south side stockyards, railroads, and steel mills. These were the daughters of mothers who presumably worked, girls who worked themselves, and the “little mothers” who needed education for the safety of themselves and their young siblings.

School officials and members of the press reported that the domestic science centers had noticeable results in the city's poorest districts. In 1904, school officials instructed 15,000 girls to demonstrate their domestic science education for their parents to prove that the public schools were in fact teaching “practical cooking.” School officials reported receiving letters from parents thanking them for the introduction of “beefsteakology” and “breadometry” into their homes. In one letter, the father of a fourteen-year-old student asked to oversee all shopping and cooking for a month and saved her family $23. “The public school girl,” the \textit{Tribune} reported, “has gone home from the public school and warned her parents against the overcrowding of sleeping

rooms, she has preached to them the gospel of fresh air, of house sanitation, of cleanliness.”

According to the *Tribune*, domestic science classes transformed eighth-grade students into effective public health educators.

Middle-class parents felt domestic science education was irrelevant to the educational needs of their more privileged daughters. Nationally, many of these parents requested their children be excused from cooking and sewing lessons to focus on academic students. “I shouldn't want Margaret to waste her time on cooking at school,” one middle-class mother remarked. “I can teach her that at home.” Another mother, the wife of a doctor, also saw little use in her daughter spending valuable school time sewing and sanitizing: “Women don't need to read books on housekeeping or study the subject if they have common sense.” The mother of a fourteen-year-old student explained why her daughter did not need cooking classes: “Emma will never have any cooking to do, she will always have servants,” she reasoned. “I'd rather she would spend her time on music and art.”

Manual training classes, in contrast, were largely thought to benefit boys regardless of their social class. While male students were not all expected to become future tradesmen, manual work in carpentry and foundry was considered useful to boys' proclivity for physical movement. According to Smith, a male student was most happy “when he can make something” because he was by nature “a creature of action.” Some educators even argued that manual training classes were more important for middle-class students because their leisurely lifestyles did not provide

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71 “Child Cooks to Try: Small Daughters in 15,000 Families Plan Experiment,” *CDT*, October 23, 1904, 1; “How Domestic Science Is Prolonging the Life of Man,” *CDT*, April 5, 1903, A5; “What the Public School is Doing for the Chicago Girl,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, Jan 26, 1908, E4.

other outlets for their boyhood energies.\textsuperscript{73}

The wealthy members of Chicago's Board of Education shared reservations about the usefulness of domestic science in the public schools. When faced with budget cuts, domestic science program was often placed first on the chopping block by Board members who viewed cooking and sewing as extraneous. As one Chairman of the Board put it plainly: “I do not believe in spending money for teaching how to cook turkey and to scramble eggs in school.” In 1905 the only woman on the Board of Education, Mrs. W. H. C. Keough, vowed to eliminate domestic education from the elementary curriculum all together. “It is absurd to waste time and money teaching cooking and sewing in the Chicago Schools,” Keough told the \textit{Chicago Tribune}. “Any girl soon can pick up these things at home.” The wife of a wealthy Catholic lawyer, Keough argued girls should receive piano lessons in seventh grade instead of cooking. “It is better to get the culture first,” she reasoned, “and the cooking and sewing afterward.”\textsuperscript{74}

\textit{“The Champion of Girls Pupils”}

Ella Flagg Young saved the neglected household arts department from obscurity. In 1909, Young returned to the public schools as Chicago's new superintendent. Young was the first woman to oversee a major school system in America and was reportedly the highest paid woman in the country with an annual salary of $10,000. At 64 years old, her election was controversial among many board members who insisted a man should be at the helm of the public schools. Without male leadership, some feared that Young would mismanage school funds or overrun the

\textsuperscript{73} “How Educational Problems Have Been Solved in Chicago,” \textit{CDT}, September 1, 1912, G2.

\textsuperscript{74} “Two Departments in the Public Schools May Have to be Cut,” \textit{CDT}, Jan 4, 1899, 5; Keough, “Strikes at School Fads: Trustee Mrs. Kenough Would Eliminate Them Here, Too,” \textit{CDT}, March 31, 1905, 9.
curriculum with “Feminism and fads.” But Young's appointment was widely supported by members of the Teachers' Federation and the city's reform community who hoped “the $10,000 Woman” would prioritize the needs of teachers, parents, and students.

Young instituted a series of reforms during her superintendency aimed at empowering teachers and democratizing school governance. These are well-documented by educational historians. Her work as the so-called “champion of girl pupils,” however, has received less scholarly attention. Much of Young's superintendency focused on ensuring that the Board of Education gave as much attention to “the needs of the girls” as the education of boys. One of her first projects in 1909 was to expand the household arts department she established ten years earlier. At a press conference following her election, Young criticized school officials for allowing domestic science to lag behind manual training in the elementary schools. “When the two departments were established it was the order to install them together,” she explained. “Every school should have its room for the teaching of domestic science.”

Young's desire to expand domestic science in the elementary schools was motivated by her progressive philosophy of education. Like her famed colleague at the University of Chicago, John Dewey, Young believed that public schools needed to adapt to new social conditions created by industrialism. Young argued in her 1901 dissertation, *Isolation in the School*, that the narrow

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78 For his most famous work on the relationship between public schools and industrial society, see John Dewey,
nineteenth-century curriculum ill-prepared children for modern society. She asserted that traditional methods of teaching students to read and write isolated the school from society because there was no clear connection to changing community needs. Young believed that a more socially-conscious school would blend history, English, and arithmetic with music, drawing, cooking, and hygiene. A diversified curriculum would educate better citizens, she asserted, and was therefore “the theory upon which a democracy rests.”

Young intended the new household arts department to prepare girls to meet their particular social responsibilities in the twentieth century. She worked closely with the city's new director of household arts, Mary Snow, to ensure every girl who graduated from the elementary schools had training for “personal, household, or community usefulness.” Snow was also a life-long educator at age 51 who, like Young, made history as the first female superintendent of schools in her home state of Maine. An active member of the National Household Economics Association, Snow believed that girls required specialized training to increase their “industrial and social efficiency” as informed mothers and homemakers. “The home of the future,” she wrote of the household arts department in 1910, “will reap the larger benefit through this early training in the duties of motherhood.”

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In a series of conferences with Snow and school architect Dwight Perkins in 1909, Young worked toward her ambitious goal of establishing a domestic science center in each of Chicago's 233 elementary schools. In her first two years as superintendent, the number of domestic science centers jumped from 38 to 109. By the end of her superintendency in 1915, domestic science equipment was installed in 199 schoolhouses across the city. Many of these “cooking laboratories” had adjoining rooms dedicated to dining that were filled with tables and chairs constructed by boys in manual training classes. Other schools had sewing rooms lined with machines and mannequins for displaying finished garments. Only 18 schools, all on the far west and south sides of the city, lacked facilities for cooking by 1912 and were too isolated for girls to easily walk elsewhere for domestic instruction. Snow argued this growing equality with manual
training would stop the Board of Education from treating domestic science centers like
“colonial possessions of the school – remote and seldom visited.” \(^{81}\)

The establishment of domestic science rooms in almost all Chicago schoolhouses expanded its role in the daily school lives of girls. Sewing classes were introduced earlier in the curriculum – in grades four and five – and cooking was offered in grades six through eight. Housekeeping, machine sewing, and millinery classes were offered in grades seven and eight. Snow also attempted to draw connections between these domestic classes and other subjects. Seventh grade cooking classes, for example, taught girls world history through lectures on the origins and historical development of each ingredient in their recipes. Millinery classes involved arithmetic and geometry exercises by cutting and measuring garments. With domestic equipment in most schoolhouses, teachers of household arts were less isolated as well. Rather than traveling to various centers throughout the week, household arts instructors became permanent members of the elementary teaching force and were paid accordingly. \(^{82}\)

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The household arts department introduced a settlement-house model of education into the public schools by emphasizing community usefulness. In 1911, Young introduced a program specifically for girls who fulfilled homemaking responsibilities “during the absence of the employed mother.” With financial support from the Department of Health, the “little mothers' classes” instructed girls in their upper-elementary grades on issues like domestic hygiene and medical care for infants. Each “little mother” received a life-like doll, roughly the size of a two-year-old child, which they used to practice feeding, cleaning, and dressing. These classes were offered at 48 elementary schools picked specifically by Young to address high rates of infant mortality.83

83 “Not Enough Children in City Says Dr. J. B. M'Fatrich,” CDT, November 26, 1911, 4; “Training for Motherhood,” Fifty-Eighth Annual Report of the Board of Education (Chicago: The Board of Education, 1912), 16, CBEA. For more on how the public schools adopted settlement house models of education see Maureen
Local school officials were encouraged to use domestic science centers flexibly to meet the particular needs or obligations of their female students who worked, cared for young siblings, and helped run the home. In elementary schools with a predominantly Jewish student body, for example, cooking teachers adapted their lessons to include Kosher ingredients and were instructed to learn the history of Jewish religious cooking. Some schools offered a special “industrial course” to help girls prepare for paid work in household industries. Modeled after the city's industrial schools, this special course taught sixth through eighth grade students how to launder, serve meals, and keep house for employment. Principals were authorized to replace the regular household course with the industrial course in any school “where conditions make it appear advisable.”

Board members resisted Young's expansion of domestic science in the elementary schools throughout her tenure as superintendent. In 1912, the Board attempted to entirely remove the elementary school curriculum from the superintendent's control in order to stop Young from expanding domestic education in the schools. Continued conflict with board members pushed Young to announce her early resignation in June 1913. “Every time I start to do anything,” she explained to the press, “there is a committee appointed to take it out of my hands.”


85 “Votes to Abolish All 'School Fads,” CDT, December 20, 1912, 1.
Young was moved to reconsider after a group of supporters organized a rally in protest of her resignation. The rally took place at Chicago's Auditorium Theater and featured speeches by Jane Addams, Margaret Haley of the Teachers' Federation, and illustrious representatives of Chicago's various women's clubs. In total, nearly 2,000 women attended the rally to show support of Young's progressive leadership. These women rejected the Board's criticism that Young had filled the curriculum with extraneous subjects. Rather, in the words of one speaker, Young “brought the schools of Chicago to the highest point of efficiency in their history.”

Conclusion

Between 1890 and 1915, advocates of domestic education altered public education in Chicago by insisting that schools invest in the maternal development of female students. Like manual training for boys, domestic education was an expression of the growing interest among progressive reformers to prepare immigrant and working-class students for industrial life. Business leaders and male school officials, for example, believed public schools should train boys for the industrial economy through manual training programs. Yet unlike manual training, domestic education was promoted by middle- and upper-class women who believed public schools had a new social responsibility of preparing girls for the challenges of motherhood in the twentieth century. Historians neglect this important social context when assuming cooking and sewing classes were an outgrowth of manual training for boys.

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87 Most educational historians have argued that domestic classes were a form of “handwork” that emerged from the manual training movement for boys. See Warner Grubb and Marvin Lazerson, American Education and
The women-led domestic education movement was a resounding success. According to a national survey conducted by the United States Bureau of Education, only 27 school districts offered cooking or sewing classes in 1895. Twenty years later, domestic education had spread to at least 3,500 towns and cities across the country. The Bureau of Education asked nearly 200 of those school districts why they established a household arts department. Rather than citing pedagogical gains of cooking and sewing like “handwork,” school representatives listed the social benefits of domestic classes for girls. Some wanted to increase “home efficiency” and “the dignifying of housework.” Others wanted to make “better homemakers” and promote “better homes.” These responses echoed the goals of local advocates like Ella Flagg Young and national organizations like the NHEA. More significantly, they revealed a clear social agenda shaping the public education of female students in the early twentieth century.

The history of sewing, cooking, and cleaning in Chicago's elementary schools highlights the urban roots of domestic school reform. Household arts classes for girls first appeared in elementary schools in states with larger manufacturing centers like Massachusetts, New York, Pennsylvania, and Illinois. Few southern states offered any domestic education in public elementary or high schools in the early twentieth century. According to the bureau of Education, only two school districts in Alabama, Louisiana, and Mississippi reported an elementary household arts department in 1914. Some southern states – like Tennessee and Arkansas –


reported zero.\textsuperscript{89} This data confirms that domestic education stemmed from decidedly urban concerns about young girls growing up in the industrial city.

\textsuperscript{89} Andrews, “Table 2 – Year of Introduction of Household Arts into Public Schools by States,” \textit{United States Bureau of Education Bulletin}, 77-78.
CHAPTER THREE

“A SUPERIOR KIND OF WORKING WOMAN”

TRADE EDUCATION FOR GIRLS IN CHICAGO HIGH SCHOOLS, 1900-1915

In 1914 Agnes Nestor of the National Women's Trade Union League went to the offices of the Chicago Board of Education with a resolution in hand. Nestor, a 23-year old glove maker and labor activist, hoped to convince school officials to offer a course on collective bargaining for students pursuing vocational degrees in Chicago public high schools. She and her colleagues argued that female students needed to learn labor rights in particular because women filled some of the most poorly-paid positions in the industrial economy. Nestor was surprised when Dr. Ella Flagg Young agreed to a meeting. Young and Nestor did not exactly get along. Young was a supporter of household arts education for girls and regularly ignored the requests of trade union women to open other vocational programs to female students. Nestor was shocked with Young expressed enthusiasm about her idea for a collective bargaining course and agreed to bring Nestor's resolution to the Board of Education. Unfortunately, Young was only interested because she thought Nestor had suggested a course for girls on how to buy – a concept affiliated with the home economics movement – rather than how to bargain. “Evidently our terms were not familiar to her,” Nestor later lamented, “as she had no previous familiarity with labor.”

This misunderstanding between Nestor and Young reflected an important division in how progressive-era women understood the purpose of vocational education for female students.

Members of the National Women's Trade Union League (WTUL) wanted public high schools to teach female students skilled trades so they could advance to better positions in the manufacturing sector. These women argued that vocational programs should also teach “the dignity of labor” to future working women through courses on collective bargaining, the history of labor legislation, and the evolution of capitalism. Their radical goals faced fierce opposition from middle-class educational reformers and school administrators who believed domestic skills like cooking and sewing were of equal if not more importance to a girl's vocational training. In Chicago, the success of this latter argument had a profound impact on how female students used the public school curriculum to prepare for employment.

The expansion of vocational education between 1900 and 1915 was one of the most significant school reform movements of the twentieth century. Before 1900, students in urban public schools studied Greek and Latin and took coursework in accounting, physics, and geology to prepare for college or professional careers. This changed after 1900 when public high schools were increasingly crowded the children of recent immigrants from Southern and Eastern Europe, many of whom spoke little to no English. School officials hoped to make a high school education more “practical” for immigrant students by outfitting existing schoolhouses with factory-style workrooms for lessons in carpentry, foundry, engineering, jewelry design, bookbinding, and sign painting. Few high school students studied Latin in Chicago by 1915 but tens of thousands learned to weld and whittle. These programs are broadly defined as “vocational education” in the historical literature but were commonly referred to as “trade education,” “industrial education,”

or “technical education” in the decades before World War I.³

The current scholarship suggests that the “vocational education movement” in secondary schools was mostly targeted at boys. Historians of education have rightfully argued that male school officials and business leaders saw vocational programs as a useful means of preparing working-class boys for the industrial workforce. Members of the Women's Trade Union League had a similar desire to prepare female students for industrial careers through public education. Unlike male school officials, however, working-class women and their supporters believed vocational education should emphasize labor values in addition to labor skills and help correct workplace injustices between men and women. Historians have underemphasized these women in the education movement because they were largely unsuccessful. But their high hope for girls' vocational training demonstrates how progressive women used public school reform as a vehicle for social reform in the early twentieth century.⁴


Female students made independent choices about their course of study in Chicago public high schools that often contradicted the reform agendas of both working- and middle-class women like Nestor and Young. Studies of vocational school reform suggest that female students were passively shuffled into household arts classes to learn cooking and sewing while their male counterparts designed furniture and poured metal into molds. On the contrary, female students in Chicago ignored household arts programs and focused their coursework on “commercial programs” like stenography and bookkeeping to prepare for office work. Along with working-class women like Agnes Nestor, these students also contributed to the vocational education movement in Chicago between 1900 and 1915.

“The School of the Future”

School officials and social reformers in the early twentieth century lamented over the growing number of teenaged adolescents who spent their days loafing in the streets or working in factories when they could be in school. At least 23,000 students left the public schools by age fourteen to enter the workforce each year in industrial cities like Chicago and Boston. Few students excelled to high school, and those who did dropped out soon after to enter the workforce. Social workers feared that the public school system may become entirely irrelevant to the needs of working-class and immigrant children who increasingly crowded their elementary school classrooms.

In 1906 the Massachusetts Commission on Industrial and Technical Education published a widely-read report that concluded public high schools required a radical reformation to curb dropout rates in American cities. Popularly named after the Massachusetts Governor who appointed it, the Douglas Commission found that three-quarters of male students in the state left
the public school system by age fourteen for work due to financial necessity or boredom with “inactive school life.” The Commission reported that respectable employers and apprenticeships increasingly refused to hire children under the age of sixteen, which meant nearly 90 percent of fourteen-to-sixteen-year-old workers occupied dangerous and poorly-paid positions in mills and factories with little hope for career advancement. The Douglas Commission recommended urban high schools offer both two- and four-year programs in trades like carpentry, drafting, engineering, and mechanics. They warned that a work-oriented curriculum was the only solution to keep male students engaged in their schoolwork and help them advance in the industrial economy.⁵

The Douglas Commission sparked a national conversation about whether American public schools were rearing a generation of unskilled workmen. A group of prominent educators, labor union representatives, social scientists, and businessmen organized the National Society for the Promotion of Industrial Education (NSPIE) in response to the Douglas Report to promote the integration of vocational programs in American high schools.⁶ Of particular concern to members of the NSPIE was that the United States would fall behind other industrial competitors, particularly Germany, if more educational resources were not devoted to training highly-skilled

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workers. A 1908 study by the NSPIE reported that 55 percent of fourteen-to-sixteen-year-old boys in Berlin were enrolled in trade programs to become “real craftsmen.” But in Chicago less than one percent of male students received dedicated trade training according to their findings. “In the long run,” a NPSIE representative announced, “American industry will pay the penalty of this unpreparedness.” Even President Theodore Roosevelt agreed that vocational programs for male students were “vital to our future progress” to compete “for the markets of the world.”


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7 “Must Train for Industrial Race; United States Will Lose to Germany if Its Boys Are Not Better Taught,” CDT, Jan 22, 1908, 16; also see “Getting Data for Trade Schools,” CDT, Dec 10, 1907, 8; Theodore Roosevelt, “Industrial Education,” The Journal of Education 67, no. 8 (1908): 201.
Chicago's superintendent of schools from 1900 to 1909, Edwin G. Cooley, rose to national fame in reformist circles for his dedication to integrating a German model of “technical education” into Chicago's public high schools. A former blacksmith turned progressive pedagogue, Cooley agreed that urban high schools could better prepare working-class boys who went on to support the city's manufacturing sector. Public high schools in Chicago prepared students well for college through academic coursework and for professional careers through classes in bookkeeping and typing. Some high schools also offered coursework in commercial geography, the history of economics, and business English to prepare male students for careers in business and banking. Cooley believed this curriculum was impractical for most children in Chicago who came from working-class and immigrant backgrounds. “It has taken us a long time to wake up to the fact that we should also help the mechanic, the clerk, and the farmer,” he explained in 1908. “They make up the body of our citizenship and they have been discriminated against.”

Cooley argued that few male students pursued a secondary education in Chicago because the high school curriculum was pretentious. Female students outnumbered male students in Chicago's high schools by a ratio of seven to one. Many female students – nearly 60 percent at the turn of the century – used the high schools as a stepping stone to gain teaching certification. Others embraced the commercial classes in high schools to prepare for white-collar work as stenographers and file clerks. High rates of female high school attendance crossed most ethnical, 


religious, and racial categories. African American girls in Chicago were twice as likely to attend high school than their male counterparts in the early 1900s also hoping to apply their academic training towards teaching careers. Cooley's criticism was that public high schools only appealed to the *sons* of professional parents.\(^{10}\)

Cooley hoped that a greater focus on boys' vocational education would help address the gender imbalance in Chicago high schools. Male school officials suggested that girls pursued a secondary education in greater numbers because they were easily persuaded to study, responded better to authority, and had a “greater love of home and school.” Boys, in contrast, were “more restless than girls” due to their natural desire for independence and self-sufficiency. Coursework dedicated to preparing male students for trades would help keep them engaged in their schoolwork and prepare for productive citizenship. Otherwise, Cooley warned in 1902, Chicago's high schools would simply become “girls' schools.”\(^{11}\)

In 1905 the Board of Education rebuilt the city's oldest high school, Lake High School on the far south side, and outfitted the building with advanced manual training equipment. Lake High School was co-ed but offered male students elective coursework in woodworking, machine shop, and construction drawing. In 1909, Lake High School became the only co-ed school in Chicago with more male students enrolled than female students, which the Board of Education

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attributed to the curriculum's new vocational focus. Lake High School became single-sex high school for boys in 1915 and was renamed the Edward Tilden Technical High School, which it remained for the better part of the twentieth century. Due to the success of Lake, manual training equipment for woodworking, forge, foundry, machine shop, construction drawing, and electric shop was installed in eight of the city's most populated high schools in an effort to correct the gender imbalance.12

Cooley also established two high schools dedicated to preparing boys between fourteen and eighteen for skilled industrial work: the Richard Crane Technical High School (est. 1903) and Albert Lane Technical High School (est. 1908). Cooley preferred the term “technical school” as used in Germany to “trade school,” which he found derogatory. Both schools were outfitted with expensive shop-room machinery dedicated to diverse trades including foundry, forge pattern, woodturning, electric construction, carpentry, machine shop, mechanical drawing, construction, and electrical work. Lane Tech, built to accommodate 2,500 students, included adjoining lecture rooms to each shop room where pupils received instruction in technique and method. Crane Tech and Lane Tech also offered standard academic courses offered at other high schools but did not include commercial classes like typing or accounting. Cooley argued that Chicago's high schools should focus on skilled labor rather than white-collar work. “The school of the future,” he asserted, “will in all grades be largely industrial.”13

12 Founded in 1881, Lake High was rebuilt and modernized to meet vocational needs in 1905 at 47th Street and Union Avenue in present-day Fuller Park. In 1915 the school was renamed Edward Tilden Technical High School after the former president of the Chicago Board of Trade. It became an all-boys technical school in 1917, which it remained until the 1960s. Today the school is Tilden Career Academy. “Boys Equal Girls in High Schools,” CDT, Sept 9, 1909, 4; “High Schools,” Fifty-Fifth Annual Report of the Board of Education, 1909, 113, CBEA.

13 Crane Tech was originally privately-run by the Commercial Club of Chicago from 1882-1903 and known as the English High and Manual Training School. The Board of Education took over ownership in 1903, relocated to a new facility at Oakley and Van Buren, and was renamed after Richard T. Crane. Named after the former
Figure 16. Chicago's Public Technical High Schools, est. 1900-1915

Other American cities established vocationally-oriented high schools specifically male students between 1900 and 1909. In manufacturing centers like Milwaukee and Baltimore, these schools were similar to Crane and Lane Technical High Schools in Chicago. Public high schools for boys in east-coast cities like Boston and Philadelphia focused more on commercial education for future managers and business leaders rather than industrial education. Chicago school superintendent of schools, Albert Jane Technical High School opened at Sedgwick and Division Ave on the north side of Chicago. Lane Tech was reportedly the most expensive public high school constructed in America at more than $800,000. The project was so extravagant that the Board's chief architect Dwight Perkins protested construction as a negligent use of school building funds. In 1933 the school relocated further north to the corner of Addison and Western Aves, where it currently stands. See “$800,000 School Work of Others? Architect Perkins Says He Protested at Cost of Lane Technical,” Chicago Daily Tribune, Feb 8, 1910, 3; “Manual Training and Household Arts,” Annual Report of the Chicago Board of Education, 1909, 145, CBEA.
officials argued these commercial high schools made boys sheepish and unmanly, while Chicago's technical high schools turned boys into rugged tradesmen. In 1908 the principal of Lane Tech argued that Boston's high school students lacked “the strength and virility and rough and ready manners of our Chicago youth.” After spending a day among Boston's male students who were “so good that they would not even whisper,” he longed for “the brain and brawn of our red-corpuscled Chicago boys.”

“Enlightened Apprenticeship” for Girls

Local school officials and the NSPIE alike largely ignored female students due to their preoccupation with rearing rugged industrialists. In 1907 a group of well-known women spearheaded a subcommittee of the NSPIE to advocate for the needs of girls in vocational school reform. Jane Addams of Chicago and Mary Morton Kehew of Boston led the committee, both of whom were prominent figures in the reform communities of their respective cities. Addams and Kehew issued a report in 1907 reminding their male colleagues in the NSPIE that one-third of women and girls between the ages of fifteen and twenty-four were gainfully employed in factories, shops, and offices in all American cities. These workers had greater difficulty finding safe and consistent employment and made far lower wages than their male counterparts. Addams and Kehew asserted that the undeniable presence of women and girls in the workforce demanded school reformers make an equal investment in their vocational training. For the United States to “maintain her rank as a great industrial Nation,” Kehew wrote, female students also required training “for the industrial civilization in which they are to live.”


Addams and Kehew were both founding members of The National Women's Trade Union League (WTUL). The WTUL was established in 1903 by a cross-class coalition of working-class women and middle-class social reformers who together hoped to organize women into labor unions, spread awareness of women's working conditions, and advocated for protective labor legislation. One of the WTUL's most active local chapters was in Chicago, where Addams had built close relationships with the labor community through her work at the Hull House settlement. Working-class members of the WTUL who stitched corsets, assembled gloves, and made felt hats in Chicago met monthly with their allies in philanthropic groups like the Chicago Woman's Club. These women often met at Hull House to discuss supporting strikes lobbying for an eight-hour workday, and broader political campaigns like women's suffrage.
A recurring point of discussion among trade women and their middle-class supporters was how to encourage school officials to prepare female students for the industrial workforce.16

Members of the national WTUL and their local chapters argued that equal access to vocational training would mean higher wages and less exploitive working conditions for women and girls. Historians of education have argued that male-organized trade unions were generally suspicious of industrial education for fear that public schools would train strike breakers and disrupt the foundational apprenticeship system depended on by craft unions. In Chicago, financial support for technical programs came from business leaders like Richard T. Crane and members of the illustrious Chicago Commercial Club which only increased these suspicions. But labor women did not share many of these concerns. Chicago's burgeoning women's unions were not rooted in the apprenticeship tradition and did not view vocational programs in public schools as a threat to their power. Rather, the WTUL hoped vocational education – particularly in garment trades like dressmaking and millinery – could help female workers advance in the industrial economy. As the WTUL's constitution stated: “If apprenticeships are not to be open to women, then trade schools which offer them opportunities to increase their economic value must come into being.”17


The first trade schools for teenaged girls were private institutions supported by the charitable donation of women's organizations. Members of the Women's Educational and Industrial Union (WEIU) founded the first work-oriented high schools for girls in America: The Boston Trade School for Girls (est. 1902) and the Manhattan Trade School for Girls (est. 1904). The WEIU was composed of upper-class club women and middle-class social reformers who used the term “union” to suggest a collective rather than a labor organizing body. Some prominent social reformers, like Mary Kehew, held leadership positions in both the WEIU and the WTUL and both organizations shared roots in the settlement house movement. Chicago's WTUL had their monthly meetings at Hull House, for example, while the WEIU met at Boston's Denison House settlement. The groups differed in their political commitments and the class makeup of their membership. The Women's Trade Union League was an alliance of working-class women and middle-class supporters who wanted to organize all working women in unions. The WEIU was composed of a more privileged class of women who supported vocational education and unions but lacked the WTUL's political commitments.18

The Boston Trade School for Girls and Manhattan Trade School for Girls instructed students between the ages of fourteen and seventeen who graduated from city elementary schools and desired preparation for trade work. Both schools offered two- and four-year programs mostly in the needle and artistic trades, which were the largest employers of working girls and women before 1910. At the Manhattan Trade School for Girls, students made swim suits, shirts, aprons,

and dresses in factory-style workrooms outfitted with foot power sewing machines. Students also gained experience in “fancy work” like lace, embroidering, and scalloping and learned to make hats, candles, lampshades, and jewelry. Both schools reflected their roots in the settlement house movement by requiring students to enroll in domestic science classes including cooking, meal serving, sanitizing, and personal hygiene.19

Middle-class women who ran the free trade schools in Boston and New York shared the WTUL’s commitment to uplifting working-class girls from dangerous labor conditions. Florence Marshall was a middle-class social reformer and member of the WEIU who founded the Boston Trade School for Girls and later directed the girls' trade school in Manhattan. Marshall was the only woman to contribute to the report of the influential Douglas Commission of 1906. She argued that public schools should offer trade programs for female students so women could advance to the ranks of managers and designers in garment factories rather than be relegated to low-skill positions as stitchers and threat-cutters. Marshall argued that women's equality with men in the manufacturing sector could be achieved through unequal access to trade education. “As long as the schools do not train the girls for the better class of industry,” Marshall warned, “they are forcing them into stores as cash girls, into candy factories, into rubber factories.”20

Marshall worked with members of the Women's Trade Union League to provide what she called “enlightened apprenticeships” for female students. The Manhattan Trade School for Girls employed experienced tradeswomen affiliated with the WTUL to lead classes in trades like


glove-making and helped secure girls positions when they left school. Administrators treated some students as apprentices by paying them for their production of garments, lampshades, and other products manufactured in school workrooms. Girls in cooking classes also profited from their domestic education by selling hot meals at lunchtime. Marshall argued that paying girls for their work taught them the value of money and the value of their own labor.\(^\text{21}\)

Middle-class educational reformers like Marshall were equally concerned that students learn skills for motherhood and homemaking. She argued that domestic science classes at the Manhattan Trade School for Girls ensured working-class girls could successfully run a home when they exited the workforce for marriage. She reasoned that working-class students would have healthier children and safer living spaces if they learned to cook nutritious meals and sanitize their kitchens. Working-class girls would also become “more responsible, more reliable and more womanly” according to Marshall if they did not lose sight of their inevitable domestic duties.\(^\text{22}\)

Middle-class advocates of trade education in the WEIU shared common goals with women in the home economics movement. In 1908 the pioneering domestic science educator Ellen Shallow Richards founded the American Home Economics Association (AHEA), which became a powerful lobby force for expanding domestic education in secondary schools and colleges across the country. The AHEA professionalized domestic education programs under the banner of “home economics” by the 1910s through sponsoring teacher training programs at


women's colleges and publishing course syllabi in their national organ *The Journal of Home Economics*. One prominent member of the AHEA was Mary Woolman, a professor of Domestic Arts & Sciences at Columbia University. Woolman was also a member of the Women's Industrial and Educational Union and the principal of the Manhattan Trade School for Girls. Like many middle-class education reformers, Woolman viewed trade training and domestic training for girls as two sides of the same coin. She argued that trade programs in dressmaking, millinery, and design would help girls find better jobs while also teaching them feminine skills that would ultimately be useful in the home. As one of her colleagues at the Manhattan Trade School put it, trade education for girls provided the dual results of “a profitable employment” and “a better home.”

Many members of the WTUL who supported the trade schools in Boston and Manhattan resented this association between training for wage-earning and homemaking. Labor women were particularly dismissive of the notion that teaching girls to cook and sew would give future

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working women cleaner homes and healthier children. Leonora O'Reilly was a 34-year-old seamstress and member of the WTUL who taught shirt-making at the Manhattan Trade School for Girls. She asserted that vocational educators should focus on helping female students secure skilled positions where they could have the time and physical strength to cultivate fulfilling lives outside of work. “I do not think that 70 per cent of children die because the mother does not know how to take care of them,” she argued in 1914. O'Reilly offered an alternative explanation: “The mother may have been so overworked in the factory or mill that she never should have brought a child into the world.”

Figure 18. National Women's Trade Union League Seal, 1903. Members of the WTUL argued that women would be better homemakers and mothers with shorter hours, higher pay, and safer working conditions – not through coursework in cooking and cleaning. This philosophy is expressed in the organization's seal, which depicts a mother holding her child in front of a factory while clasping hands with the Goddess of Liberty. The phrases between them suggest that uplifting women in the workplace would protect women in the home.

Labor women like O'Reilly wanted public schools to embrace more radical vocational programs for female students than the trade schools in Boston and Manhattan. One of O'Reilly's contemporaries, Agnes Nestor, was perhaps the most vocal advocate of expanding vocational training for girls in American public schools. Nestor was born in Grand Rapids, Michigan in 1880 to a housewife and a skilled machinist who became active in the labor movement when the family relocated to Chicago in 1897. She left school at thirteen years old to work in a Chicago glove factory, where she helped organize the International Ladies' Glove Workers Union at the age of twenty-three. Nestor joined the WTUL shortly thereafter and later served as the Chicago chapter's president from 1913 to 1948. Like O'Reilly, Nestor came of age at the height of the women's labor movement and had a personal commitment to empowering her fellow female wage-earners rather than preparing them for homemaking.26

Nestor and O'Reilly believed that male and female students should have equal access to all publicly-funded vocational programs, particularly those that trained students for coveted skilled trades like engineering and printing. They also believed vocational programs needed to teach labor values to future working men and women in addition to labor skills. Speaking at an American Federation of Labor convention in 1908, Nestor argued that vocational programs should include lessons on the history of the labor movement, the evolution of industry, and the history of capitalism. Girls in trade programs should learn the recent history of the women's movement, study existing labor laws, and learn “the philosophy of collective bargaining” to assert their rights and organize their fellow workers. For Nestor and O'Reilly, domestic education

had no place in girl's vocational education because it was irrelevant to increasing the labor power of women in the workforce.\textsuperscript{27}

![Figure 19. Agnes Nestor, 1914. George Grantham Bain Collection, Library of Congress.](image)

Training women for office jobs theoretically solved some of the labor concerns expressed by members of the WTUL. The clerical field was rapidly opening to women in the early twentieth century due to the expansion of the corporate sector and mechanization of office work. There were roughly 100,000 women and girls working in clerical positions in American cities in

1900. By 1920, that number had surpassed one million. But the Women's Trade Union League viewed commercial education as irrelevant to their goals of empowering working-class women and legitimizing trade work. In short, Nestor and her colleagues wanted to improve labor conditions for working-class women rather than pull women out of the working class.28

Young labor activists shared the conviction that both class and gender inequity oppressed working women in equal measure. This ideology, which historian Annelise Orleck has called “industrial feminism,” shaped the educational activism of the Women's Trade Union League. For example, Nestor argued that giving female and male students the same access to vocational training would empower workers who were women. Likewise, teaching female students to assert their labor rights would protect women who were workers. Educators like Florence Marshall did not share these same commitments. Instead, middle-class women advanced a more traditional ideology of “domestic feminism” by suggesting women achieved fulfillment through their socially-valuable work as caretakers and homemakers. These ideological distinctions divided working- and middle-class women even when they worked together to bring trade education for girls into the public schools.29

The Technical vs. Comprehensive High School

By 1908 both the Boston Trade School for Girls and Manhattan Trade School for Girls were absorbed by their respective public school systems. Members of the WTUL and middle-class women's groups in Chicago urged the Board of Education to establish a similar trade school for girls or risk falling behind their eastern competitors. Superintendent Edwin G. Cooley agreed

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and worked with Jane Addams on a plan to establish at least two technical high schools for
girls that would serve as the female counterparts to Crane Tech and Lane Tech. In 1909 Cooley
and Addams announced that the proposed technical high schools for girls would teach trades like
glove-making, dress designing, millinery, and bookbinding in specially-designed workrooms.
Reflecting the interests of the middle-class women, the schools would also prepare female
students for homemaking through coursework on cooking, domestic science, and general home
sewing.30

Women's groups in Chicago hoped Ella Flagg Young would support their proposal for a
network of public technical schools for girls when she took over the superintendency in 1909.
Young had expressed general support for girls' vocational education and spoke frequently about
ensuring that new educational reforms for boys were likewise open to girls. Young explained at a
press conference that she heard “nothing but boy, boy, boy” from male board members on the
topic of vocational school reform. Young argued that she would address the employment needs
of female students with equal seriousness when Cooley retired. “I think it is about time I heard
something about girl, girl, girl.”31

To the disappointment of trade school advocates, Young rejected the idea of girls-only
technical schools on the north, south, and west sides of Chicago. Young was critical of all
gender-specific high schools because she worried they would corrode the American tradition of
coeducation. Coeducation made public schooling in the United States distinct from European

30 “To Teach Girls Trades: Chicago to Establish Technical High School Like Those for Boys,” *New York Times*,

31 “Urges Schooling for Girl Workers: Mrs. Young Says Boys have Advantage in Technical High and Other
Courses,” *CDT*, Sept 28, 1909, 22.
countries and was viewed by progressive educators like Young as a symbol of the nation's
democratic values and commitment to equal opportunity. As the famed American pedagoge
John Dewey wrote, coeducation was “an intellectual and moral necessity in a democracy.” Young
arguably contradicted this principle by promoting sex-specific subjects in the elementary schools
like cooking and sewing for girls. But she was ideologically opposed to an educational system
that isolated boys and girls in gender-specific schools to study a gender-specific curricula.
“There is no difference between the mind of a girl and the mind of a boy,” she wrote in protest of
a technical school for girls in 1908. “You make them different when you educate them
differently.”

Young also criticized single-sex technical schools as fundamentally classist. In 1909
Young argued that segregating boys and girls “who intend to earn a living” from those who were
“supported by their families” would only lead to resentment and “snobbishness” between
students. She worried that poor and working-class children who needed to prepare for
immediate employment would be robbed of a general education or the possibility of pursuing
academic subjects of interest outside a practical career path. “The American workman,” she
wrote in 1913, should not be forced to forfeit his right “to the stimulus that comes through the
humanities.”


33 “Urges Schooling for Girl Workers: Mrs. Young Says Boys have Advantage in Technical High and Other Courses,” CDT, Sept 28, 1909, 22; Young, “Superintendent's Report,” Report of the Board of Education, 1913, 116, CBEA. The labor community in Chicago had similar concerns about tracking working-class students into technical high schools while students with professional or college ambitions remained in academically-focused schools. In 1912 Cooley lobbied the state legislature to create two separate school boards to oversee academic and vocational education, respectively. His controversial “Cooley Bill” was defeated by a coalition of
Young's caution against what she called “the vocational craze” foreshadowed the problems of vocational tracking in public schools what would divide educational reformers in later decades. In particular, New Left critics in the 1960s and 1970s made similar arguments that vocational education was inherently classist, deterministic, and anti-democratic. But labor women in the early twentieth century saw alternative possibilities for the future of vocational education in public high schools. With the involvement of the labor community, working women in the WTUL hoped vocationalism would uplift the average worker rather than stifle her. “In an Industrial Democracy,” Leonora O'Reilly argued, “it behooves us to educate every child with a proper understanding of the dignity and the functions of labor.”

Young and many like-minded progressive educators in the 1910s were not swayed by working-class women's perspectives. Rather than establish separate technical high schools for male and female students, Young wanted to make the existing high school curriculum more “comprehensive” through integrating a diversity of educational programs designed to meet multiple student needs. A “comprehensive high school” would incorporate academic, vocational, and physical education under one curriculum. Students all received a standard “English

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education” in reading, writing, math, science, and could pick humanistic electives like art or foreign language. The comprehensive high school also offered trade and commercial programs for students with diverse vocational goals. The comprehensive high school model was supported by many middle-class progressives in the 1910s who hoped to foster harmony between students of different cultural and class backgrounds. Young believed that a comprehensive curriculum provided “the greatest service that a democratic nation can demand.”

Young and her supporters argued that a comprehensive high school for girls would remove the social stigma surrounding vocational education that stemmed from its roots in the nineteenth-century reform school movement. In support of the comprehensive school model, the editor of the Journal of Education wrote in 1909 that students at technical high schools were stigmatized because many observers associated “industrial training” with “prisons, reformatory institutions, and schools for the feeble-minded.” He argued that “the academic girls” and the “technical girls” should be brought together in comprehensive high schools to disassociate industrial training with reform and punishment. Comprehensive high schools would help critics overcome the “foolish prejudice” that vocational training was only suitable for troublesome or feeble-minded children.

Young introduced a dozen vocational programs in the public high schools by 1912 to make the curriculum more comprehensive. Most of these were two-year programs aimed at preparing boys to enter skilled positions by age sixteen. Male students could enroll in two-year programs in most Chicago high schools including mechanical drawing, electricity, carpentry, t


machine shop, accounting, and stenography. The latter two “commercial” subjects were the only vocational programs open to both male and female students. Male high school students could also enroll in more specialized four-year vocational programs including architecture, business, and manual training. The popular four-year manual training program allowed students to study multiple trades and prepared them to teach manual training in the public schools.38

“Household arts” was the only program added to the comprehensive curriculum designed specifically for girls. At least 13 high schools offered both two- and four-year household arts programs for female students by 1912. These programs included classes in household science, dressmaking, millinery, English, and arithmetic. Young considered these programs useful for any girl, whether she would have a future of working in or outside the home. In sewing classes, girls made their own graduation gowns, hemmed dresses, and learned about new sewing technique and machinery. Cooking classes were more advanced versions of elementary domestic science lessons that often involved the science of chemistry, bacteriology, and household biology so girls were informed on nutrition in their future homes. Young argued that girls who graduated from the household arts program were prepared for work in “textile trades” as well as for work as “efficient homemakers.”39

Members of the Chicago WTUL argued that new household arts classes for providing little practical value to future working girls. Margaret Dreier Robins, president of the Chicago WTUL from 1907 to 1914, agreed with Young and Snow that household arts education was useful for girls and would result in cleaner homes and healthier families. But she argued that

38 “Two Year High School Course,” CDT, Jan 3, 1911, 10; “Table VIII-IX: Membership of High School Classes,” Annual Report of 1913, 319-321, CBEA.

39 “Give Diploma in Two Years: Authorities Arrange Special High School Course,” CDT, June 21, 1910, 1.
their insistence on training female students for their “double part” as worker and homemaker had led to “a great deal of confusion” over the necessity of vocational training for women. “I am not saying that cooking and sewing are not necessary,” Robins explained at a NSPIE conference in 1910. “But when we cheat a girl out of the training she ought to have for her breadwinning capacity...then we make a great and grave mistake.”

Figure 20. Household Arts Majors Learning Dressmaking, c. 1920. From *Are You Thinking...High School or Work?* (Chicago: Chicago Board of Education, 1921), 14.

By emphasizing domestic skills, Robins argued that household arts programs ignored the most important vocational lesson for future working women: how to assert one's “labor power.” Like Agnes Nestor and Leonora O'Reilly, Robins believed that vocational training should teach

female students the values of the labor movement in addition to skills like sewing and scalloping. She argued, for example, that female students in household arts programs should learn to make dresses along with how to value a dress on the market and run a dressmaking shop. “Unless we teach [a student] the value of her own labor power,” Robins warned, “we make it necessary for her to become more and more an underbidder.”

Chicago members of the WTUL challenged Young directly for refusing to create a technical school for female students. Addams invited Young to a meeting at Hull House in which she gave a speech on the importance of a trade education for female students. Young criticized Addams after her talk. “I don't agree with Miss Addams on separate high schools for boys and girls,” Young explained. “I am a decided coeducationist...boys and girls are educated better together.” Addams rebutted that the city's coeducational high schools failed to provide girls with equal access to trade education. Unless she planned to add “great wings for girls” to the existing buildings of Crane Tech and Lane Tech, Addams argued, then Young needed to establish a dedicated school for future working women.

Young was ultimately moved to reconsider the place of girls' trade education in the high school curriculum. After nearly three years of pressure from women's groups like the WTUL and Chicago Woman's Club, Young maintained that co-education was always “preferable in ethical practice” to single-sex education. However, she announced in the winter of 1911 that perhaps women's groups were right to suggest that “the development of industrial training may be better studied for a time in special technical schools.” Young also echoed Addams that the complicated

41 Robins, “Industrial Education for Women,” 81.

42 “No Sex in School or Pupils' Minds: New Local Coeducational Argument Advanced by Mrs. Ella Flagg Young,” CDT, Oct 8, 1908, 6.
task of preparing girls for waged work was too great a responsibility for “one man or one woman” to oversee on their own. Instead, Chicago would open a new high school dedicated to preparing girls over fourteen years old for waged work.43

Young's change of heart came at the heels of the greatest uprising of young female garment workers in American history. In the winter of 1910 and 1911, outrage over the oppressive working conditions of mainly Jewish and Italian garment workers lead to months-long demonstrations of garment workers and their middle-class allies in the reform community.44 Young announced her plan for a girls' technical high school only one month after the garment strikes in Chicago came to their climactic close. In doing so, she echoed Chicago's labor women by arguing it was “the duty of the City” to ensure future working girls were not relegated to “the most poorly paid parts” of the industrial workforce. “Money expended in helping young girls become strong and self-reliant women,” Young explained to the Board of Education, “will return to the community in later years a hundred fold.”45

“Occupations Suitable for Women”

Chicago's first and only technical high school for girls opened in 1911 in an old school building at 26th and Wabash Avenue on the south side of the city.46 Young named the school after

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46 In 1926 the Lucy Flower Technical High School for Girls was relocated to a new facility at 3545 W Fulton Blvd
her friend and former Board of Education member: the Lucy Flower Technical High School for Girls. Freshman and sophomore students at “Flower Tech” enrolled in both academic and domestic subjects including English, hygiene, cooking, sewing, drawing, general science, botany, mathematics, music, and physical education. Students who remained at Flower Tech for the four-year program advanced to “technical” trade programs like dressmaking, millinery, and household science along with more advanced academic work as well including modern languages and history. Academic subjects in the third and fourth years were often linked to technical programs. For example, third-year chemistry was linked to household science classes to improve students' understanding of cooking and baking.47

To the disappointment of trade school advocates in Chicago, Young’s conception of “vocational education” for girls was still limited by her assumption that homemaking education was equally important to job training. Like in comprehensive high schools, the curriculum at Flower Tech combined training for the home and workplace. The school had one industrially-oriented classroom with over twenty foot-power sewing machines and button hole machines where girls learned various techniques for skilled dressmaking and millinery. Flower Tech also had sewing rooms with desktop machines where girls learned to hem and repair household items like sheets and curtains. Chemistry and botany classes were intended to serve “the learners in the kitchens and in the sewing rooms” by teaching the scientific principles of cooking and washing.

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The school had an on-site laundry department for washing lessons; a kitchen and adjoining dining room; and a garden for students to use in cooking classes.48

Figure 21. Flower Tech Students Making Hats and Lamp Shades, c. 1920. From Are You Thinking...High School or Work? (Chicago: Chicago Board of Education, 1921), 6.

Flower Tech did not offer apprenticeship programs for female students like the trade schools in Boston and Manhattan. Male students at Lane, Crane, and Lake High Schools offered apprenticeship programs to work with experienced carpenters, electrical workers, blacksmiths, gasfitters, and plumbers. These programs were overseen by an advisory committee composed of both union representatives and members of the Chicago Board of Education. Some advanced dressmaking and millinery classes at Flower Tech were taught by “women of experience” in

dressmaking trades. But most lessons were led by teachers trained in household arts or
traditional subjects in Chicago's teachers’ college.49

The Flower Tech curriculum reflected assumptions among middle-class educators that
domestic education was equally relevant to trade education for future workers. “A technical
school for girls,” Young wrote in 1913, “must provide first for a general training in the art of
homemaking and second a marketable skill in occupations suitable for women.” Flower Tech's
founding principal and the co-architect of its curriculum, Dora Wells, similarly argued that a
technical curriculum should prepare female students not only for “women's work” but for
“women's needs.” Wells was a college-educated woman in her early fifties who spent most of
her career training teachers in Chicago's public school system. She argued that Flower Tech
educated “a superior kind of working woman” because graduates were ready for both wage-
earning and homemaking.50

Women's groups in Chicago pressured Young to reform the curriculum at Flower Tech
throughout the 1910s. In 1915 the Chicago Woman's Club formed a subcommittee to lobby for
the creation of a public trade school for girls similar to those in Boston and Manhattan. The
Committee invited Florence Marshall to Chicago to give a presentation on the importance of
educating girls for work and her success integrating the Manhattan Trade School for Girls into
the New York City public school system. Afterwards, the committee issued a report arguing that

49 See McManis, “Vocational Training in Chicago Schools,” 157; “Chicago's Vocational Schools,” The Carpenter
vol. 33 (January 1913): 21-22. Craft unions in Chicago were originally hostile to the vocational education
movement. Their involvement was an effort to protect the apprenticeship system and ensure the public schools
did not train strike breakers.

50 Young, “Lucy L. Flower Technical High School,” 268; Wells, “The Lucy Flower Technical High School,” 613,
611; “Miss Dora Wells Selected as Girls' Trade School Head,” CDT, May 12, 1911, 7.
Education did not either reform Flower Tech's curriculum immediately or establish a “real” technical school for girls elsewhere in the city.51

Young rebutted her critics. Flower Tech, she argued, was a far superior school to the girls' trade schools in Boston and Manhattan. After visiting the Boston Trade School for Girls, Young argued that the school over-emphasized “the money side” of vocational education by paying students for their production of goods in school workrooms. Young argued that paying Flower Tech students for their production of pillowcases, sheets, shirts, and aprons would devalue their work by distracting students from “the joy of working.” Speaking to the press in 1912, Young explained that students at Flower Tech produced garments and linens to learn “the most valuable asset in the world: initiative.” Members of the WTUL argued that, if paid, students would learn something far more valuable: the principle of wage justice.52

Wells also defended the Flower Tech curriculum for its social efficiency. She reasoned that the average American woman only worked five to seven years before devoting her life to marriage and motherhood. Technical programs like interior design, cooking, and dressmaking were therefore most practical for a majority of female students who would presumably transition out of positions as temporary wage-earners and into life-long roles as homemakers and mothers. Like other domestic feminists, Wells had no interest in teaching commercial programs like typing and stenography because they did not offer such an obvious transference of skills from the

51 “Report of the Trade Schools Committee,” (April 1917), pg. 1, Club Minutes, Box 25, Chicago Woman's Club Records, Chicago History Museum (CHM), Chicago, IL; “Report of the Trade Schools Committee,” (1917), pg. 3, Club Minutes, Box 25, Chicago Woman's Club Records, CHM. Also see “What's To Be Done With This $50,000?” CDT, January 19, 1911, 3; “Plan For Girls' School: Committee Head Would Use Money for Trade Institution,” New York Times, March 10, 1914, 10.

52 “Fears Craze for Teaching Crafts: Mrs. Ella Flagg Young Sees Peril in Turning Schools Into Mere Workshops,” CDT, Dec 4, 1912, 2.
workplace to the home. “If efficiency be lost in wage-earning power because the school frankly tries to meet the double purpose [of women] ...” Wells argued in 1912, “the loss must be accepted as inevitable under the present organization of society.”

That year Young approved plans for a coed technical high school on the westside of Chicago. Opened in 1914, the Carter Harrison Technical High School also limited female vocational programs to cooking, sewing, and artistic needlework. The high school had more than 90 specially-designed workrooms for a range of trade programs including pattern design, carpentry, bookbinding, foundry, jewelry making, electric work, and sign painting. Women worked in many of the trades emphasized at Harrison Tech during the 1910s including bookbinding, printing, and jewelry design. No evidence exists, however, that a single female student was enrolled in these programs at Harrison Tech. Instead, female students only had access to the school's two domestic science kitchens and textile rooms for millinery and dressmaking.

School officials argued that female enrollment in trade programs was impractical due to the limited employment opportunities for women in male-dominated industries. They reasoned that preparing female students for traditionally-feminine lines of work was more practical and socially efficient. Members of the Chicago WTUL rejected this logic as a self-fulfilling prophecy. In 1916, Margaret Haley of the Chicago Teachers' Federation asked a principal why there were no female students enrolled in the bookbinding program at his high school. He responded that the only positions open to women in the bookbinding industry required “little


technique” that did not require dedicated training in high school. Haley argued that his point only proved why girls needed more access to bookbinding education; not less. Working women like Haley rejected the notion that existing inequalities in the workforce justified unequal access to education in Chicago's public high schools.⁵⁵

“To Learn as Much as We Could”

Wells and Young maintained that the Lucy Flower Technical High School was carefully designed to address the economic and social roles of young American women. But they failed to consider what actual students desired from a work-oriented secondary education in Chicago. When Flower Tech opened in 1911, students eager to prepare for employment transferred from their neighborhood schools across the city. Flower Tech mainly catered to girls from south-side white enclaves such as Bridgeport and Englewood during its opening decade. But Flower Tech was also attended by female students from across the city due to its unique open-enrollment policy. This included a large number of Bohemian immigrants from westside neighborhoods and African American students living the strictly segregated “Black Belt” of Chicago. Decades after graduating, one former student recalled that Flower Tech had a reputation as a school for career-seeking “dreamers” and girls “of a different type of personality” who preferred working with their hands rather than reading and studying.⁵⁶

Echoing the complaints of the Chicago WTUL, many female students were ultimately disappointed with the limited work programs offered at Flower Tech before World War I. One

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⁵⁵ Margaret Haley, “Co-Education in Vocational Training,” Recommendations for Reorganization of the Public School System of the City of Chicago by the Committee on Schools, Fire, Police, and Civil Service (Chicago: Barnard and Miller, 1917), 51.

student who transferred to Flower Tech from her neighborhood high school thought she would have access to diverse trade programs like her two brothers who attended Lane Technical High School for Boys. As an adult, she recalled her frustration with Flower Tech's required cooking and sewing classes, lamenting that household arts “was the last thing I wanted to major in!”

Students were also frustrated with the emphasis on millinery and design at Flower Tech, which did not reflect the realities of the female labor market. Millinery was a shrinking industry that employed less than two percent of working women by World War I. The fastest growing industry for young women, stenography, was not offered at Flower Tech to the disappointment of many job-seeking students. Enrollment at Flower Tech remained low during its first decade due to this lack of practical choices for students. Young estimated an enrollment of at least 500 girls in the school's opening year. But Flower Tech was the least-populated high school in Chicago with only 158 full-time students by 1913.

The limited vocational offerings were particularly vexing for African American students who were discriminated against in the fields emphasized at Flower Tech. Less than 20 percent of black women wage-earners worked as seamstresses or dressmakers in the early twentieth century due to discriminatory hiring practices. Many African American students at Flower Tech who majored in needle trades had difficulty securing stable garment work outside of black-owned businesses. One student, Willetta Greer, pursued a millinery degree and hoped to help support her family after graduation. She found that despite her training there were no jobs in that field for

57 Nell Mills, interviewed by Nancy Green, May 9, 1984, box 1, folder “Interviews 1917-1939 White,” Nancy Green Papers, CHM.

African American women. Greer worked at a lamp shade factory after graduation along with her sister, a fellow Flower Tech alumna.\(^{59}\)

Young believed that domestic education was most important for immigrant and working-class girls who would miss out on home training in the workforce. Ironically, these students were the least likely to enroll in cooking or sewing classes. A 1914 study by the Board of Education found that girls living in the city’s “less favored districts” were the least “enthusiastic” about household arts classes. The Board of Education found that the majority of female students who enrolled in household arts programs were not future working girls but the daughters of “professional” parents who planned to attend college or become teachers. These middle-class daughters enrolled in sewing and cooking for what school officials deemed “cultural value” and “the love of the work” rather than to prepare for wage-earning or homemaking.\(^{60}\)

In general, female students were disinterested in household arts programs that were offered in most of Chicago’s comprehensive high schools by 1912. Student enrollment in household arts programs was remarkably low in the early twentieth century. During the 1912 to 1913 school year, less than three percent of female high school students in Chicago took household arts. In contrast, 35 percent of their male peers completed vocational programs in carpentry, mechanical drawing, or machine shop. Household arts classes were so unpopular that in 1912 the Board of Education discontinued the program in at least one high school all together.\(^{61}\)


\(^{61}\) “Table VIII-IX: Membership of High School Classes,” *Fifty-Ninth Annual Report of the Board of Education,*
Figures 22–23. Percent of Female and Male Students in High School Classes by Subject, 1913. Programs with less than one percent enrollment are not listed and include design, pattern making, and machine shop. Data compiled from “Table VIII-IX: Membership of High School Classes,” Fifty-Ninth Annual Report of the Board of Education, 1913, 319-321, CBEA.

More than 60 percent of female students continued to enroll in traditional academic subjects during the 1910s in spite of sweeping vocational reforms to the curriculum. A standard high school education had long served a vocational function for middle-class daughters by preparing them for teaching careers. Female students who earned wages after high school also focused on academic subjects in large numbers and ignored new household arts programs. The children of European immigrants preferred classes that strengthened English speaking and literacy skills, which could help them secure work outside the low-skill manufacturing sector. These students also enrolled in commercial classes like typing and “business English” in the hopes of filling new office positions with at least a two-year high school education. Ironically, the high school curriculum offered before the vocational education movement – academic subjects coupled with commercial coursework – provided the most valued vocational training for first-generation students in Chicago public schools.62

A desire for upward class mobility among female students shifted the gender dynamics of commercial coursework in Chicago public schools. While women and girls entered the corporate sector in the early twentieth century, office work was still a male-dominated field and commercial programs were not designed with female students in mind. As one Chicago school official explained in 1911, typing and accounting classes were for future “captains of commerce” who would help the United States win “the global struggle for commercial supremacy.”63 Nevertheless, commercial programs were popular among many white female students who hoped

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to work in a respectable middle-class environment and earn higher wages. Women made up only seven percent of office workers in Chicago by 1910. Yet female students represented 47 percent of typing and stenography students and 30 percent of bookkeeping students in Chicago public schools. By 1913, fully one-third of all female students in Chicago public high schools pursued a two-year program in stenography or accounting.64

Evening classes in stenography and “business English” were also popular among high school-aged girls who worked during the day in department stores and dressmaking shops. During the 1913-1914 school year, over 5,000 working women and girls attended high school evening classes in Chicago. Most were under the age of 21 and the American-born daughters of German, Irish, and Russian immigrants.65 A 15-year old working girl explained that she enrolled in evening bookkeeping classes at her local high school to advance out of her low-wage clerical position. “It was hard giving up three evenings a week after working hard all day, but it was well worth it,” she wrote in a letter to the Chicago Tribune. “The majority of us, I think, would be willing to exert ourselves a little to learn as much as we could.”66

Members of the Women's Trade Union League in Chicago maintained that female students were denied the right to choose from the diverse vocational programs available to their male counterparts. Limited alternatives may have indeed contributed to the immense popularity

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of commercial education among the daughters of native-born white and European immigrant parents. Yet these students also crowded stenography and accounting classes because they desired the social and economic benefits of white-collar employment. Their enrollment choices reflect an educational goal ignored by both the middle- and working-class women who vied for control over the vocational training of female students in Chicago: upward class mobility.

Conclusion

Members of the Women's Trade Union League attempted to reform the vocational education of female students throughout the early twentieth century with limited success. In numerous northern cities including Chicago, chapter members fought for seats on local school boards to have a voice in “exactly what education the girls are getting.” Along with her effort to introduce a course on collective bargaining, Agnes Nestor wrote petitions to the Chicago Board of Education demanding students study labor legislation and workers' rights before leaving the school system. Her ambitious goals for vocational education were thwarted by middle-class educators who maintained public schools had a paramount responsibility to prepare female students for the so-called “jobs of life.” While accepting women's entrance into the workforce, school officials like Ella Flagg Young believed vocational programs for girls must take into account women's socially-essential work as caretakers and homemakers in addition to their wage-earning potential. These middle-class educators reinforced traditional notions of feminine work in the school curriculum and helped lay the groundwork for the expansion of home economics education in American high schools in the decades that followed.

The Chicago WTUL created an independent school for future working women following Nestor and Young's misunderstanding about a collective bargaining course in 1914. Under the leadership of Nestor and Margaret Dreier Robins, the Training School for Active Women Workers operated out of the WTUL's headquarters on the westside of Chicago and prepared young women and girls for skilled trade work and effective union leadership. Students at the “labor school” took classes on collective bargaining and the history of capitalism. They studied existing labor legislation and the history of the women's movement in lectures led by WTUL members and guest speakers. Students had the opportunity to apprentice with skilled dressmakers and glove-stitchers and engaged in “field work” by visiting union offices and participating in strikes. The WTUL reimbursed full-time students for lost wages up to $12 a week. The Training School for Active Women Workers was the first full-time labor school in the United States, and it catered exclusively to women and girls in Chicago.68

Labor women were committed to reforming vocational education because they believed in the power of public schools to reshape society. Women like Agnes Nestor and Leonora O'Reilly suggested that public high schools could promote gender parity in the workforce by providing female students with equal access to trade training. They hoped publicly-funded classes on the history of the labor movement and collective bargaining would mobilize the

68 The school was well-respected among education professionals by World War I. For example, female students in sociology programs at the University of Chicago and Northwestern University were encouraged to attend classes at the labor school to learn about the history of industry and current labor problems in Chicago. By the 1920s some women's colleges, including Bryn Mawr College, offered dedicated programs on “women and the labor movement” that mirrored the curriculum first offered at the Training School for Active Workers in Chicago. See Women's Bureau, U.S. Department of Labor, Toward Better Working Conditions for Women: Methods and Politics of the National Women's Trade Union League, Bulletin 252, 1953, 36, Agnes Nestor Papers, Box 1 Folder 1, CHM; “Toward Better Working Conditions for Women: Methods and Policies of the National Women's Trade Union League” Bulletin 252, 1953, 36, Agnes Nestor Papers, Box 1, Folder 1, CHM; “Common Welfare,” The Survey Vol 34, No. 12 (June 19, 1915): 263; Karen Bastorello, A Power Among Them: Bessie Abramowitz Hillman and the Making of the Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2008), 52.
working class by encouraging women to organize unions. These goals stood in sharp relief to organizations like National Society for the Promotion of Industrial Education, whose members wanted to train a powerful industrial workforce rather than empower industrial workers. Rose Schneiderman, the New York hat-stitcher and famed union organizer, summarized why labor women remained so invested in vocational school reform in spite of constant opposition. “The Women's Trade Union League is not interested merely in making more efficient machines out of our people,” she explained in 1914. “We want to make better human beings.”

CHAPTER FOUR

“TO PREVENT GIRLS FROM GOING ASTRAY”

WOMEN AND THE VOCATIONAL GUIDANCE MOVEMENT IN CHICAGO, 1910-1929

In 1916 a fourteen-year-old student wrote to a weekly advice column for “business girls” in the Chicago Times about her desire to drop out of high school and find an office job. “I feel that I am old enough and sufficiently educated to earn my own living,” she explained. “So many girls I know, who are not much older than I, are working, and they are able to buy such pretty clothes for themselves, and seem to have such a good time.” The girl wanted to spend less time studying and more time enjoying the city with her friends. “I want to be able to earn my own living and be independent.”

The Chicago Times columnist, Mary King, received hundreds of similar letters from female students between the ages of fourteen and sixteen who were contemplating whether to stay in school or join the workforce. Illinois' compulsory attendance and child labor laws of 1903 allowed students to legally leave school for work at age fourteen with an approved “work certificate” from their local school board. Roughly 23,000 students in Chicago ended their school careers by the eighth grade annually to work in factories, stores, offices, and packing houses. Like many middle-class observers, King considered these students ill-equipped to enter the labor force. “So many of the letters which have reached my desk lately have been from young girls who are anxious to give up their school work, and make themselves 'independent' by going to

work,” King explained in her Sunday morning column. Her advice for the working-aged girl was always the same: stay in school. “She has a scant realization of the struggle she will have for a position,” King warned, “nor does she understand the advantages of a good, substantial education.”

King's advice for aspiring “business girls” echoed professionals in the nascent field of vocational guidance during the 1910s. Beginning in 1908, progressive school districts in American cities established vocational guidance bureaus to help students chose a vocational program of study and find safe and stable employment after graduation. Guidance professionals in Chicago, Boston, and New York conducted detailed investigations of where adolescents worked and hoped to guide fourteen-to-sixteen-year-old students into respectable positions in offices and shops. Most often they tried to guide these students back to school. Like Mary King, school counselors and guidance textbooks framed fourteen-to-sixteen-year-old students as too mentally immature, physically weak, or morally vulnerable to enter the workforce. Guidance professionals argued that students should invest in their future careers by pursuing a high school education for the safety of themselves and the good of society.

Guidance programs were an outgrowth of the vocational education movement in American high schools. Historians have argued that vocational guidance was promoted by school officials and business leaders who wanted to streamline public education by supervising students' transition from school to work. Most historians suggest that the field now known as “career counseling” was a progressive step forward by well-meaning educators who helped working children find better jobs. Revisionists have criticized vocational guidance for reinforcing existing

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2 “The Wasted Years, Fourteen to Sixteen,” *A Report on Vocational Training in Chicago and in Other Cities* (Chicago: City Club of Chicago, 1912), 33, Chicago Board of Education Archives (CBEA); Ibid.
inequalities through recommending industrial lines of employment to mostly working-class and immigrant students. Both groups of scholars agree, however, that the vocational guidance movement was an effort to build stronger connections between education and industry.\(^3\)

Historians of education have devoted less attention to the work of female social reformers in the development of vocational guidance programs in urban public schools. The limited literature on vocational guidance highlights the activism of business leaders and ivy-league intellectuals who professionalized school counseling through organizations like the National Vocational Guidance Association.\(^4\) But women played key roles in establishing vocational guidance programs at the local level. A group of well-known social reformers including Jane Addams, Sophonisba Breckinridge, Edith Abbott, and Ella Addams Moore brought vocational guidance into Chicago public schools in 1910 after organizing the Vocational Supervision League. These women argued that supervising children's transition from school to work could address existing child welfare issues like vagrancy, juvenile delinquency, and abusive child labor practices. In other words, these middle-class social reformers embraced vocational guidance as part of a larger social reform agenda in the 1910s.

Reformers like Addams and Breckinridge focused their efforts on the troubling fate of girls who left school for work between the ages of fourteen and sixteen. Guidance professionals

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suggested that school counselors could protect female students from physical harm and moral
corruption in the workforce by convincing them to stay in school and invest in their futures.
Historians of education have suggested that helping male students avoid dead-end jobs and
prepare for productive citizenship were the chief motivations of the vocational guidance
movement in progressive-era cities. This chapter demonstrates how the concerns of reformist
women for the moral and physical safety of girls shaped the development of vocational guidance
programs in equal measure.⁵

_A Child's Right to Work_

The state of Illinois passed interlocking child labor and compulsory education laws in
1903 that gave the Chicago Board of Education new control to regulate the employment of
working-aged children. Pushed by child labor activists like Florence Kelley, these laws restricted
the hiring of children under fourteen years old and empowered local school boards to regulate
the employment of students between the ages of fourteen and sixteen. School boards in many
industrialized cities like Chicago, Boston, and New York issued work certificates to students who
left school for work that verified their legal working age to employers. By 1903 all fourteen-to-
sixteen-year-old children from both the public and parochial school systems were required to
have a work certificate signed by the Superintendent of Schools and the State Factory Inspector
before entering the workforce.⁶

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Bloomfield: Organizer of the Vocational Guidance Movement (1907-1917).”

_Fifty-First Annual Report of the Board of Education, 1905_, 176, CBEA.
Work certificate systems enabled school officials and factory inspectors to keep track of students who left schools for factories, shops, and offices. The Chicago Board of Education issued more than 14,000 certificates to students in the inaugural year of the certificate system. The majority of certificates were issued to the American-born children of German, Russian, Bohemian, and Italian immigrants who left school in grades five through eight to contribute to their family income. Many work certificates were issued to the children of Polish immigrants from the city's expanding parochial school system. The certificate system did not account for all
child labor or solve the truancy problem as school officials intended. A 1912 study estimated that at least 8,000 students left Chicago public schools for work each year without certification or before the legal working age.⁷

Girls often left school without work certificates to fulfill housekeeping duties for employed mothers or widowed parents. In 1906 truant officers in Chicago compiled a list of the most common excuses given by girls who left school at age fourteen without a work certificate, which included: “kept home to mind the baby”; “helped mother on wash day” or “keeping house for father since mother died.” Chicago’s new Department of Compulsory Education warned parents who kept their children “at home as drudges” would be “brought into court and punished.” Immigrant parents successfully argued that the labor of their daughters in the home was essential to let mothers work and support their families. This child labor law was amended in 1908 to allow girls to leave school before age sixteen for “employment by parents without compensation.”⁸

Nearly a third of students who applied for work certificates in Chicago were female. Female students were more likely than their brothers to leave school for work between ages fourteen and sixteen among immigrant communities from Germany, Russia, and Italy. Families who needed supplemental income from their children often chose to keep their sons in school rather than their daughters due to the greater financial benefits of a vocational education for

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boys. By 1908 a male student at Lane Technical High School, for example, could take classes in carpentry or electrical engineering led by experienced tradesmen. He could secure union work after graduation through the school's apprenticeship program and presumably support himself and future family into adulthood. The long term financial benefits of vocational education for female students were not as obvious to families who would benefit from the wages of at least one working child. 

Job prospects for fourteen-to-sixteen-year-old girls were limited. Many employers in Chicago did not hire workers under sixteen for full-time positions, which often left working-aged children to shift between temporary positions. In 1916, for example, a fourteen-year-old student at a Polish parochial school could only find a temporary job in a candy factory during the holiday season with her work certificate. Another female student used her work certificate to fill various “scab jobs” sewing pants during a wave of garment workers' strikes. These examples were typical of the experiences of thousands of working girls who left school before the age of sixteen.

School officials lamented that the new certificate system was prone to abuse and fraud by parents and children alike. Children under fourteen years old frequently lied about their age to receive certification, and often distinguished between their “working age” and “real age” when

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pressed by social workers. The press frequently blamed the abuses of the certificate system on the alleged “greed” of immigrant parents who demanded their children enter the workforce prematurely and hand over their wages. According to an investigation by the Chicago Tribune, immigrant parents often shared the same certificate for older and young siblings under fourteen years old to bypass the child labor law and forged the Superintendent's signature on their children's work certificates. The State Factory Inspector uncovered a so-called “certificate mill” at St. Joseph's Polish School in 1907 where police allegedly found 1,300 forged work certificates issued to children who were under the legal working age. All certificates were signed by the school's parishioner, who was arrested and charged with violating state child labor law.¹²

Fraud was perhaps a necessary alternative for families who had trouble securing valid certificates for their fourteen-to-sixteen-year-old children. The Board of Education did not make the application process easy. Parents were required to appear with their children before the School Management Committee to present either a birth certificate or baptismal documents confirming their child's age. In the opening week of school, mothers waited for hours in long lines outside the Board of Education offices to secure certification for their working-aged children. If they did not have access to birth records, parents made another lengthy appearance in front of the Cook County Juvenile Court to verify their child's age under oath. For working parents with limited English skills, this system was more than difficult to navigate legally.¹³

¹¹ Abbot and Breckinridge, Truancy and Non-Attendance in the Chicago Schools, 297.


¹³ “Day Full of Troubles: Board Overwhelmed by Visitors and Swamped by Pleas for Labor Certificates,” CDT, September 9, 1903, 3.
Many child labor activists saw the new certificate system as a dangerous concession to the child labor problem. Anna E. Nicholes, a settlement house worker and child labor reformer, criticized the certificate system for allowing vulnerable children to prematurely enter the workforce without sufficient training. Writing in the progressive monthly *The Survey*, Nicholes criticized the Board of Education for making a “discouraging” compromise with the evils of the child labor. She argued that child labor laws were supposed to reduce the number of children entering the workforce. But within two years after the new child labor law the Board of Education had allowed more than 30,000 children to leave school to work in offices, shops, and factories “with the full permission and sanction of the state.”

School officials insisted that their ultimate goal was to come face to face with parents and urge them to enroll their children in high school. They reasoned that the system regulated child labor and helped the state factory inspectors keep better tabs on the location and employers of school-aged children. By 1906, the Board of Education reported that the number of unaccounted for truants in Chicago had decreased by 4,000 students. Nevertheless, Nicholes was right to view the certificate system as a compromise with the needs of working children. By 1905 most of the nation's industrial centers relied on local school boards to help regulate the employment of children under sixteen years old through issuing work certificates. These programs demonstrated a social acceptance, however small, that urban children had a right to work by age fourteen in order to support themselves and their families.

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14 Nicholes, “From School to Work in Chicago,” 231.


16 By 1904 twenty-one states required children remain enrolled in school until age sixteen or fifteen unless they had proof of work. See Florence Kelley, “Has Illinois the Best Laws in the Country for the Protection of Children?,” *American Journal of Sociology*, vol. 10; no. 3 (1904): 308.
Middle-class reformers argued that allowing students to leave school prematurely for work exasperated child welfare issues in Chicago. Indeed, working-aged children between fourteen and sixteen came before the Cook County Juvenile Court in increasing numbers after 1903. A report by the Juvenile Detention Home found that the average “delinquent girl” awaiting trial was fifteen years old and had left school during or after the eighth grade to work in either a factory or private home as a domestic servant. The report found that most all delinquent girls were working or in between jobs with arrested.17 The average “delinquent boy” was also in his early teens and most likely working as a newsboy, factory hand, or errand runner. Nearly half of all delinquent boys were accused of stealing due to financial insecurity. These statistics mirrored national trends. According to a 1907 study by the Bureau of Labor, two-thirds of all delinquent children in American cities were under sixteen and in their “transitional period” between school and work.18

These studies often concluded that working-aged children were prone to vagrancy and delinquency due to a lack of supervision finding work after leaving school. The Board of Education commonly approved work certificates for teenaged students before they secured employment, which contributed to the concerns of child welfare activists that the certificate

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system was increasing juvenile vagrancy and crime. In 1912 the City Club of Chicago reported that over 23,000 boys and girls between fourteen and sixteen “flit about from one juvenile occupation to another” with long periods of idleness that often lasted weeks or months at a time. Such instability created an “irregularity of habit” among adolescents which the report concluded was “the undoing of manhood and womanhood.” The lack of consistently and supervision among children who left school for work became known by school officials and social reformers as “the fourteen-to-sixteen problem.”

Social reformers suggested different implications of “the fourteen-to-sixteen problem” for male and female students. Inconsistent work patterns among boys were considered harmful to their character development and future breadwinning abilities. In The Spirit of Youth and the City Streets (1909), Jane Addams argued that boys were naturally free-spirited and could easily become delinquent without structure and supervision. She argued that boys who lacked vocational guidance would “revolt against industry” and chose lifestyles of “idleness and futility” due to their natural restlessness and desire for independence. This pattern could continue into adulthood without intervention, causing Chicago's restless working boys to permanently join “the ranks of the unemployed.”

Middle-class reformers considered the fourteen-to-sixteen problem morally dangerous for girls who could be sexually exploited or corrupted by bad work environments. According to one settlement house worker, girls who labored in factories, shops, and department stores were “exposed to serious moral risk” through their daily interactions with male managers and

19 “The Wasted Years, Fourteen to Sixteen,” A Report on Vocational Training in Chicago and in Other Cities (Chicago: City Club of Chicago, 1912), 33, CBEA.

customers. Female workers who developed friendships with male coworkers also became “slack
in manners and conversation,” which left them “open to danger” and solicitation. In 1911, the
Chicago Vice Commission issued a startling report that girls who worked in factories and
department stores were likely to engage in part-time sex work due to their low paychecks. As one
commissioner explained, “a tempted girl” who made six dollars a week in a garment factory was
quick to “sell her body for twenty-five dollars per week” when she learned “men are willing to
pay the price.”

Unsupervised girls in the workforce tapped into the white slavery hysteria that galvanized
many middle-class reformers in the early twentieth century. Newspapers and pulp fiction
sensationalized stories of vulnerable girls who arrived to cities in search of work only to be
seduced by litigious men and sold into the sex traffic. Chicago was proclaimed “the center of
white slavery in the United States” by the sensationalist press in 1910. Thus any discussion of
the fourteen-to-sixteen problem among girls was frequently colored by existing anxieties that
young working girls were in constant physical and moral danger in public urban places.

Furthermore, social reformers also distrusted the financial independence of school-aged
girls who spent their teenage years in the workforce. In the 1910s working girls increasingly
spent their wages on new forms of commercialized leisure like dance halls and movies. They

21 Robert Archey Woods and Albert Joseph Kennedy, Young Working Girls: A Summary of Evidence from Two
 thousand Social Workers (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1913), 23.

22 Chicago Vice Commission, The Social Evil in Chicago: A Study of Existing Conditions with Recommendations
by the Vice Commission of Chicago (Chicago: Gunthrop-Warren Printing Company, 1911), 43. Also see
William T. Stead, If Christ came to Chicago! A Plea for the Union of All Who Love in the Service of All Who
Suffer (London: The Review of reviews, 1894); Jane Addams, A New Conscience and an Ancient Evil (New

23 See “Open War on Vice to Protect Girls,” CDT, September 26, 1909, 1-2; “Ignorance a Lure to Vice,” CDT,
November 1, 1909, 7; Ernest A. Bell, Fighting the Traffic in Young Girls, Or, War on the White Slave Trade
(New York: G.S. Ball, 1910).
engaged in Chicago's burgeoning consumer culture by visiting downtown department stores to buy themselves new shoes, hats, and cosmetics. Social reformers suggested that this financial autonomy led to sexual autonomy and, by extension, sexual delinquency. According to Addams, “the lure of the city” corrupted impressionable girls through bringing them into new public spaces and daily contact with men. Addams argued that consumer luxuries also “seduced” working girls and distracted them from investing in honest living or finding husbands. School officials shared these concerns. In 1914 the Chicago Board of Education argued that delinquency was common among working-aged girls due to their unhealthy interest in “skating rinks, movies, dance halls, motorcycles, and late hours in crowded streets.”

In 1910 three women's groups – the Chicago Woman's Club, Woman's City Club, and the Association of Collegiate Alumnae – formed the Vocational Supervision League (VSL) to investigate labor conditions of working-age girls and help them pursue more wholesome employment. The League's leadership included some of Chicago's more influential social reformers including Jane Addams and Sophonisba Breckinridge. Much like the city's middle-class “vice” commissioners, members of the Vocational Supervision League were startled by reports that suggested teenaged working girls were likely to turn to prostitution. According to a study funded by the League in 1910, the majority of sex workers in Chicago were girls who left school at age fourteen without steady employment. These girls became “despairing and hopeless

in hunting for work” until ultimately “led astray when idle by the gayety and glamor of the streets.” The League argued that helping girls find “proper vocational employment” would serve as a form of vice prevention for Chicago law enforcement. As one League member explained, vocational guidance would “prevent girls from going astray.”

Many of the League's founding members were closely involved with the Cook County Juvenile Court and motivated by shared concerns for the welfare of vagrant and troubled children. The Cook County Juvenile Court was the first court system dedicated to minors in America and was founded by prominent social reformers and club women in 1899 including Addams, Breckinridge, and Lucy Flower. The court system remained dependent on the financial and volunteer support of women's groups into the 1910s. Notably, the Chicago Woman's Club

Figure 25. Vocational Supervision League Seal, 1918. Scholarship and Guidance Association Records, UIC.


hired the first probation officers to counsel children convicted of crimes like vagrancy and theft, make recommendations to the court on their behalf, and monitor their transition back to school or work. Probation officers were usually women expected to serve as sympathetic moral guides to erring children. Chicago had the largest probation force in the country by 1911 with over thirty paid probation officers, many of whom were affiliated with Chicago women's clubs.²⁷

Progressive educators argued that public schools should embrace the guidance methods of the juvenile probation system. One scholar stated in 1913 that school officials could better provide for children if they implemented a “probation and reporting system” to “systematically study the case” of each individual student. Like probation officers, teachers and school principals should act as “lady friends” to struggling children by visiting them at home, in the workplace, and offering informed advice on their future careers.²⁸ Urban educators argued that probationary guidance in the public schools could prevent delinquency among children before it began. “We no longer wait until a boy has been committed to a penal institution before he is taught a trade,” wrote the assistant superintendent of Boston public schools in the School Review. Why wait for a boy to appear before a judge before offering him guidance and counseling?²⁹


Members of the Vocational Supervision League agreed that guidance counseling should be incorporated into the public schools to curb future delinquency problems among working-aged children. Philanthropist Ella Addams Moore served as president of the Vocational Supervision League and the Chicago Woman's Club during the 1910s. In 1912 she explained that boys who left school without guidance joined “the army of idle children” from which “the ranks of criminals are recruited.” She continued that girls who left public school without stable employment contributed to “that other army of which we do not think without a shudder.” Moore suggested that vocational guidance would protect children from dangerous working conditions while also protecting society from the disruption of unsupervised children.

The Vocational Supervision League hired Anne Davis in 1910 to investigate job prospects of girls who left school for work between the ages of fourteen and sixteen. Davis was twenty-seven years old and the daughter of Welsh immigrants. She graduated from the University of Chicago School of Civics and Philanthropy that year where she had gained field experience working with delinquent girls in the court system. As the League's chief investigator, she spent four months interviewing girls and observing working conditions in more than a dozen industries including shoe-making, artificial flower construction, engraving, stenography, telephone operating, hair dressing, and laundry. Most of her research focused on the sewing trades. During her investigation Davis helped almost fifty girls find better jobs in the garment trades and convinced at least seven to return to school until their sixteenth birthdays.


31 Breckinridge and Abbott, “The School and the Working-Child: A Plea for Employment Supervision in City Schools,” in *Finding Employment for Children who Leave the Grade Schools to go to Work* (Chicago: The
Davis's investigation led her to conclude that no girl under age sixteen should be allowed to leave school for work. With only a grammar school education, Davis reported that fourteen-year-old girls could only realistically hope to find work as errand runners or string cutters with no opportunities for advancement. She found that only three percent of girls worked in skilled trades; most made an average two dollars a week. Even these low-level positions were hard to come by for recent immigrants who did not always demonstrate the requisite customs and “neat appearance” that many employers desired in their female employees. Davis argued that stable employment for African American girls under sixteen years old was virtually impossible. Out of twenty-five “respectable” dressmaking shops, Davis found only two that employed African American workers.32

Superintendent Ella Flagg Young supported the Vocational Supervision League and their goals of guiding girls into safe and respectable lines of employment. At the League's request Young gave Davis a permanent office at the Lucy Flower Technical High School from which she could continue researching and publishing reports on the employment opportunities available for girls in Chicago. All Flower Tech students were required to meet with Davis for an advising appointment before leaving school. Davis interviewed each student and conducted a house visit to determine her financial needs. Davis usually advised Flower Tech students to stay in school for at least a two-year vocational program. If a student and her family convinced Davis that immediate employment was absolutely necessary, her goal was to find a better job “than the girl


could have found for herself.” Davis was the first guidance counselor in Chicago public schools and she initially catered exclusively to girls.\(^\text{33}\)

The Vocational Supervision League expanded their guidance work to both boys and girls at other public schools the following year. By 1912 female students from neighboring schools were routinely referred to Davis for vocational guidance before receiving their work certificates. Women's groups affiliated with the Vocational Supervision League supported vocational guidance by paying Davis' salary and hiring additional counselors to work with both male and female students under her direction. From 1912 to 1914, the Chicago Woman's Aid devoted 50 percent of their annual budget to paying the salaries of vocational counselors in the public schools.\(^\text{34}\) Much like juvenile probation work, guidance counseling was considered a feminine “helping profession.” Most early vocational guidance counselors in Chicago were college-educated white women in their twenties, many of whom had studied social work like Davis.\(^\text{35}\)

The Board of Education assumed financial responsibility for the salaries and guidance work of the Vocational Supervision League in 1914. Anne Davis was promoted as Director of the new Vocational Guidance Bureau in Chicago public schools, a position she held for the next twenty years.\(^\text{36}\) The Board of Education hired additional guidance counselors to work under her


\(^{34}\) “Meeting Minutes - Civics and Philanthropy,” (May 1911 – March 1918), 110 and 118, Box 12, Folder 110, Chicago Woman’s Aid Records, UIC.

\(^{35}\) Anne Meis Knupfer, “Professionalizing Probation Work in Chicago, 1900-1935,” Social Service Review 73, no. 4 (1999): 481-82. For a notable example of two sisters involved in both juvenile probation work and vocational guidance see the Ethel and Irene Kawin Papers, Chicago History Museum, Chicago, IL.

\(^{36}\) Davis grew to national fame among educational reforms as a leader in the vocational guidance movement. She would later serve as president of the National Vocational Guidance Bureau, consult for the Illinois State
direction who were placed in fourteen elementary schools and three high schools with the highest dropout rates. The work certificate system was placed under the purview of the Vocational Guidance Bureau as well. By 1915 any public school student hoping to secure working papers were required to consult with a vocational guidance counselor before entering the workforce.  

Progressive educators like Ella Flagg Young hoped vocational guidance would increase the social and economic relevance of a high school education. Young argued vocational guidance would particularly appeal to the children of working-class families by “connect[ing] our schools with the present industrial life.” Vocational guidance also helped school administrators offer an increasingly individualized education designed to fit the distinct needs and abilities of specific students. “Education of today,” Young wrote in 1914, must also help each child “discover and develop to the full all his possibilities.”

Vocational guidance gained momentum in other American cities due to similar arguments that schools should guide students in their transition from school. In 1909 two professors and social reformers, Meyer Bloomfield and Frank Parsons, introduced the first vocational guidance program in Boston public schools. Bloomfield and Parsons were leaders in the national vocational guidance movement who argued that vocational training in public schools was not


sufficient to prepare children for self-sufficiency. “We guide our boys and girls to some extent through school then drop them into this complex world to sink or swim,” Parsons wrote in his seminal *Choosing a Vocation* (1909). Parsons argued that high schools needed to teach “the value of making a good plan” so working-aged children were not “drifting through life like a rudderless boat.”

Guidance professionals often used the term “drifting” to suggest the dangers of crime and vagrancy among children without vocational supervision. As one guidance counselor warned, children who “drifted aimlessly from one empty position to another” often wound up in juvenile court systems. “This sort of drifting,” she continued, “develops the habit of drifting, so that the boy or girl is finally unable to feel any lasting interest or make any continued effort.” Vocational guidance programs were founded on the assumption that children without guidance during the “vulnerable age” of fourteen-to-sixteen would become social and economic outcasts. According to Anne Davis, the ability of guidance counselors to help students avoid becoming “misfits” was “sufficient reason for doing the work.”

*Vocational Guidance for “Problem Girls”*

The vocational guidance movement shaped the juvenile justice system alongside urban public schools. In 1912 Judge Pickney of the Cook County Juvenile Court hired Mary Bartelme as an assistant judge to oversee the cases of all delinquent girls in Chicago. Bartelme was a former Chicago public school teacher and the only woman to receive a law degree from

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Northwestern University in 1894. She spent the first decade of her career working with probation officers in the juvenile court system helping children transition back to school or helping them find stable work. Justices argued that the male-run court could not properly advise delinquent girls due to the sexual nature of many of their crimes. As the New York Times reported: “Few men, no matter how wise and good, are capable of passing judgement on girls who have erred, because few men have a clear understanding of woman's nature.” Bartelme's promotion to the new Cook County Court for Delinquent Girls made her one of the first American women to oversee her own courtroom.41

Bartelme argued that a lack of vocational supervision during a girl's transition from school to work contributed to delinquent behavior. In an interview with the New York Times, Bartelme cited “lack of employment” as a main cause of delinquency among teenaged girls. Most girls who came before Bartelme's court were out of school and often in between jobs. She explained that girls without full-time employment spent their days wandering the downtown business districts in search of work. Bartelme made explicit references to the white slave trade when describing the dangers of unemployment for young urban girls. She argued that litigious men “stalked and hunted” unemployed girls in Chicago “like game in the fields.”42


Bartelme agreed with most of Chicago's reform community that children should not enter the workforce until at least age sixteen. Bartelme argued that girls under sixteen were not mature enough to “fight against temptation” and should be barred from the workforce. In one case a fifteen-year-old girl, Grace, appeared before Bartelme's bench after being arrested for stealing purses. Grace explained she had left school at age fourteen but could only find odd jobs and seasonal work. She stole periodically to support herself during stints of unemployment. Bartelme ordered Grace to return to school and ask the Vocational Guidance Bureau to find her an appropriate job when she turned sixteen.43

43 “America's Only Woman Judge is Doing a Big Work”; Court Transcript, G.H., December 28, 1925, pg. 2, Box 6,
Most girls who appeared before Bartelme were arrested on vague charges of “immorality” and “incorrigibility” rather than for specific crimes like theft. Historians Anne Meis Knupfer and Mary Odem have argued that these charges had more to do with subjective judgements about a girl's moral character or sexual impropriety than their actual misdeeds. Far fewer girls appeared before juvenile court systems in progressive-era cities. Yet girls were far more likely to be institutionalized due to the perceived moral dangers of their offenses. Over 51 percent of girls who came before the Cook County Juvenile Court during its first decade were placed in industrial school or reformatories compared to only 21 percent of boys.

Bartelme committed girls to the State Training School for Girls in Geneva, Illinois or to the Sisters of the Good Shepherd in Chicago if she concluded they were “immoral.” Industrial schools and reformatories in the early twentieth century continued to train girls for domestic service and paroled them in private homes throughout the state as maids and cooks. Like their nineteenth-century counterparts, juvenile reformers in the 1910s viewed domestic service as a suitable field of employment for girls who required stable employment in a safe and wholesome environment. According to Bartelme, domestic work taught troubled girls “to value a life of duty, service, and serious endeavor.”

Folder 74, Mary Bartelme Papers, UIC.


45 Charles Clinton Berkey, “The Delinquent Child and the School or, What Educators May Learn from the Juvenile Court” (M.S., The University of Nebraska - Lincoln, 1913), 30. Historians have uncovered similar disparities of institutionalization by gender in progressive-era cities like Memphis, Los Angeles, and Milwaukee. See Odem, Delinquent Daughters, 115.

Bartelme helped girls find work or encouraged them to pursue vocational training if they convinced her of their sexual morality. Bartelme was particularly impressed by girls who remained chaste while working in factories or engaging in commercialized leisure, which she considered inherently immoral environments. In 1923 a fifteen-year-old African American student at Flower Tech, Bertha, was arraigned for frequenting dance halls and cabarets. Bartelme questioned how any girl who stayed out all night could be “moral.” A probation officer described how Bertha had resisted the sexual advances of two boys one evening. Bartelme commending Bertha’s “strength of character to resist” and “good judgement” in a difficult situation, and asked Bertha what type of work she hoped to pursue. After Bertha expressed interest in the printing trades, Bartelme told Bertha she would help her secure enrollment at the Tuskegee Institute if her parents could send her money each month. Bartelme argued that Bertha could become “a very capable young woman” as evidenced by her moral restraint so long as she was “given the right opportunities.”

Bartelme assessed the moral character of working girls by asking them detailed questions about their spending habits. Bartelme shared the assumptions of many middle-class reformers in Chicago that the financial freedom of working-aged girls could lead to sexual freedom and delinquency. Bartelme quoted Jane Addams in a 1913 interview that “the lure of the city” and its commercial attractions encouraged girls to become sexually active. She argued that “a new and brilliant world” of consumer luxuries seduced teenaged working girls by distracting them with...
money and entertainment rather than wholesome living. She lamented: “These poor, foolish girls think only of the pleasure of the moment.”

Bartelme routinely asked working girls questions about their spending habits to determine whether they should return to school, receive help finding a better job, or be committed to an institution. She usually assessed working girls’ financial maturity by asking how many hats they owned, how many pairs of shoes, if they owned stockings, and whether those stockings were silk. Of all “immoral fashions,” Bartelme had a particular vehemence against girls buying silk stockings. She told the Washington Post in 1915: “I wish all the silk stockings in the world were in the bottom of the Atlantic Ocean!” Bartelme argued that girls who spent their wages on “foolish things” were not mature enough to be working and should return to school until at least sixteen.

Bartelme interpreted the spending habits of some girls as evidence of delinquency. A seventeen-year-old Italian girl, Linda, appeared before Bartelme for incorrigible behavior in 1923. Linda was recently unemployed after quitting her job in a mail order house and spent most weekday evenings at dance halls. Bartelme questioned Linda about her dress, shoes, and silk stockings. She concluded that Linda was a delinquent for shopping frivolously while in-between jobs, which made her a burden on her single mother. “No girl is a good girl that becomes a beggar,” Bartelme explained, and ordered Linda to The House of Good Shepherd.


49 “She Lists Silk Stockings Among Causes of Delinquency of Girls,” The Washington Post, Nov 28, 1915, E15; Court Transcript, October 30, 1922, pg. 5-6, Box 6, Folder 74, Mary Bartelme Papers, UIC.

50 Court Transcript, L.D, March 3, 1923, Box 6, Folder 74, Mary Bartelme Papers, UIC.
Linda and Judge Bartelme debated whether her financial choices and difficulty holding a stable job were truly a reflection of bad moral character:

Linda: I am not delinquent.

Judge Bartelme: But, my dear little girl, you are delinquent.

Linda: I am not.

Judge Bartelme: Define delinquency.

Linda: I have not lost my virtue.

Judge Bartelme: The law says that girls who defy their parents and that run the streets are delinquent.

Linda: I am not delinquent. I have not lost my virtue.

Judge Bartelme: The House of Good Shepherd and Geneva take girls for any delinquency.

Linda: They are bad.

Judge Bartelme: But you are bad.

Linda: I am not.

Judge Bartelme: My dear girl, you may be virtuous, but are not a good girl.

Linda: I am.

Bartelme eventually conceded to Linda's claims of virtue and commended her for remaining chaste in spite of her immoral surroundings. “I am learning something here,” Bartelme admitted. She asked Linda what type of work interested her and would best keep her out of future trouble. Linda explained that the only job she ever enjoyed was in an office. Bartelme
referred Linda to an employment bureau for stenographers and released her from court.51

Bartelme’s work in the Court for Delinquent Girls reflected the broader efforts of social reformers to supervise the working lives of urban girls. Juvenile court systems in other American cities also enlisted women to oversee the cases of female delinquents and encouraged them to return to school or find lawful employment. Some social reformers created independent vocational guidance bureaus specifically for “problem girls” in the 1910s. For example, probation officers and school officials in New York City referred girls with behavioral problems to the Vocational Adjustment Bureau for Girls which helped “pre-delinquents” return to school and pursue vocational training. The Bureau’s placement director argued that girls who displayed “problems of behavior” were likely to “drift into delinquency” without vocational guidance. “By identifying these cases early,” she explained, “we are enabled to help the girl become a useful member of society instead of a destructive one.”52

Planning for “Desirable Occupations”

The Vocational Guidance Bureau of Chicago continued to investigate industries employing working-aged children under Davis’ leadership through the 1920s. Bureau officials conducted hundreds of occupational surveys to determine what industries offered “desirable” or “undesirable” positions for working-aged children. Undesirable occupations included low-skill positions with limited chances for promotion such as piece work, errand running, or seasonal

51 Ibid.

jobs in candy and box factories. Guidance counselors referenced Davis' list of “desirable occupations” for boys and girls that would lead to financial advancement and security. This included carpentry, engineering, jewelry making, expert dressmaking, stenography, and accounting. All desirable occupations required a two- or four-year vocational program in one of Chicago's 22 public high schools.


Vocational guidance literature proliferated in the 1910s to help students prepare for working lives after high school. Guidance textbooks usually addressed male and female readers separately. Two textbooks used in Chicago public schools, *Profitable Vocations for Boys* and *Profitable Vocations for Girls* (1915), offered high school students advice on how to pursue promising occupations with a two- or four-year high school education. The popular textbooks were written by Eli Witwer Weaver, founder of the vocational guidance in New York City public schools. Like many guidance professionals, Weaver argued that the goal of vocational guidance was to help students pursue “lawful and honorable occupations” and avoid “drifting” into vagrant or criminal lifestyles.\(^{54}\)

Weaver's *Profitable Vocations for Girls* listed diverse career paths for female students in the fields of sales, medicine, telephone operating, civil service, librarianship, teaching, and journalism. Weaver argued that female students could prepare for nursing careers by pursuing a four-year high school education with an emphasis on science. Girls could plan to own their own dressmaking shops by studying business and sewing or become interior designers through majoring in a four-year household arts program. Vocational guidance literature often suggested that female students had the freedom to pursue a variety of professional careers if they planned their course of study carefully. These textbooks reflected a small but significant cultural acceptance of women's entrance in new areas of the economy.

This freedom to plan for a desirable career, however, was restricted to students who were white, English-speaking, and had the financial luxury to invest in a secondary education. Labor men and women criticized vocational guidance literature for offering irrelevant advice to most students.

urban children who needed to earn wages as soon as possible. In 1919 the American Federation of Labor (AFL) released their official position on vocational education in the public schools. They argued that guidance counselors compelled working-class students “to prepare for a role they will never play” by privileging professional careers. Vocational guidance was particularly irrelevant to the great masses of public school children who did not excel to the high schools at all. The AFL argued that more practical forms of vocational training and guidance should be placed in the upper elementary grades so that “the children of the people” had equal opportunity to prepare for self-sufficiency.55

Guidance literature promoted both gendered and class-based rationales for why career planning was important for male and female students. In Profitable Occupations for Boys, Weaver emphasized the importance of financial independence and self-sufficiency among men. He argued that boys should work towards careers in commerce, law, or medicine and avoid jobs that would lead to “industrial slavery.” Industrial labor was ultimately “demoralizing” to adolescent boys, he asserted, because of the low wages and lack of financial security. Weaver argued a boy should focus on becoming “the master of his own destinies” capable of independent breadwinning. Otherwise, boys would run the risk of becoming financial burdens to their families and the state.56

Guidance literature deemphasized the value of financial independence for future working girls. Rather, guidance experts like Weaver argued that professional careers were important to a girl's character development. “Woman's value,” Weaver asserted, “is not estimated by what she

56 Weaver, Profitable Vocations for Boys (New York: The A. S. Barnes Company, 1915), 1-2.
has acquired in the way of knowledge or accomplishments or skill, but by her character.”

Weaver argued that girls should pursue occupations that reflected the three principles of “wise work”: usefulness, honesty, and cheerfulness. Telephone operators, for example, embodied the characteristics of wise work through being helpful and honest to callers and developing “a pleasant voice and polite address.” In sum, Weaver suggested that finding cheerful and useful work was more important than actual profits to a “profitable occupation for girls.”

Weaver's emphasis on character development reflected a broader cultural assumption that working girls would eventually become homemaking women. Cheerfulness, usefulness, and honesty were traits associated with the emotional and physical labor of homemaking. Vocational guidance literature often suggested female students find jobs where they could learn transferrable skills for the home. In another popular textbook, *Vocational Guidance for Girls* (1919), Marguerite Dickson suggested office work for female students because the “calm atmosphere” most resembled the feelings and rhythms of home. Office work also taught important skills that girls could use to become more efficient homemakers, including “neatness, accuracy, precision.” The monotonous work of filing and typing was also useful according to Dickson because “constantly recurring tasks” were essential to “the housekeeper's routine.”

Weaver and Dickson both warned female students to avoid physical exertion in the workforce to safeguard their bodies for motherhood. “The working day is long and leaves little time and strengthen for other activities,” Weaver explained in *Profitable Vocations for Girls,* “The girl must choose the work for which she is naturally fitted.” Girls who wanted to pursue


nursing or medicine, for example, needed “steady nerves and good health” in addition to “scientific accuracy” and “mechanical skill.” Dickson similarly cautioned female readers to avoid jobs for which they are “physically unfit.” Citing no medical evidence, Dickson argued that a “strenuous life” in the workforce could threaten a girl's ability to safely bear healthy children in the future. A girl's potential career in business, she warned, should not interfere with “the business of being a woman.”

Domestic service offered the most obvious transferrable skills between a girl's presumed temporary working years and lifelong homemaking responsibilities. Yet guidance professionals and school counselors rarely suggested domestic service as a suitable occupation for female students. Paid domestic labor was categorized in guidance literature as socially degrading and bad for a girl's character development due to its association with industrial reform schools. As one guidance professional explained, living under the same roof as an employer was work for “the untrained girl” that was “hard for a self-respecting girl to bear.”

Additionally, the migration of African American families to industrial centers like Chicago shifted the racial dynamics of domestic service after 1910. Near the turn of the century, female workers of European descent pursued new opportunities in the commercial and manufacturing sectors where jobs were more independent and often better paid. White-owned factories, shops, and offices in Chicago generally discriminated against African American migrants from the south. As a result, most black women and girls filled positions as laundresses, cooks, and servants that were increasingly viewed as “undesirable” by native-born whites and

59 Weaver, Profitable Vocations for Girls, 1; 183-184; Dickson, Vocational Guidance for Girls, 133; 158.

60 Dickson, Vocational Guidance for Girls, 185.
recent European immigrants alike. The work of live-in servants had long been viewed as arduous and isolating among female workers in American cities. But the racialization of cooking and cleaning as black occupations solidified the stigmatization of domestic service by the 1910s.  

For these reasons, guidance textbooks usually categorized domestic service as an undesirable occupation for their presumed white and middle-class readership. Teachers and guidance counselors in Chicago schools, however, routinely recommended African American students pursue “practical” positions as maids and laundresses. Parents and civil rights activists fought against the discriminatory advising of black children since the founding of the Vocational Guidance Bureau. In 1913 the Chicago Defender protested school officials at Englewood High School who either dissuaded or prohibited “the young ladies of the race” from enrolling in commercial classes. African American attendance in Chicago's public high schools was low before World War I, accounting for less than four percent of the total student body. Yet the Defender demanded black membership on the Board of Education to ensure all students had “the right of industrial employment” regardless of race. Their requests were ignored.

The work of vocational guidance professionals was shaped by class, race, and gender-based assumptions about what was “practical” for working-aged students. One Chicago student explained to a social worker that she was dissuaded from enrolling in commercial classes at her  


high school not because of low test scores but because of her teacher's lack of faith she would find employment as a stenographer. “Teacher said not to take a commercial course because there were no jobs opening up for colored,” she explained, “there's nothing but housework and cleaning.” Discriminatory advising of black students only increased in the 1920s. School officials at Flower Tech, for example, often advised black students to enroll in cooking classes to prepare for domestic service despite their interest in pursuing degrees in dressmaking or millinery.

Rather than visit the offices of school guidance counselors, African American families in Chicago more often utilized employment referral services at organizations like the Negro Fellowship League to help their children find work in the 1910s and 1920s. T. Arnold Hall, president of Chicago's Urban League, expressed the general perception of public school guidance among African American parents in Chicago. “Very little has been done by vocational guidance to help the Negro children,” he summarized in 1930, “because a more favored group refused to change its early concepts of them.”

In addition to racial discrimination, guidance professionals expressed ignorance to the financial circumstances that led so many parents to view the guidance movement with disdain or disinterest. Anne Davis often blamed immigrant parents in particular for failing to invest in their children's financial futures. The Vocational Guidance Bureau distributed pamphlets to parents with titles like “Why Boys and Girls Should go to High School” which listed over a dozen trade programs available in Chicago high schools in an effort to persuade parents to keep their children

63 Black Metropolis, 225; 259.
in school. Davis also wrote letters to parents stating the benefits of a two- or four-year vocational program. “There is little chance for boys or girls to secure good work until they are sixteen years of age,” she explained in one letter. “As a result, children who leave school at fourteen are compelled to take up factory or errand work.” Davis explained that these types of jobs were often seasonal and unstable, resulting in bouts of “idleness” in which their children would be “on the streets where they often get into trouble.”

Chicago parents were not ill-informed about the benefits of a secondary education. Rather, a secondary education was out of reach for families who relied on their children's wages or support with household chores. Davis frequently wrote of the Bureau's success convincing parents to keep their children enrolled in school. But during the 1914-1915 school year, only 17 percent of families decided to send their children to high school after consulting with the Vocational Guidance Bureau. Both vocational education and vocational guidance remained largely irrelevant to the great masses of urban children, 93 percent of whom still left the school system before high school by 1917.

Guiding Girls Back to School

Reformist women in the Vocational Supervision League continued to invest in “the protection and further education” of working-aged children after the creation of the Vocational

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67 Abbott and Breckinridge, Truancy and Non-Attendance in the Chicago Schools, 461. By 1917, only 23,582 public school students out of 350,197 attended high school (less than 7 percent). See “Table 1: Enrollment, 1917-1918” Sixty-Fourth Annual Report of the Board of Education, 1918, 191.
Guidance Bureau. In 1916 the League shifted focus towards legislative reform and funding school scholarships for working-aged children. They lobbied the state legislature to raise the compulsory attendance law to sixteen years old and supported similar restrictions on child labor laws in Illinois. The Vocational Supervision League asserted that stricter compulsory attendance laws were necessary to stop the 23,000 fourteen-to-sixteen-year-old children from prematurely entering the workforce each year. An end to the work certificate system would also curb the social problems created by children who “drifted” through the workforce without supervision.

Two members of the Vocational Supervision league, Edith Abbott and Sophonisba Breckinridge, argued that raising the compulsory attendance law was “indispensable as a means of safeguarding the state.”

The League also funded scholarships so working-aged children could continue their public school education until at least age sixteen in spite of financial hardship. On average the League awarded 15 to 20 dollars a month to cover carfare, food, and make up for lost wages so students could complete usually a vocationally-oriented program in a Chicago public high school. Their scholarship work was supported by more than 200 dues-paying members representing more than 50 women's groups in Illinois. Like vocational guidance, the League's public school scholarship work was intended to keep fourteen-to-sixteen year old students in school so they did not drift “from job to job with consequent loss to industry, to themselves, and to the community.”

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68 Ella Adams Moore, “An Experiment in Vocational Supervision,” (April 1917), pg. 2, Box 5, Folder 49, Scholarship and Guidance Association Records, UIC.

69 Abbott and Breckinridge, Truancy and Non-Attendance in the Chicago Schools, 264.

70 The Vocational Supervision League was renamed the Scholarship and Guidance Association in 1942, which it remains today. “Meeting Minutes - Civics and Philanthropy,” (May 1911 – March 1918), pg. 110; 118, Box 12,
Vocational guidance departments in other urban school districts relied on donation-based scholarship funds like the Vocational Supervision League. New York City public schools were the first to award scholarships for working-age children in 1908, which were organized by social workers at the Henry Street Settlement House. Many scholarship associations were founded specifically to help intellectually gifted students from poor and working-class families continue their education. In Chicago, the Vocational Supervision League awarded 70 scholarships to “unusually intelligent” students in their inaugural year. Their goal was to prevent “superior children from wasting their lives in blind-alley jobs” by affording access to vocational training.71

The League also focused on helping children considered unfit to join the workforce due to mental “dullness” or physical “nervousness.” Members of the Vocational Supervision League argued that children with mental slowness or physical abnormalities would most benefit from additional years of vocational training in high schools. Like other urban reformers in Chicago, the League assumed these students would become socially troublesome without a closely-supervised transition from school to work. “Many dull children left untrained, shifting from job to job, are potential delinquents,” a Chicago scholarship organizer explained. She argued that

helping “dull” students remain in school until at least age sixteen was therefore “undoubtedly preventative of juvenile and adult delinquency.”

School nurses and guidance professionals increasingly relied on psychological testing in urban public schools during the 1910s. In Illinois and elsewhere, new state education laws allowed school districts to establish separate classrooms for the education of children deemed “subnormal” and “feeble-minded” by school psychologists. The Chicago Board of Education also designated special classrooms to students who were blind, deaf, and epileptic.73 The integration of special education in public schools was an attempt by progressive lawmakers to remove children from the isolation of large state institutions, allowing them to stay with their families and attend their neighborhood schools. This small step towards deinstitutionalization, however, also brought psychological testing into hundreds of urban public schools and greatly expanded their scope of influence in the daily experiences of students.74

School officials in Chicago often denied work certificates of fourteen-to-sixteen-year-old students on the grounds of mental or physical defectiveness. Data from the early 1920s indicates that nearly a third of students were denied working certificates after their mandatory examination by school nurses. Male students were more likely than girls to be denied work certificates due to “low mentality” and placed in special education rooms for “subnormal” children. In contrast,

72 Esther Ladewick, Scholarship for Children of Working Age, Social Service Monographs, No. 7 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1929), 81.


female students were more commonly denied work certificates due to physical weakness or the ambiguous medical classification of “nervousness.” These students were less likely placed in special education classrooms, which were overcrowded with boys in the 1910s. Rather, girls were advised to return to their regular school programs and conserve their strength.75

Scholarship recipients in the 1910s and 1920s were often fourteen-to-sixteen-year-old girls denied work certificates for failing their mandatory medical inspections. In a typical example: A fourteen-year-old student, Ellen, found a job in an ice-cream cone factory making $2.50 a week in order to support her widowed mother and three younger siblings. But Ellen was deemed “physically weak” during a medical exam by her school nurse and was advised to stay in school “until she was older and stronger.” The school nurse referred Ellen to the Vocational Supervision League, which arranged a two-year scholarship for Ellen to attend high school and learn dressmaking.76

Members of the League feared for the physical degradation of young girl workers and argued they should remain in school for their own safety. Women's groups continued to fund investigations of girls' working conditions throughout the 1910s. These often included troubling details of swollen feet, crooked backs, and physical exhaustion experienced by young girl workers who entered the labor force prematurely. In one study, social worker Louise

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Montgomery interviewed more than 100 working girls between the ages of fourteen and sixteen living in Chicago's stockyards district and concluded that their employment caused permanent physical damage. Montgomery described one girl who was initially “strong, vigorous, solid” before she worked in a factory, lost ten pounds, and became “nervous, listless.” She met another fourteen-year-old girl who was “broken in health” after working in a department store for a year and required permanent bed rest. Montgomery warned that young girl workers may be unable to bear children in the future because they “spent their girlhood employed” rather than preparing for motherhood.77

Most students referred to the Vocational Supervision League were girls between the ages of fourteen and sixteen. During the 1918 to 1919 school year female students made up 70 percent of scholarship recipients in Chicago public schools. One scholarship recipient was a fourteen-year-old student, Annie, who applied for a work certificate at the end of eighth grade. Her school's medical examiner determined Annie had “a weak heart” not suited for wage-earning and advised she return to school. Annie's mother could not afford to put her through high school. Instead, a school counselor with the Vocational Guidance Bureau arranged for Annie to receive a scholarship from the League and pursue a two-year stenography program. When Annie was sixteen she returned to the Vocational Guidance Bureau, where counselors helped her find work as a typist.78

The majority of the League's scholarship recipients – 61 percent over their first ten years – were awarded two-year scholarships to complete stenography and accounting programs. Other

female students used scholarships to learn dressmaking and costume design at Lucy Flower Technical High School or study traditional subjects in their local high schools. After completing what was usually a work-oriented program, the Vocational Guidance Bureau helped scholarship recipients find work and passed their line of funding down to another student in need. Fourteen-year-old Loretta received a four-year scholarship to attend Flower Tech, for example, after which the Bureau helped her secure a dressmaking apprenticeship in a department store. When she graduated from Flower Tech her scholarship was passed down to another fourteen-year-old student, Mary, who used the support to finish a four-year business program at her local high school.79

Leading members of the Vocational Supervision League argued Chicago's public high schools offered too few practical vocational programs for female students. Many, like Jane Addams, were openly critical of the household arts programs in the high school curriculum which combined training for the home and workplace. Anne Davis shared these criticisms of the household arts programs, which she argued did very little to prepare girls for the realities of waged work. During her first year as head of the Vocational Guidance Bureau, Davis lamented that Chicago's household arts programs were just “an antidote to the day’s work rather than an aid to it.”80

Davis hoped her investigations of industries could be used by school officials to create more practical vocational program for female students. Davis gave one of her reports to Dora

79 “Annual Report of the Scholarship and Guidance Association,” (c. 1919), pg. 2, Box 5, Folder 43, Scholarship and Guidance Association Records, UIC; “Fifteenth Annual Report, April 1927 – April 1928,” 5, Box 19-S1, Folder 165, Chicago Woman's Aid Society Records, UIC.

Wells, principal of Flower Tech, during her first year as school guidance counselor. Davis hoped Wells would review the report and adjust the Flower Tech curriculum to address more realistic trade opportunities for girls rather than focusing on students' preparation for homemaking. There's no evidence to suggest Wells ever took her recommendations into account. Davis occasionally advised female students to leave the public school system and pursue more practical vocational training elsewhere. After their failed attempts to reform Flower Tech, Jane Addams establish a dressmaking day school at Hull House in 1915 with support from the Women's Trade Union League and Chicago Women's Club. The free Hull House Trade School catered to girls over fourteen years of age who completed their grammar school education and wanted to learn sewing, designing, and garment construction from experience dressmakers. Davis agreed with club women that the Hull House Trade School offered more useful education for aspiring dressmakers than the sewing classes offered in Chicago's public high schools. The Vocational Supervision League arranged multiple scholarship to make up for lost wages while girls spent their days at Hull House rather than their local public schools.  

Letters written to Davis and the Vocational Supervision League suggested that girls were thankful for the opportunity to further their education in both private and public vocational programs. “You do not realize what it means to me,” wrote one scholarship recipient. “I will try to prove my gratitude by the result of my work.” Some girls were eager to repay the League to make sure future students could benefit from their financial support. One girl who was awarded a

scholarship to buy glasses repaid her scholarship in installments once she graduated and found a job in 1918. “This day has been my first pay day and I am returning you the money you so generously advanced,” she wrote, so that “some other child may benefit by it.”

Public school scholarships helped hundreds of children pursue a secondary education. Yet the Vocational Supervision League did not achieve their stated “whole goal” of keeping all working-aged children in school until age sixteen. The League failed to reform Illinois' compulsory attendance law or child labor restrictions. Compulsory attendance in many states were raised two decades later, in the 1930s, when the economic depression pushed many urban children out of the labor force and into the classroom. In the absence of legal regulation, school officials relied on guidance counseling and scholarship organizations like the Vocational Supervision League to extend the school lives of Chicago children through the 1910s and 1920s.

Conclusion

The educational activism of women's groups made Chicago one of the few cities with a dedicated vocational guidance program in 1910. Vocational guidance grew steadily over the next decade across the country. In 1918 the Bureau of Education sent postcards to high schools across the country asking whether they had departments “designed to assist young persons in securing employment.” Of the 5,628 schools that relied, 932 reported a dedicated vocational guidance

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82 “Some Letters From Scholarship Children,” *Bulletin of the Vocational Supervision League* (June 1918), Box 5, Folder 50, Scholarship and Guidance Association Records, UIC.

83 George H. Mead, “The Aim of Scholarship Work,” *Bulletin of the Vocational Supervision League* (1918), Box 5, Folder 50, Scholarship and Guidance Association Records, UIC.

84 Tighter compulsory education laws emerged in tandem with greater restrictions on child labor during the 1930s, which culminated in the Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938. See John A Fliter, *Child Labor in America: The Epid Legal Struggle to Protect Children* (Lawrence, Kan: University of Kansas Press, 2018).
bureau in their schools. Some of these schools were in rural districts where guidance counselors worked with local farms to place male students in agricultural positions. But the overwhelming majority of vocational guidance bureaus were located in states' largest cities including Boston, Cincinnati, Kansas City, and San Francisco. These school districts not only had a greater density of students, but a more pressing concern among reform communities to protect children from dangerous labor conditions and prepare them for safe employment.\textsuperscript{85}

The literature on vocational guidance in American public schools suggests male school officials created these programs to better integrate public schools into the economy by the 1910s. Historian Harvey Kantor, for example, argues that school officials designed vocational guidance programs to make public schools more economically efficient for male students in particular. He contends that vocational guidance counselors became interested in the protection and social preparation of students only after child labor was abolished in the 1930s. As Kantor argues, guidance work was reoriented towards ensuring troubled youth and students with “behavioral problems” remained in school before becoming socially-disruptive dropouts by the mid-twentieth century.\textsuperscript{86}

Anne Davis, Mary Bartelme, and members of the Vocational Supervision League were not motivated by a desire to build bridges between schools and employers. Rather, these Chicago women always viewed vocational guidance as a form of delinquency prevention and character


development, particularly for female students. They embraced vocational guidance not to increase the industrial relevance of public schools, but as a tool to support existing social reform initiatives targeted at children like juvenile delinquency, vagrancy, and exploitive child labor. In sum, the concerns of middle-class reformist women for the social development and physical safety of girls fueled the development of vocational guidance in Chicago public schools by World War I.
In 1922 fourteen-year-old Ella, the daughter of Polish immigrants, ran away from home. Her parents had insisted she attend a parochial high school. Picked up on a vagrancy charge, Ella told Judge Mary Bartelme of the Juvenile Court for Delinquent Girls that she wanted to attend a public school instead. “I want to have an American education so I will know something when I grow up,” she told Bartelme. A court translator explained that her parents, who were present in the courtroom but unable to speak English, wanted Ella to attend the school of their Polish Parish until she could join the workforce at age sixteen. Ella refused. “I want to have an American education,” she reiterated. “I want to go to Public School and be an American girl.”

Attending a public high school became an increasingly standard part of the American experience for many first-generation students in the 1920s. National high school enrollment increased nine-fold between 1900 and 1930 as child labor laws tightened and the age of mandatory attendance rose nationwide. The greatest spike in high school enrollment occurred in the decade after World War I. Less than 40,000 students in Chicago pursued a secondary education in 1920. By 1929, the number of full-time high school students in Chicago surpassed 90,000. The children of native-born and middle-class parents continued to fill high school

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1 Records of the Proceedings of the Cook County Juvenile Court for Girls, August 30, 1922, Box 6/Folder 73, Mary Bartelme Papers, Special Collections and University Archives, University of Illinois at Chicago (UIC), Chicago, IL.
classrooms to prepare for college and professional careers. But in the 1920s the majority of Chicago's high schools were the children of immigrants from Eastern and Southern European countries like Poland, Germany, and Italy.²

![Graph: Chicago Public High School Student Enrollment, 1900-1930](image)

Figure 29. Growth of Chicago Public High School Enrollment, 1900-1930. Data compiled from Annual Reports of the Board of Education, Chicago Board of Education Archives (CBEA).

Climbing enrollment numbers prompted a massive reorganization of the high school curriculum after World War I. Leading education professionals argued that a secondary education should prepare all students, but particularly the children of immigrants, for citizenship in addition to teaching “fundamental processes” like reading and writing. Postwar nationalism inspired school officials to adopt new courses called “civics” and “social studies” that taught

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students how to vote, why to pay taxes, and the importance of volunteering in their communities. Education professionals argued that a student's entire high school experience should prepare them for American social life and civic participation through embracing “cardinal principles” like good ethical character, health, and a worthy use of leisure time.³

Vocational education was central to the reorganization of the high school curriculum after World War I. The war emergency encouraged the passing of the Federal Vocational Education Act of 1917 – popularly known as the Smith-Hughes Act – which provided federal funding for high school-level classes and teacher training programs in the fields of agriculture, trades and industry, and home economics. A landmark piece of federal education policy, historians have demonstrated how the Smith-Hughes Act solidified the place of vocational education in the high school curriculum for the following century. Scholars have yet to examine, however, how vocational programs expanded by the Smith-Hughes Act were incorporated into the gendered citizenship training of students after World War I. In Chicago's comprehensive high schools, trade programs taught male students expected American values like how to be a productive worker and show loyalty to one’s employer. Home economics programs supported by federal funds emphasized the study of family roles among female students in addition to skills like cooking and sewing.⁴


Women were central to the expansion of vocational programs for good citizenship between 1917 and 1929. Women’s groups lobbied for the inclusion of home economics in the Smith-Hughes Act by demanding that Congress invest in the social preparation of future mothers and homemakers. Over the protest of labor activists like Agnes Nestor, members of the American Home Economics Association (AHEA) gained new supervisory positions at the state and federal level to oversee the domestic training of female students in secondary education after World War I. These women successfully replaced the few trade subjects in household arts classes, like dressmaking and millinery, with more generalized courses like the social study of the home and the selection of clothing. This new curriculum – still called “household arts” by many school officials but increasingly referred to as “home economics” – prepared female students to be good American mothers, well-mannered housewives, and responsible consumers.5

Thousands of first-generation female students continued to pursue commercial programs in Chicago’s comprehensive high schools after World War I. But home economics classes were increasingly popular among these students as well. Indeed, many immigrant daughters considered lessons on how to decorate a home and dress like a “lady” valuable parts of an American education and entrance into American culture. A growing minority of African American female students, many recent migrants from the south, were also engaged in home economics.

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economics classes during the 1920s but often not by choice. School officials suggested that African American female students prepare for their expected economic roles as domestic servants through household arts classes while students of European descent learned the social expectations of white American homemakers. In the decade after World War I, vocational education helped to reinforce race-based boundaries between students who could become “American girls” through public education and those who could not.

*Vocational Homemaking*

In 1914 President Woodrow Wilson appointed a special commission to investigate the status of vocational education in American high schools and make recommendations to Congress for how federal aid could help expand vocationalism in secondary education. Wilson organized the Commission on National Aid to Vocational Education largely in response to the impending military conflict abroad with Germany, one of the nation's chief industrial competitors. Speaking before Congress, Wilson argued that the nation must address two sides to protecting America's place at the top of the industrial world order: the “military side” and the “vocational side.” Like Germany, he argued, “we ought to have in this great country a system of industrial and vocational education under federal guidance and federal aid.”

The Commission was mostly composed of state representatives and a few education professionals affiliated with the National Society for the Promotion of Industrial Education (NSPIE). Prominent commissioners affiliated with the National Society, notably Charles Prosser, echoed the President's concern that federal aid should be allocated to support the expansion of

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programs like engineering, foundry, and mechanics in American public schools. Without serious investment in these industries, he wrote, “our national prosperity is at stake.” Commissioners representing the interests of rural states, like Senator Hoke Smith and Representative Dudley Hughes of Georgia, reminded their colleagues that the agricultural economy was equally important to national prosperity. These men asserted that rural school districts needed federal support to teach the next generation of farmers to raise cattle, irrigate fields, and fix farm equipment in public schools while their urban counterparts prepared for manufacturing jobs.7

Wilson appointed two women to the commission: Agnes Nestor of the Women's Trade Union League (WTUL) and Florence Marshall of the Manhattan Trade School for Girls. Nestor, whose appointment was endorsed by the American Federation of Labor, was the only commissioner with actual labor experience. Letters of support poured into her office at the WTUL headquarters in Chicago from union men and women who hoped she would be a voice of working people on a commission of “peanut politicians.” Even Ella Flagg Young wished Nestor luck achieving what she failed to implement in Chicago. “Hoping you have powers granted you in the Committee,” she wrote, “that will enable you to make your ideas effective.”8

Nestor struggled to promote her values of gender equality and respect for labor rights in the commission’s discussion of vocational education. During their proceedings in 1914, Nestor submitted a resolution from WTUL that all programs supported by federal funds be


8 General Correspondence, Letter from Cleo Murtland to Nestor, Feb 18, 1914; Letter from Woodrow Wilson to Agnes Nestor, Feb 17, 1914, Harriet Reid to Nestor Feb 24, 1914; Ella Flagg Young to Nestor, Feb 18, 1914, , Box 1, Folder 7, Agnes Nestor Papers, Chicago History Museum (CHM), Chicago, IL.
coeducational. The resolution also demanded the Commission on National Aid to Vocational Education promote trade programs that taught the philosophy of collective bargaining and the history of industry. During their proceedings, Nestor and Marshall urged the commission to consider current inequalities in the workforce by supporting trade programs that provided “new opportunities for women” in printing, architecture, and engineering. These suggestions were dead on arrival. Their colleagues argued that the most efficient vocational programs would prepare students for “the most common occupations” in which men and women currently worked. From their perspective, the Commission's purview was not to consider vocational programs for “what men and women might do that they are not doing.”

One of the most contentious issues between commissioners was whether they should include education for the vocation of “homemaker” in their recommendations to Congress. In the spring of 1914 Nestor called Leonora O'Reilly of the National WTUL to speak before the commission. O'Reilly bristled at the remarks of one commissioner, Vermont Senator Carroll S. Page, who defined home economics as “vocational education” for female students. She questioned that if homemaking was truly a “vocation” like engineering or carpentry, then why did Senator Page not open home economics classes to male students in his state? “Well, men don't do the cooking in Vermont,” Senator Page responded. “Perhaps they ought to,” replied O'Reilly. “And if a boy can sew on a button better than a girl, why, let him sew on his buttons.” Like Nestor, O'Reilly suggested that the commission reinforced inequality under the guise of “efficiency” by insisting that homemaking was a vocation for women. “It is unjust,” she argued,

“to think that because we have been cooking all our lives we are going to go on and be cooks forever.”

Senator Page and his colleagues maintained that the commission would do a disservice to future wives and mothers if they ignored home economics education. They argued home economics was particularly important for female students in rural school districts because work on the farm and in the farm home were intimately connected. Women supported the family income in rural communities by canning, gardening, baking, and home sewing. On this point the commissioners reached a compromise. Nestor and Marshall agreed that the domestic work of women and girls could be considered “vocational” in the context of the farm home. Outside the context of the farm home, the other commissioners conceded that home economics skills were only “vocational” when applied to the paid work of dietitians, cooks, matrons at institutions, and interior designers.

The Commission on National Aid to Vocational Education drafted a bill to provide federal funds to states in support of public school programs in industry and agriculture in the spring of 1914. The proposed federal program would also reimburse states for developing vocational teacher training programs and paying teachers' salaries. In an effort to appease the interests of both rural and urban commissioners, the bill mandated that no more than 50 percent of a state's budget for vocational programs could be spent on vocational programs in agriculture or industry.

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The bill also reflected the goals of Nestor and Marshall by stating that vocational programs supported by federal funds should prepare both male and female students between the ages of fourteen and eighteen for “useful employment.”\textsuperscript{12}

Home economics was not covered in this original bill. Yet section four allowed states to use federal funds to train home economics teachers along with teachers of agricultural and trade programs. In their official report to Congress, the commission explained that domestic education was too important “to a girl's preparation for life” for them to ignore the subject completely.\textsuperscript{13} Nestor still viewed her work on the commission as successful and was relieved and she and Marshall stopped home economics from having a larger place in the bill. “We felt that if domestic science were allowed a greater appropriation, it would be too easy to push all girls into that field,” she wrote in her autobiography. “We, too loved the home; but the girls needed also training which would equip them to earn a living.”\textsuperscript{14}

Unfortunately for Nestor, the bill immediately sparked outrage from the General Federation of Women's Clubs over the lack of home economics support when introduced to Congress the following year. Composed of more than 3,000 local women's clubs, the General Federation promoted the civic, political, and education reform agendas of prominent club women on the national level. Leaders of the Federation criticized their lack of involvement in Commission for National Aid to Vocational Education and the omission of home economics in

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{12} The bill stated that trades and industry funds should prepare male and female students for wage-earning while agricultural funds should prepare students “for useful employment on the farm or in the farm home.” “Proposed Legislation,” \textit{Report of the Commission on National Aid to Vocational Education} Vol 1, 78-80.
\item \textsuperscript{13} “Recommendations,” \textit{Report of the Commission on National Aid to Vocational Education}, Vol 1, 17.
\end{itemize}
the bill. At their Biennial Convention in Chicago in 1915, the General Federation organized a Home Economics Committee tasked with securing increased appropriations for home economics education in the bill. They argued that home economics education was desperately needed in cities like Chicago, where many female students had limited opportunities to prepare for their “higher vocations” as mothers and homemakers when they left the public school system for work in offices, stores, and factories.  

The Federation successfully convinced Senators Dudley Hughes and Hoke Smith to redraft the bill to provide federal aid towards the creation of home economics programs as well. Support for the revision also came from Congressman Horace M. Towner, whose wife Elizabeth Towner was a prominent figure in the national club women movement. The revised bill provided


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15 General Federation of Women's Clubs, Twelfth Biennial Convention of the General Federation of Women's Clubs, June 9 to June 19, 1914, Chicago, IL (General Federation of Women's Clubs, 1914), 145, 167, 622. catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/011984835
federal funding for the development of vocational programs in the three fields of agriculture, trades and industry, and home economics but did not divide the share of funds evenly; funds for home economics programs in public schools were required to come out of a state's budget for trades and industry. States could use up to 20 percent of their budget for trades and industry towards the creation of home economics programs.16

President Wilson passed the Federal Vocational Education Act – popularly named the Smith-Hughes Act after its authors – as a necessary war measure in 1917. The scope of the Smith-Hughes Act was conservative in terms of expenditures. Congress allocated seven million dollars towards the creation of vocational classes and teacher training programs in agriculture, trades and industry, and home economics through the Smith-Hughes Act over a ten-year period. Each federal dollar was matched by local or state funds for a total investment of fourteen million dollars in vocational education nationally by 1927. Smith-Hughes funds were stretched thin in most states. By the end of the decade, less than a million students nationwide were enrolled in full-time, part-time, or evening programs funded through the Smith-Hughes Act.17

Nevertheless, the impact of the Smith-Hughes Act on public education was profound. Federal agencies became involved in shaping the public school curriculum for the first time in American history through funding and overseeing vocational programs after 1917. The Smith-


Hughes Act created a Federal Board for Vocational Education tasked with distributing funds for vocational programs, conducting national studies, and advising states on matters of vocational school reform. This program of federal oversight continued until 1963 when the Smith-Hughes Act was replaced by new education policy under the Kennedy Administration. Federal support for vocational programs in public schools and colleges only increased in the 1960s and expanded to a current federal investment of more than one billion dollars annually. In sum, the Smith-Hughes Act marked the beginning of century-long federal investment in the vocational training of American students.

The Smith-Hughes Act also increased the power of state governments in the affairs of local school districts. Each state was required to establish a State Board of Vocational Education to distribute federal funds to local officials and issue reports on the status of vocational education in their communities. State Boards of Vocational Education were overseen by the Federal Board but had a great deal of autonomy deciding how to distribute Smith-Hughes funds and, in particular, how to train teachers of vocational subjects in their respective states. By the end of World War I, all 48 states hired multiple supervisors responsible for conducting studies and developing curricula for vocational programs in agriculture, trades and industry, and home economics. This new group of education officials were closely involved with the creation of vocational programs in local school districts and ensured the continuity of vocational education throughout the states.18

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18 All subsequent vocational education legislation has reinforced the rights of states to set their own goals for what is now called “career and technical education” with support from federal funds. This is true of Kennedy’s Vocational Education Act of 1963, which maintained the collaboration between state and federal education officials on matters of vocational education established by the Smith-Hughes Act. Recent legislation passed by the Trump Administration also empowers states distribute $1.2 billion towards vocational programs based on local need. U.S. Congress, House, *Strengthening Career and Technical Education for the 21st Century Act*, HR 2353, 115th Congress, introduced in House May 4, 2017, [www.congress.gov/115/plaws/publ224/PLAW](http://www.congress.gov/115/plaws/publ224/PLAW).
Furthermore, the Smith-Hughes Act legitimized homemaking as a vocation for women worthy of federal support. In 1919 the Federal Board for Vocational Education defined “the vocation of homemaker” as an essential “business and social enterprise” that supported the “social and civic unit” of the American family. The Board listed the following tasks under the profession of homemaker to serve as guidelines for state education officials: the care and rearing of children; the care of the house and its equipment; the selection, preparation, and serving of food; the selection, care, and occasional construction of clothing; the care of the health of the family. The Federal Board for Vocational Education advanced the goals of domestic feminists in the home economics movement by confirming that the social responsibilities of women in the home required dedicated vocational training. “Home makers,” the Federal Board asserted, “are not born any more than carpenters, plumbers, doctors, and lawyers.”

Historians of education have largely assumed that the inclusion of “home economics” in the Smith-Hughes Act reflected the conservative leanings of state senators and members of the National Commission on Aid to Vocational Education. But federal support for domestic education was the result of activism by well-connected club women who believed educating future homemakers was equally important to the preparation of future breadwinners. Labor


20 See Lazerson and Grubb, American Education and Vocationalism.
activists like Nestor worked hard to keep home economics out of the bill for fear that this would limit opportunities for female students to enroll in programs for trades and industry. The General Federation of Women's Clubs, in contrast, viewed their eleventh-hour contribution to the Smith-Hughes Act as a progressive step forward for women that would lead to cleaner homes, healthier children, and a general acknowledgement that the work of mothers was in fact work. Their success was part of a broader effort among privileged women reformers to increase federal investment in American homemaking.

“Kitchen Patriotism”

All 48 states ratified the Smith-Hughes Act by 1918 and appointed education officials to oversee the creation of vocational schools, programs, and teacher training programs in their respective states. Federal funds were initially used to train conscripted soldiers for military vocations, particularly in northern cities. For example, the Chicago Board of Education used Smith-Hughes funds to offer temporary courses in sheet metal drafting, telegraphic code, and auto mechanics for military draftees at Lane Technical High School. Federal funds were also used to hire new teachers or add additional programs in trades and industry. Apprenticeship programs for male students were expanded in Chicago's technical high schools including electrical work, drafting, carpentry, jewelry design, baking, and gas fitting. In rural school districts, the Illinois State Board of Vocational Education allocated funds to prepare male students for agricultural vocations including programs in animal husbandry, poultry, and farm equipment repair.21

The Chicago Board of Education opened multiple “continuation schools” using Smith-Hughes funds that operated on weekday evenings for young workers who could not attend regular school hours. These continuation schools were overseen by Chicago's former superintendent of schools, Edwin G. Cooley, who hoped attending evening vocational classes would help working boys excel to better positions in their current places of employment. Auto workers between the ages of fourteen and eighteen could attend the Automobile Continuation School on weekday evenings to sharpen their skill sets, and the Washburne Continuation School prepared young drafters and woodworkers for higher-paid positions in the building trades. Cooley also oversaw a Commercial Continuation School that trained “office boys” in meatpacking companies for more lucrative positions as bookkeepers. In 1919, the Illinois State Legislature passed a bill requiring all fourteen-to-sixteen-year-old students who left school for work attend a continuation school for at least eight hours a week.22

The war emergency brought female students into vocational programs funded through the Smith-Hughes Act. According to school officials, the Board of Education received more than one thousand calls from employers requesting female students from commercial classes who could fill clerical positions made vacant by the military draft. Cooley welcomed female students to the Commercial Continuation School as a result, making Chicago the only city with a continuation school for female students in 1918. The Board of Education also introduced an accelerated five-month stenography program for female students in six high schools, including the Lucy Flower

Technical School for Girls, attended by thousands of female students and returning alumnae. Female students entered trade programs previously reserved for male students in urban school districts during the war as well. In Chicago and New York, female students enrolled in programs for architectural drafting, sign painting, and printing funded through the Smith-Hughes Act and trained for military vocations like overseas telephone operating.23

State and local school officials used federal funds to invest in trade education specifically for female students as well. Girls comprised more than a quarter of all students in federally-funded trades and industry programs in 1918. Like pre-war trade schools, most of these programs emphasized the female-dominated garment and artistic trades. Existing trade schools for girls in northern cities, like the Manhattan Trade School for Girls, applied for federal funds to hire new teachers and purchase equipment like foot-power machines. Other school districts used trades and industry funds to create new part-time and evening schools for textile work and food service. Although enrollment remained low, all but eleven states offered trade programs for female students funded through the Smith-Hughes Act by 1920.24

Early trade programs for girls funded through the Smith-Hughes Act often combined education for wage-earning and homemaking. The Smith-Hughes Act required that full-time vocational programs engage students in “shop work” for at least 50 percent of the school day,


“shop-related” work for 25 percent of the day, and general courses for the remaining quarter. For
male students shop-related coursework included subjects like chemistry and the history of
industry and the science of animal husbandry in agricultural programs. Shop-related courses for
female students often included classes associated with the home economics movement like
household science and hygiene.  

Labor women like Nestor hoped school officials would stop emphasizing domestic
education in girls' trade programs as women entered new fields of work during World War I.
Demand for women and girls in the manufacturing sector expanded during the war as one
million men under the age of thirty left their jobs. Between 1916 and 1920, women in the iron
and steel industry increased by 40 percent, and women in carpentry doubled. Nestor argued that
federal funds should prepare female students for manufacturing jobs outside of garment work,
which she thought encouraged the confusion between trade education and domestic education.
Nestor also argued that “shop-related” coursework should include collective bargaining lessons
and the history of labor laws rather than household science. “The question of women in
industry...” Nestor wrote in 1917, “...must henceforth be guided by a national policy which is
centered in a national responsibility.”


Education officials at the federal and local levels, however, were more interested in mobilizing home economics education in support of the war effort. In Chicago, the Red Cross redirected all high school sewing classes towards the production of goods for American soldiers and allied refugees in France and Belgium. Female students organized Junior Red Cross Auxiliaries and worked as “knitting machines” producing sweaters, trench caps, knit caps, scarfs, socks, mittens, pillows, and flannel shirts for soldiers. In their first month alone, Chicago Junior Red Cross Auxiliaries collected more than 33,000 garments made by female students along with more than 20,000 other articles including gun wipes, splints, and trench candles. Agents from the Department of Agriculture also worked with local school officials in Chicago to teach students the principles of food conservation and wartime nutrition.27

Domestic education took on a larger role in the daily school lives of female students as a result of World War I. While all girls took household arts classes in elementary schools, learning to cook and sew were optional electives for female high school students in Chicago. This changed during the war. School officials required female students to learn “kitchen patriotism” through at least six classes in cooking and nutrition a semester. Organizations like the Red Cross and the Department of Agriculture continued their relationship with Chicago high schools after the war through offering syllabi on food conservation, nutrition, and first aid. The Director of

Household Arts in Chicago public schools, Jennie Snow, argued that these courses were still valuable in peacetime to protect the health of families and “the welfare of the Nation.”

The wartime emphasis on domestic education for female high school students reinforced social expectations for a woman's responsibility to care for her home and family and, by extension, her nation. World War I also opened new career opportunities for women with home economics backgrounds in the fields of nutrition and dietitians. Female students in Chicago high schools were exposed to these new fields of employment. After World War I, members of a Chicago-based group called the Home Economists in Business visited household arts classes to

Figure 31. Junior Red Cross Auxiliary in Chicago Learning First Aid, 1918. *Sixty-Fourth Annual Report of the Chicago Board of Education* (1918) 96, CBEA.

talk to students about career possibilities for women in food companies and advertisement agencies. These school speakers included Marye Dahnke, the Director of Home Economics for the Kraft Foods Corporation, and one of the first woman to have a leadership role in the food industry.²⁹

Female students were introduced to the field of nursing through the involvement of the Red Cross in household arts classes. Members of the Junior Red Cross Auxiliaries learned first aid skills like how to keep a wound from becoming infected and attach a splint to a broken arm. First aid classes were popular among female students who hoped to pursue careers in the nursing field after graduation. Due to the popularity of the Junior Red Cross Auxiliary, the Lucy Flower Technical High School introduced a nursing major for female students in 1918 that included coursework in advanced science and math along with household arts courses like sanitation and childcare. The Vocational Guidance Bureau published a study of opportunities for women in the nursing field and created a sample curriculum for high school girls interested in pursuing the field after graduation focused on household arts and science classes.³⁰

This professionalization of domestic education extended beyond the public school system. Inmates in the Illinois State Training School for Girls used textbooks donated by the Red Cross to practice first aid in the infirmary. The popularity of the program led administrators to establish a nursing major and “hospital school” out of the infirmary for inmates to pursue nursing


³⁰ See “A Study of Nursing and Nursing Education,” Vocational Guidance Bureau Occupation Studies No. 8 (Chicago: Board of Education, 1928), Vocational Guidance Bureau Records, CBEA.
training for work in hospitals and state institutions once paroled from Geneva. In sum, the war context allowed a large number of female inmates at the Illinois State Training School to prepare for careers outside the field of domestic service for the first time in the reformatory's history.31

Members of the American Home Economics Association (AHEA) ensured that public high schools foregrounded homemaking education rather than these “vocational uses” of home economics education after World War I. In 1919 Anna E. Richardson was appointed to Chief of Home Economics for the Federal Board for Vocational Education. A prominent member of the AHEA, Richardson's duties on the board involved interpreting the meaning of “vocational home economics” outlined in the Smith-Hughes Act and creating official policies on home economics education in secondary schools. Richardson had a clear vision of home economics education rooted in the study of what she called “the sociological significance of family life.” More than the study of domestic skills like cooking and sewing, Richardson argued that home economics classes should teach students about the foundations of a good marriage and the mental development of children. Richardson believed students should leave a home economics course with an understanding of how to spend leisure time as a family, intervene in a sibling rivalry, and make a grocery list for a household of four. Richardson argued that home economics programs should foreground “personality and improved relationships” in addition to “knowledge and skills” needed for domestic work.32


Members of the AHEA spread family-centered home economics education through securing supervisory positions on state boards of vocational education. All but six states had full-time supervisors of home economics by 1920, the majority of whom were affiliated with the AHEA. Many state supervisors also had four-year college degrees in home economics and were dedicated to preparing female students for competent motherhood rather than careers in nursing or nutrition. The State Supervisor of Home Economics in Illinois, Adah Hess, was an active AHEA member who received a degree in Domestic Arts & Sciences from Columbia University in 1916. Hess organized annual conferences with fellow state supervisors in the Midwest to discuss new research in fields like child development and parent education and to agree on standardized home economics syllabi to distribute to local school districts. In sum, Hess and her colleagues used their supervisory roles created by the Smith-Hughes Act to promote the national mission of the AHEA.33

The AHEA standardized the training of home economics teachers at the college level through their involvement in State Boards of Vocational Education. One of the most important roles of state vocational education officials was to determine the criteria for teacher certification in the three vocational fields covered by the Smith-Hughes Act and oversee the creation of teacher training programs at publicly-funded colleges. Home economics programs at four-year colleges expanded dramatically in the postwar decade with help from Smith-Hughes funds. Only

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33 land grant colleges offered four-year programs in home economics in 1917. Over the next nine years, the number of public colleges, universities, and normal schools with home economics programs increased twenty-fold to a total of 651.34

College programs for home economics teachers emphasized the nascent fields of child development and parent education during the 1920s. These programs were evolved from earlier efforts in domestic education to bring science and professionalism to the traditional work of mothers. In child development courses, students applied behavioral science to child rearing rather than rely on their presumed natural instincts as women. Students also learned the developmental stages of childhood in these courses and read literature on the psychological benefits of raising children in a married two-parent household. A 1924 survey conducted by the AHEA found that 80 percent of college women studying home economics had child development courses as part of their program. The following year, the AHEA successfully lobbied the Land-Grant College Association to recognize child care as a standard course in the home economics curriculum.35

Illinois State Supervisor Hess helped establish home economics programs to the University of Illinois and the Chicago Normal School after World War I. She also used Smith-Hughes funds to bring home economics programs into rural school districts throughout the state for the first time. In Chicago and Springfield, which already offered high school household arts


programs by 1920, Hess prepared working girls for motherhood through evening home economics programs funded through the Smith-Hughes Act. By 1922 more evening home economics programs were offered in Springfield and Chicago than in all rural school districts of Illinois combined. Thirteen of Chicago's twenty-four high schools offered evening home economics programs for girls working during the day by 1922. These evening home economics programs included coursework on the social relationships of the family, child development, and household budgeting.36

Child development courses entered high school household arts classes as well. State Supervisors of Home Economics collaborated with the Children's Bureau throughout the 1920s to develop new course syllabi in childcare and parent education for public school students. These child- and family-focused courses overshadowed an earlier emphasis on skills that straddled the line between trade education and domestic education. Household arts classes in public high schools formerly focused on cooking and sewing skills. According to data from the Bureau of Education, only 17 percent of high school household arts programs taught childcare skills before World War I. By the end of the 1920s, however, 66 percent of high school household arts programs emphasized childcare skills and parent education.37


Labor women lobbied for supervisory roles over the vocational training of female students. In 1920 the Women's Trade Union League sent a petition to the Federal Board for Vocational Education demanding the appointment of “women familiar with the problems of women in industry.” The petition was supported by Mary Anderson, a former shoe-stitcher in Chicago and WTUL member, who was elected as the first president of the Women's Bureau of the Labor Department in 1920. The Federal Board for Vocational Education appointed a woman to study the female labor market and make recommendations on programs for girls in trades and industry later that year. They did not consult the WTUL in making their decision, however. Instead they hired Anna L. Burdick, a former school official from Iowa with no actual labor experience, to the position of Special Agent for Girls and Women in Trades and Industry. Anderson argued that an education professional like Burdick was not qualified for the position. The Board needed to hire a labor woman who understood “not only where a girl can get a job but what that job means to the girl.”

Trade women also struggled to secure supervisory positions at the state level. The only women on state boards of vocational education in the 1920s were home economists. State supervisors of trades and industry were mostly educational professionals affiliated with the National Society for the Promotion of Industrial Education or political appointees from the departments of commerce or labor. Labor women wanted involvement on state boards to have a voice in the training of vocational teachers. As Anderson argued, teachers should have work

experience rather than a college education to offer “real guidance to the girl” based on a familiarity with the workforce. Only a small handful of states, notably New Jersey, required teachers of trade programs for girls have at least two years practical work experience in manufacturing. Most states had no standardized criteria for how trades should be taught to female students due to a lack of supervision.39

Figure 32. Female Enrollment in Smith-Hughes Programs for Home Economics vs. Trades and Industry, 1918-1929. Data compiled from annual reports of the Federal Board for Vocational Education, 1918-1929, digitized by Harvard University, accessed through HathiTrust Digital Library.

The role of the AHEA in vocational supervision standardized the domestic training of female students in American public schools and professionalized the training of home economics teachers. The role of home economists in vocational supervision tilted the previous balance between trade education and domestic education programs in their favor. Roughly 30,000 female students enrolled in trade programs and home economics programs funded through the Smith-Hughes Act in 1918. Over the next decade, enrollment in home economics courses supported by Smith-Hughes jumped ten-fold while female enrollment in trades and industry programs remained stagnant.\(^\text{40}\)

“Cardinal Principles”

Citizenship training in American public schools helped expand the role of home economics education in the postwar period. In the 1910s, organizations like the National Education Association (NEA) expressed concern that federal support for vocational training would overshadow general education in public high schools or splinter the high school curriculum along academic and vocational tracks. Leading education professionals argued that public schools had a duty to fit students for American social life and civic participation in addition to preparing young people for work. Their concerns for the fate of the high school curriculum were heightened by an expanding student body of first-generation students from Eastern and Southern European families. The NEA suggested that school officials needed to retool the high school curriculum to better prepare these students in particular for American citizenship.

In 1914 the NEA appointed a special commission to create a list of goals and standards for secondary education that could be adapted by public high schools across the country. The Commission on the Reorganization of Secondary Education released their report in 1918, soon after the states ratified the Smith-Hughes Act, which argued that the high school curriculum warranted “an extensive reorganization” to prepare students equally for their economic, political, and social roles as American citizens. Along with teaching “fundamental processes” like reading and writing, the Commission advanced six “cardinal principles” that every high school curriculum should teach: ethical character, good health, civic morality, proper use of leisure, worthy home membership, and vocational training.41

The Commission's report, *The Cardinal Principles of Secondary Education* (1918), was widely-read among school officials and educational professionals nationwide. The Commission argued that school officials should embrace a comprehensive high school curriculum in which all school subjects worked together in service of the “cardinal principles.” That career training was listed as a cardinal principle neutralized the threat of a vocationally-oriented curriculum in the wake of the Smith-Hughes Act. *The Cardinal Principles* suggested that educating students for work was one of a series of equally important goals emphasized in socially-efficient schools. In doing so, *The Cardinal Principles* also implied that vocational training could support the larger mission of school officials to prepare first-generation immigrant students for good citizenship. The authors asserted that learning a vocation, along with other cardinal principles like civics and

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good health, helped students develop “common knowledge, common ideals, and common
interests essential to American democracy.”42

School districts across the country embraced the curricular reforms promoted by the
Commission on the Reorganization of Secondary Education after 1918. Echoing The Cardinal
Principles, the Chicago Board of Education announced in 1919 that the new mission of the city's
public high schools was to promote “the ideals, hopes, and traditions of America” through a
comprehensive curriculum. School officials introduced civics classes designed to teach students
“American patriotism and the principles of representative government.”43 These goals were
achieved through lessons on the U.S. Constitution, the relationship between the federal
government and the states, and the duties of citizens. In 1925 the Illinois state legislature
mandated all high school students study civics and U.S. history for at least one hour a week.
School officials hoped that an education in civics would ensure “great citizens come from our
school children” in the postwar decade.44

New extracurricular clubs and activities in Chicago public schools reinforced The
Cardinal Principles after World War I. The Board of Education introduced the first student
governments in the postwar period where high school students practiced the principles of civics
and ethical character by running for office and electing their peers to positions like student body

42 The authors of Cardinal Principles referenced the importance of these principles, particular civics education, for
the children of immigrants who “attend the secondary school in large and increasing numbers” before passing
“directly into participation in the activities of our society.” See The Commission on the Reorganization of
Secondary Education of the National Education Association, Cardinal Principles of Secondary Education
the School,” 190.

43 Sixty-Fifth Annual Report of the Board of Education, (1919), 7-8, CBEA; “Announces Five Courses of New
Junior Highs: Better Citizenship Is Aim, Bogan Says,” CDT, Sep 5 1924, 15.

44 “Citizenship,” Annual Report of the Superintendent of Schools (1926), 19; “More Attention to Citizenship,”
Annual Report of the Superintendent of Schools (1926), 103; “Teaching Parents the Value of Education,” The
president. Public high schools also bolstered after school activities and social clubs in the early 1920s to promote “worthy use of leisure” among students. Local school officials in Chicago lamented that new forms of commercialized leisure after World War I increased delinquency among adolescents and distracted from civic engagement. As one school official explained, school-sanctioned groups like student government kept young people focused on “the more serious and responsible aspects of citizenship” rather than the frivolity of “jazz, war spirit, movies.”

Vocational programs in comprehensive high schools supported the new curricular focus on democratic values and civic engagement. The nascent field of “social studies” entered Chicago's high schools by World War I and combined subjects like civics, history, economics, and geography to teach students the fundamentals of American social organization. Alongside the names of state capitols and the importance of paying taxes, social studies textbooks described how different jobs supported the economy and why productive workers made good citizens. One popular textbook used in Chicago schools, *American Citizenship Practice* (1924), explained to high school readers that the right to choose a vocation was “the basis of democracy” and an expression of individual freedom. Choosing a career was also a duty of citizenship necessary for all men to support an organized society. Male students in Chicago high schools even engaged in shop work as part of their social studies education. In ninth grade social studies classes, for example, all students devoted the first half of the school year to U.S history and civics and the


second half to “elementary economics and vocational guidance.” For boys, the latter courses included trade classes to learn “the various shop processes” that support the manufacturing sector.\(^\text{47}\)

The integration of trade classes in the social studies curriculum led to a generalization of vocational education in the high school curriculum. School officials in the 1920s often argued that learning to woodwork and weld was more important to the social and civic development of male students than their job preparation. Chicago Superintendent of Schools, Peter A. Mortenson, wrote in 1926 that the purpose of trade programs in the comprehensive curriculum was to teach male students “the value of materials, the meaning of property and capital” rather than to “turn out skilled workers.” The Board of Education officially listed “vocational education” as a social study alongside civics, U.S. history, and geography in the comprehensive high school curriculum that year. Outside the dedicated apprenticeship programs at schools like Lane Tech and Crane Tech, Mortenson's colleagues agreed that shop classes should be reimagined as “cultural subjects” intended to teach students that “men work together in organized society.”\(^\text{48}\)

The integration of trade programs and social studies marked an important shift in vocational education. In the 1920s, more male high school students engaged in vocational training than ever before in American high schools. By mid-decade more than 85 percent of male

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high school students in Chicago enrolled in trade courses such as woodworking, pattern making, forge, foundry, machine shop, electrical construction, auto mechanics, sheet metal, and printing. Yet outside of the city's technical high schools, few of these students intended to work as cabinetmakers, joiners, or blacksmiths after graduation. Rather, these programs supported a broader educational effort to teach students important social principles like hard work and ethical character. As one educator explained, trade classes taught Chicago boys “the alphabet of experience” needed to appreciate “the complex economic world in which they must play their specialized parts.”

This shift in the function of vocational programs was shaped by a desire to teach first-generation students the values of an American workforce. One Chicago school official argued that vocational classes should teach male students that a “good citizen” is “not an idler.” This view was colored by xenophobic ideas about immigrant workers and fears of political radicalism among immigrants in the 1920s. For example, social studies textbooks explained the importance of respecting one’s work machinery, the value of “loyalty to employer” and the importance of “promptness at work.” Indeed, one Chicago school official argued that a goal of citizenship classes was to encourage “industrial peace” between employers and “immigrant workmen.”

Home economics education was incorporated in the Americanization efforts as well. While male students learned the importance of productive work, female students learned that marriage and family provided the foundation for social order. The American Citizenship Practice


textbook included sections for female readers on the importance of an attractive home, good cooking, and cleanliness to American families. The authors argued that well-kept homes were essential to cultivate the “love, loyalty and service that make for efficient American citizenship.” Female students learned similar lessons in Chicago's elementary schools during the 1920s. A syllabus for first graders used in Chicago included lessons to teach girls the different social roles of the family, such as that the mother “keeps home clean and comfortable” and “cares for the family needs and pleasures,” while the father “does for the family” and “provides for necessities and pleasures.”

The function of household arts classes in Chicago high schools expanded to teach the cardinal principle of citizenship and worthy home membership. Illinois State Supervisor of Home Economics, Adah Hess, argued that household arts programs in high schools should cover three subjects: food and nutrition, clothing and textiles, and home management. She defined the latter subject as “a social study” in which female students considered “the relationships of the family members, and of the relations of the family to society.” In addition to cooking and sewing, Hess' syllabus for Illinois students included class discussions on how the family should support their community through volunteer and church activities and how to foster “desirable family relationships.” In the postwar decade education professionals suggested that the function of domestic education for girls, like trade education for boys, was the acquisition of social values rather than skills. As one Chicago school official described, household arts classes were a form

of “character training” that helped female students develop certain “attitudes” in the home such as “happy” and “helpful.”

The social study of home and family generalized Chicago's household arts classes during the 1920s. Chicago school officials intended to prepare female students for the social position of mother and homemaker through domestic education since the turn of the twentieth century. Yet household arts programs at the high school level also included useful trade skills for female students including dressmaking, garment construction, and millinery. Cooking classes involved overlap between domestic labor and wage-earning for students who practiced serving meals like waitresses and prepared food for their peers in the cafeteria. The wage-earning potential of domestic skills were eliminated in most high school curriculums due to the new emphasis on the social study of homes and families. In 1917 more than 80 percent of American high schools included drafting lessons in their household arts programs where girls learned to make their own patterns and construct their own garments. By 1927, only 6 percent of female students learned drafting as part of their household arts education. Instead, over 60 percent studied the social structure of the American family.

Americanization and civics education effectively divorced domestic education from trade education in the postwar decade. Household arts classes in the 1920s taught female students the principles of responsible consumerism through lessons no how to buy rather than make garments like dresses and hats. In Chicago high schools, drafting classes were replaced with coursework


53 Ibid.
like “material selection” and “purchasing and selecting” in the 1920s. According to one study, more than 90 percent of American high schools included coursework on “selection and cost of textiles” in their household arts programs by the postwar decade. The success of the ready-made clothing industry, which dramatically reduced the number of garments women produced at home, supported the emphasis on buying rather than making garments in household arts classes. Yet these lessons also reflected a desire to Americanize working-class and immigrant girls who were commonly stereotyped as irrational and frivolous shoppers. By teaching female students what, when, and how to buy their garments, household arts classes prepared immigrant daughters for responsible middle-class consumerism.54

Citizenship training in public schools generalized both trade programs for boys and domestic education for girls in Chicago's public high schools. While vocational subjects received specific attention under the Smith-Hughes Act, school officials worked to integrate all school subjects together to best prepare students for citizenship. This emphasis on social roles overshadowed the limited opportunities of female students to receive education for wage-earning in public high schools. Subjects that previously straddled the line between domestic education and trade education were generalized as various “studies” in the 1920s. Classes previously called “cooking,” a skill, were renamed as “food study” in Chicago's public high schools. The skill-based subject of “sewing” became the study of “clothing.” These subjects were generalized in the 1920s to help students understand their future place within the organization of American society.

“They Taught Us to be Ladies”

By 1920 all female students in Chicago's public high schools were required to complete at least one semester of household arts during their freshman year. Most Chicago high schools continued to offer a two-year household arts major intended for female students who left school with a work certificate by age sixteen. These two-year programs stood outside national trends by teaching skills like dressmaking and garment construction throughout the 1920s. Yet they also foregrounded the social responsibilities of women and girls through the social study of the home and the family. School officials in the 1920s echoed the words of the city's former Superintendent, Ella Flagg Young, that female students could exit these two-year programs and earn wages in “an occupation suitable for women” or return home as expert housekeepers.55

The Lucy Flower Technical High School for Girls combined programs for wage-earning and homemaking throughout the 1920s. The Chicago Board of Education moved Flower Tech to a new four-story facility in 1926 located across the street from the Garfield Park Conservatory on the west side of Chicago. Designed to serve up to 3,500 students, the new Flower Tech facility had more sophisticated shop rooms for female students to practice machine operating and had a department store-style “showroom” for students to display their finished garments. Flower Tech introduced new programs in the 1920s, like a degree in “beauty culture,” which let students practice hairdressing and manicuring in classrooms outfitted like salons. Most famously at the time of its opening, Flower Tech had the first on-site health clinic in an American public school where aspiring nurses learned to care for the ill, administer first aid, and studied sanitation and

physiology. Alumnae interviewed about their experiences at Flower Tech emphasized their pride in the new school building that rivaled the city's technical schools for boys in its monumental size. "It was like movin' from a kitchenette to a ten-room mansion," one former student recalled. "Everything was new and wonderful." 56

School officials required all Flower Tech students to study child development and parenting alongside vocational programs. The on-site clinic, for example, had a daycare program where Flower Tech students practiced looking after the young children of neighborhood mothers. School officials argued the daycare was useful for aspiring nurses but essential for all Flower Tech students to learn the science of "mothercraft" through coming "directly in contact with small children." Home economics coursework expanded beyond cooking and sewing in the postwar period to include lessons on managing a household budget and the social relationships of parents and children. Flower Tech received state and federal funds from the Illinois State Board of Vocational Education as a school for home economics rather than a school for trades and industry. 57

The household arts focus at Flower Tech appealed to some immigrant families who viewed sewing as a particularly valuable skill for their daughters. Nearly 30 percent of students at Flower Tech left with a two-year household arts degree by the age of sixteen. Students in this


program were mostly the daughters of Eastern and Southern European immigrants who focused on sewing to secure work in dressmaking shops or department stores. Other families hoped sewing classes at Flower Tech could make their daughters more helpful at home. One student attended Flower Tech at the request of her mother, a Lithuanian immigrant, who never learned to sew. She left school with a two-year dressmaking degree in 1926 not to find work, but to help her mother make and mend items at home.  

School officials at Flower Tech increasingly emphasized the social roles performed by middle-class women in the 1920s in addition to skills like sewing and cooking. In 1921, Chicago's eighteen “Deans of Girls” who worked in the city's high schools compiled a textbook on manners and decorum for high school students. The textbook explained to female readers that “a lady” was one who “keeps herself physically fit, her thinking on a high plane, and her manners gentle and winsome.” The proceeding chapters outlined various rules for being lady including never loitering on sidewalks, never talking loudly on streetcars, and never wearing clothes that were “too startling.” Flower Tech students – often referred to as the “Flower Girls” in the 1920s – were expected to best represent their school in public by following these rules of ladylike behavior. For example, Flower Tech had an extracurricular group called Hostess Club whose members were positioned in the front hall of the school to greet visitors and escort them


59 The Deans of Girls in Chicago High Schools, Manners and Conduct in School and Out (Chicago: Allyn and Bacon, 1921). First appointed in 1913 by Ella Flagg Young, the Deans of Girls were modeled after Deans of Women in American universities. They were responsible for overseeing the increasingly gender-specific education of female students in Chicago's public high schools. See Jana Nidiffer, Pioneering Deans of Women: More Than Wise and Pious Matrons (New York: Teachers College Press, 2000).
through the newly-constructed building throughout the day. The Hostess Club reflected a new emphasis among school officials that female students learn the social customs of civilized womanhood in addition to skills for the home.  

The importance of presenting oneself as a lady often overshadowed the career development of students at Flower Tech. Anna Davis of the Vocational Guidance Bureau recommended Flower Tech offer hairdressing and cosmetology classes because the beauty industry was a rare field in which both black and white women could find stable employment. In an occupation study published by the Bureau in 1926, Davis reported that white-owned salons hired African American women and provided safe working conditions. Yet few students who studied beauty culture at Flower Tech excelled to cosmetology school or salon work. Instead, the program at Flower Tech emphasized personal grooming through teaching students how to style their own hair and care for their own teeth and nails. Beauty culture classes at Flower Tech also prepared students for beauty consumerism by studying the best products for their skin and hair types. As school principal Dora Wells explained, these classes “fit pupils for daily life” rather than for careers in the beauty industry.

60 Green, “For Girls Only,” 10; Celestine Ellis Jeffries, interview by Nancy Green, Sept 14, 1983; Leanita McClain, interview by Nancy Green, n.d; Green, interview notes on Theresa Steger Butler, n.d.; Green, interview notes on Clarice Statton Hughes, n.d; Green, interview notes on Laura Ann Williams, Dec 12, 1983; Green, interview notes on Josephine Michalek Izewski, Dec 20, 1983, Nancy Green Papers, CHM.

61 Davis, “A Study of Beauty Culture in Chicago,” Occupation Studies No. 12 (Chicago: Board of Education, December 1926), Vocational Guidance Bureau Records, CBEA. Flower Tech reflected national trends. A national survey of public high schools found that zero percent of states reported lessons on skincare, teeth cleaning, or hair dressing in high schools before 1917. Ten years later these subjects – often called “grooming” – were offered in a third of American high schools as part of a household arts curriculum. See Bailey, “The Progress of Home Economics in the Secondary Schools, 1917-1927,” 22. Also see “Adds A Frill to the School Bill,” CDT, Jan 18, 1933, 11; “Beauty Culture Defended,” CDT, Jan 21, 1933, 12.
School officials equating learning to be a “lady” with the citizenship training of female students. In their textbook on manners, Chicago's Deans of Girls explained that learning to behave like ladies made students “happier, more agreeable, and more effective citizens.” Principal Wells argued that the goal of all vocational programs was to teach students the social values of good citizenship rather than prepare them for wage-earning. Writing in the *Journal of Education*, Wells explained that Flower Tech programs such as dressmaking and cafeteria service taught students “dignity, self-control, and willingness to take responsibility,” which she deemed “the best lesson in civics that a child can ever learn.”62

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62 The Deans of Girls in Chicago High Schools, *Manners and Conduct in School and Out*, iii; Dora Wells, “A
Many first-generation students valued this emphasis on proper presentation and ladylike decorum in the 1920s. A dressmaking major at Flower Tech who later worked in a bridal shop thought her lessons in proper presentation and grooming were just as important as her vocational training. The daughter of Italian immigrants, she summarized her education years later: “I went in a child, I came out a perfect lady.” Another student, Jessie, enrolled in Flower Tech in 1926 after telling a Hull House social worker that she was interested in learning dressmaking. She did not pursue work in garment construction after high school, but valued her education at a technical school for girls nonetheless. “They taught us to be ladies,” she said of her education at Flower Tech. “When you came out, you were a lady.” Whether these students viewed becoming a “lady” as part of an Americanization process is unclear. But learning the social skills of middle-class womanhood certainly helped first-generation students lay claims to what David Roediger has called “white social citizenship” in the postwar decades.63

Commercial education for office work remained popular among first-generation students in Chicago high schools as well. More than a million more women joined the field of stenography after the war and comprised more than 60 percent of bookkeepers in American cities by 1930.64 Some immigrant and first-generation students switched out of dressmaking and millinery programs when Flower Tech offered a two-year stenography program during World

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63 Gilda Mazzola, quote from interview notes by Nancy Green, Nov 2, 1983; Green, interview notes on Jessie Allen McSwain, Feb 2, 1985, Nancy Green Papers, CHM; Roediger, Working Toward Whiteness, 230.

64 Although many scholars place the feminization of office work near the turn of the twentieth century, census data reveals that most office jobs, particularly the work of bookkeepers and cashiers, were not dominated by women until 1930. See Sharon Strom, Beyond the Typewriter: Gender, Class, and the Origins of Modern Office Work (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1992), 18, 49. For more on the feminization of office work see Margery Davies, Woman's Place Is at the Typewriter: Office Work and Office Workers, 1870-1930 (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1982); Angel Knoley-Folland, Engendering Business: Men and Women in the Corporate Office, 1870-1930 (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994).
War I. Agnes Hahn, a Flower Tech student who emigrated from Sweden in the 1910s, switched from dressmaking to stenography during the war and immediately found work at an insurance company. She held her position for thirteen years before meeting her husband and devoting her time to rearing their children. School officials at Flower Tech discontinued the stenography program when the school relocated in 1926 to the disappointment of many students, some of whom left Flower Tech to take commercial classes in their neighborhood high schools instead.\(^65\)

The daughters of immigrants were often encouraged to pursue commercial programs in Chicago high schools at the request of their parents. Indeed, immigrant parents were more likely to recommend clerical work for their American-born daughters than any other field of employment. First-generation students were often dissuaded from pursuing academic subjects of interest, such as literature or history, by parents who preferred they major in two-year stenography programs and contribute their wages to the family income as soon as possible. Almost all female office workers were native-born and white in the early twentieth century. But nearly 60 percent of women clerical workers in Chicago were the American-born daughters of European immigrants by the 1920s, many of whom took classes like typing and “business English” in the city's comprehensive public high schools.\(^66\)

Female students from immigrant families viewed commercial education as valued training for American work culture. Unlike shops and stores, offices were considered respectable

\(^{65}\) Green, Interview notes on Agnes Hahn, n.d.; Green, interview notes on Virginia Fehr Streibich, n.d., Papers, CHM; Green, interview notes on Nell Mills, May 9, 1984, Nancy Green Papers, CHM. Also see A. L. Prickett, “Development of High School Commercial Curriculum and University Courses,” *The Accounting Review* (March 1928): 56; Dewey Rowland, “Current Bookkeeping Practice in Relation to the High School Commercial Bookkeeping Course” (M.A., University of Southern California, 1928), 32.

environments where immigrant daughters could strengthen their English, learn middle-class social skills, and potentially meet future husbands. Some students left parochial schools for the public school system because they desired an “American education” to prepare for office work. Fourteen-year-old Ella told Judge Bartelme that she wanted to attend a public high school to become “an American girl” in 1922 specifically because her Polish parochial school did not offer commercial programs. Ella wanted to study typing and English so she could find work as a stenographer, a job she associated with becoming an American. Participating in office culture may have allowed first-generation students like Ella to move from ethnic white to white American in the slow process of “becoming Caucasian” in the decades after World War I.67

Lessons in ladylike decorum in Chicago high schools also prepared daughters of immigrants for middle-class office culture. Managers expected their female office staff to look attractive but conservative. In her weekly advice column for “business girls,” Mary King cautioned new office workers against clothes that were “too gaudy of color” or “too extreme of style.” Indeed, some managers in the 1920s banned bobbed hairstyles and other fashions associated with the sexually-liberated flapper. Social behaviors emphasized in the household arts curriculum like helpfulness and ladylike decorum were also expected of female office workers.

One vocational guidance textbook published in 1919 explained that a pleasant temperament, neatness, and good manners were all necessary traits for successful stenographers.\textsuperscript{68}

Indeed, office work was understood as quintessentially white in the postwar decade. Very few African American women were hired as clerical workers during the 1920s. By 1929 only 2 percent of white-collar workers in the United States were African American, and these women worked almost exclusively in black-owned businesses. Parents and the black press often dissuaded African American students from pursuing commercial programs in public schools due to the limited chances for securing work in the field. In 1918 the \textit{Chicago Defender} advised African American female students to ignore the increase in stenography and bookkeeping classes in high schools during World War I. “Many white girls are taking this course,” the editor of the \textit{Chicago Defender} wrote, “but a white girl has a hundred chances to your one.” The editor urged black students to focus on academic coursework to prepare for teaching careers. Black students needed to focus on practical perpetration, he argued, and commercial courses were “not a preparation.”\textsuperscript{69}

Many African American families hoped their daughters could enter the teaching profession with a four-year high school education. Flower Tech had an interracial student body since 1911 due to the school's original proximity to the segregated Black Belt of Chicago. Black enrollment at Flower Tech steadily increased in the following decade after thousands of southern black families migrated to Chicago to fill wartime manufacturing jobs. Some Chicagoans

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suspected that the Board of Education relocated Flower Tech to the west side of the city in an effort to curb black enrollment during the 1920s. But south-side black families continued to send their daughters to Flower Tech due to its open enrollment policy. According to one former student, nearly a third of incoming freshmen in 1926 were African Americans who took hour-long streetcar commutes to Flower Tech each morning. 70

Figure 34. Flower Tech Students Wearing Garments Made at School, c. 1940. Nancy Green Papers, Chicago History Museum.

70 “Vice Forces Lucy Flower Girls' School to Move,” CDT, March 7, 1915, 1; Carl Sandburg, “Chicago is Second In Our Population: Jumps from Fifth Place Since 1910; City Has 125,000 Colored Residents,” The Chicago Defender, Dec 13, 1919, 17; Allen H. Spear, Black Chicago: The Making a Negro Ghetto, 1890-1920 (Chicago: University Press, 1967), 11-132; Green, interview notes on Mildred Tolliver Hoskins, Feb 4, 1985, Nancy Green Papers, CHM.
Flower Tech had a reputation as a prestigious institution for hardworking girls of color. In addition to its technical degrees, Flower Tech was considered an academically rigorous school that enabled African American students to prepare for teaching careers. The all-girl environment at Flower Tech reminded some families of an exclusive school for higher learning that one student called “the poor man's Vassar.” The academic opportunities for black students at Flower Tech were shared between families and often promoted by the black press. The *Chicago Defender* frequently featured full-page profiles of Flower Tech students who made the honor role that included a glamorous headshot. These well-known students in the 1920s included Mabel Wheeler, the daughter of the first African American lawyer in Illinois, and the daughter of Ida B. Wells.71

More African American students attended Flower Tech in the 1920s to prepare for full-time employment than their white peers. Nearly 40 percent of black women and girls over the age of ten were gainfully employed in America by 1920. Black women in Chicago continued to fill the lowest-paid positions in the female economy after World War I as domestic servants, laundresses, cooks, and factory hands. Black women were also five times more likely to continue working when married to support the wages of their husbands, which were also lower than their white counterparts.72 Many black families in Chicago hoped that a technical education could

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help their daughters secure better-paid work outside the field of domestic service as designers or teachers.

For these reasons, African American students resented Flower Tech's emphasis on homemaking skills and ladylike decorum. Many black students had brothers who attended all-boy technical schools like Crane or Tilden and thought their trade education at Flower Tech would be similarly practical. These students were frustrated with required coursework in meal serving, cooking, and childcare that was intended to train first-generation students for the social role of American homemaker. One former student recalled how, despite being a dressmaking major, she was forced to enroll in child development classes at the school's clinic. She felt that these were actually domestic service lessons in disguise that required black students to babysit children in the school's all-white daycare. Black students who attended Flower Tech to avoid low-paying jobs in domestic service resented their classmates who seemed happy to prepare for a life of homemaking. “Those [white] students weren't nothin' but just housewives,” recalled a graduate of 1929 who ran into former classmates years later. “Hadn't done anything with what they learned.”

Education professionals at the federal and local levels promoted racist assumptions that black female students should embrace domestic education to fill low-paid positions as servants. When implying its usefulness for white students, the Federal Board for Vocational Education defined home economics education as training for motherhood, homemaking, and American

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womanhood. The Federal Board for Vocational Education described the purpose of home economics classes for African American female students in much different terms. In a 1923 bulletin published by the Board, federal officials argued that home economics classes supported by Smith-Hughes funds should help black female students “take their places in the economic organization of society.”

The new social studies curriculum suggested that these distinctions between female students were a natural part of the American social order. A civics textbook used in Chicago explained to students that African Americans, as well as Chinese and Japanese immigrants, had less opportunity for economic advancement due to inherent cultural failings. Students learned that these racial groups struggled to assimilate and become “happy and efficient citizens” due to their lower “standard of culture.” In contrast, the textbook suggested that “the proper type of European” could join “the great American community” through working hard, engaging in politics, and maintaining clean homes.

In 1928 an African American parent sent their child's social studies textbook to the Chicago Defender to raise awareness for the race-based conception of American citizenship promoted in the high school curriculum. The Chicago Defender published the entire chapter on United States history in the newspaper, damning the textbook as “propaganda” that advocated “southern hates” against African Americans. Indeed, the textbook explained the economic distinctions between black and white Americans were the result of “Nature,” which made it all

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but impossible for African Americans to become “an equal force in civilization.” The chapter continued to describe most black workers as a “listless, aimless class who aspire to nothing.” The editor of the Chicago Defender argued that such racist literature had no place in the school system of a “liberal northern city” like Chicago. But social studies textbooks justifying economic disparity as “natural” to the American social order remained in Chicago public schools, as did vocational programs that reinforced race-based conceptions of women's labor.76

Conclusion

The purpose of vocational education broadened after World War I to support the social and civic training of American high school students. In 1925 the National Society for the Promotion of Industrial Education changed its name to the American Vocational Association (AVA). The National Society was originally founded to ensure that public schools trained students, mostly male, to become “effective economic units” in an industrial society. This mission was redefined in the postwar decade. As an organization for vocational rather than industrial education, the AVA defined its purpose as helping all students “develop their largest social and economic usefulness.”77


School administrators and education officials prepared female students for social usefulness through an expansion of home economics education. Throughout the 1920s, members of the AHEA and the General Federation of Women's Clubs lobbied for an amendment to the Smith-Hughes Act that would allow states to divide funds equally between home economics, trades and industry, and agriculture programs. Named after the Senator who introduced the bill to Congress, the proposed Fess Home Economics Amendment was widely supported by school officials who argued increased funding for home economics would support their Americanization efforts. The Amendment explicitly called for home economics programs funded through the Smith-Hughes Act to “assist in the Americanization program” of local high schools, such as by correcting the “poor health habits and home conditions” of immigrant mothers. 78

The Fess Home Economics Amendment to the Smith-Hughes Act failed to achieve Congressional support when introduced in 1920 and again in 1921. But the provisions of the Fess Amendment were absorbed into a second piece of vocational education policy in 1929, the George-Reed Vocational Education Act, which continued the federal program created by the Smith-Hughes Act. Most importantly for women's groups, the George-Reed Act increased funds for home economics education and allowed states to invest equally in home economics, trades and industry, and agriculture programs. Adelaide S. Baylor, Chief of Home Economics Education of the Federal Board for Vocational Education in 1929, argued that the additional funds would

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improve American homes and American society by extension. “National standards,” she argued, “are simply home standards on a larger scale.”\textsuperscript{79}

Federal support for home economics education had a profound impact on the schooling experiences of female students. In Chicago, coursework on the relationships of family members, household budgeting, and child development taught first-generation immigrant students the expectations for American homemaking. These courses suggested very specific economic roles for African American students, who were encouraged to prepare for domestic service while their classmates learned to decorate their homes, host dinner parties, and present themselves as “ladies.” Commercial education offered another path to American social citizenship for first-generation students that was also closed to classmates of color. Although the high school curriculum was reorganized to support the civic education of all students, vocational programs reinforced a race-based division of labor between women in the postwar decade.

EPILOGUE

More than 1,500 male students of the Albert Lane Technical High School for Boys walked out of class on the afternoon of March 3, 1971. The teenaged boys marched seven miles to the offices of the Board of Education in downtown Chicago, chanting “We don't want no broads! We don't want no broads!” The largest vocational high school in the Midwest was going coed. School officials announced that Lane Tech would open its doors to female students to comply with forthcoming federal mandates barring sex discrimination in education. In the fall of 1972, 400 female students joined a student body of nearly 5,000 boys preparing for careers as architects, contractors, welders, printers, and engineers.

The prospect of a coeducational Lane Tech was contested by teachers and parents as well as students. School administrators questioned whether “girls in mini skirts” would be dangerous distractions and potentially cause shop room accidents. One male student worried that girls would “turn their noses at shop classes” and hurt the school's reputation for technical rigor. In 1971 a school-wide survey found that 76 percent of Lane Tech parents wanted the school to remain all-male for fear that girls would threaten the nationally-renown vocational curriculum. Many of these critics assumed that female students would feminize the curriculum by demanding home economics classes.¹

Rochelle Harris was a member of the first coed class of students at Lane Tech in 1972. Harris chose Lane Tech over her neighborhood high school because she was excited by the opportunity to learn technical skills like engineering. Many of her peers enrolled at Lane Tech for the school's well-regarded academic programs as well as the technical curriculum. These students had no interest in reforming the school to include girl-specific programs like cooking or dressmaking. “Girls are in machine shops, auto shops and foundries. They take drafting, design houses, operate presses,” Harris wrote in 1974. “In fact, I haven't heard of one request for a home economics class (from the girls that is).”

Harris' options for a vocational training in Chicago's other public high schools were remarkably similar to programs taken by women of her grandmothers' generation. Girls in Illinois accounted for 83 percent of students studying health occupations like nursing and nutrition in 1972; 86 percent of students in retail and sales programs; 69 percent of students in white-collar programs; and 92 percent of students in home economics. Male students, in contrast, accounted for 90 percent of the state's trades and industry majors. Indeed, Chicago's vocational programs in the 1970s reflected the gender-specific vocational reforms championed by progressive-era reformers at the beginning of the twentieth century.

Gender-specific vocational programs in American high schools were slowly dismantled by a new generation of reformist women in the 1970s. Agitation from women's organizations against gender discrimination in education writ large led Congress to enact Title IX of the

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Educational Amendments Act of 1972 that prohibited sex discrimination in all federally-funded educational activities. Unequal access to vocational programs, which received federal funds since the Smith-Hughes Act of 1917, were central to women's demands that Congress enforce Title IX after 1972. “Segregated [vocational] classes are illegal,” wrote one activist in a letter to Congress. “Enforce the law!”

Congress organized a special committee to investigate gender discrimination and “sex stereotyping” in vocational education in 1975. The committee was chaired by its only female member, Shirley Chisholm, who made history in 1968 as the first African American woman elected to Congress. Chisholm heard testimony from women's groups who argued that Congress needed to hold local school administrators and teachers accountable for failing to adapt vocational programs after Title IX. Marilyn Steele, an education reformer from Flint, Michigan, testified that vocational guidance counselors should encourage female students to enroll in male-dominated programs and vice versa. Steele also reasoned that any public school using “textbooks that show men in jobs and mothers with their aprons in the kitchen” should be penalized for violating Title IX. By not enforcing Title IX in public vocational programs, Steele argued that Congress supported “the socially determined custom, reinforced in our public schools, of preselection of occupation by sex.”

Steele and her fellow reformers believed vocational programs in public schools needed to adapt to the new social and economic burdens faced by women in the late twentieth-century.

4 Marilyn Steele, “Prepared Statement of Marilyn Steele, PhD, Director of Planning and Community Activities, Flint, Michigan,” Hearings before the Subcommittee on Elementary, Secondary, and Vocational Education (1975), 23.

5 Steele, “Statement of Marilyn Steele,” Hearings before the Subcommittee on Elementary, Secondary, and Vocational Education (1975), 9, 12.
workforce. In 1920, nearly 77 percent of female workers in America were single women and girls who exited the workforce in their early twenties. But by 1970, 63 percent of female workers were married with children. Reformist women in the 1970s argued that vocational programs designed to help girls earn temporary “pin money” while preparing for full-time homemaking were woefully out of step with the realities of American family life. Testifying before Congress in 1975, Nancy Perlmen of the Coalition of Labor Union Women argued that girls' vocational programs for retail and secretarial work were insufficient for the majority of female students who would become breadwinners as well as homemakers. “Women work out of economic necessity,” she explained. “They are working to put food in their children's mouths and to pay the rent.”

Home economics programs required a radical reconfiguration by this logic as well. Perlmen argued that schools did not need to abolish home economics but should expand the scope of a home economics education to prepare all students for the work of running a home regardless of gender. “Everyone should know how to cook, sew, fix a light switch, file their taxes,” she argued. While complying with the Educational Amendments Act, she argued home economics classes in public high schools should also prepare female students for the specific challenges of holding a job while caring for young children at home. Instead of reading a textbook about the joys of full-time homemaking, Perlmen suggested that home economics students hear from a part-time nurse about how she arranges childcare for her three kids when she works a night shift at the hospital.

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7 Perlman, “Statement of Nancy Perlman, Treasurer of the National Coalition of Labor Union Women,” 28.
Women's activism to address gender discrimination in education during the 1970s challenged an almost century-long tradition of educating female students for separate occupations in American schools. By 1974, female students composed nearly half of incoming freshmen at Lane Technical High School in Chicago. Social custom was still an obstacle for early female students at Lane Tech, many of whom were assigned as “assistants” to boys in shop class and instructed to stand idly by holding toolkits for their male classmates. Home economics courses were also slow to integrate in Chicago public high schools and continued to serve mostly female students until the 1990s. Nevertheless, the boundaries between male and female vocational programs were gradually erased by women reformers and students in late-twentieth century public schools.

Gender differentiation in the vocational curriculum slowly faded in the late twentieth century, yet inequalities based on race and class persisted. The divergent trajectories of Lane Technical High School and Lucy Flower Technical High School after the 1970s provide a useful example. When Lane Tech went coed in 1972, the school catered mostly to the children of skilled workers and middle-class professionals living on the north side of Chicago. Less than 15 percent of Lane Tech students were African American in 1972. Lane Tech retained its reputation for academic and technical rigor after girls enrolled, and increasingly emphasized a commitment to preparing male and female students for four-year colleges and careers in technology. Today, Albert Lane Tech College Prep High School is a highly-selective public magnet school that claims to have more alumni with PhD degrees than any other high school in the nation.\(^8\)

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Lucy Flower Technical School for Girls went coed in 1978 without public controversy or concern for the school's reputation. Flower Tech had a student body of 1,000 female students at the time, 99 percent of whom were African American. Unlike Lane Tech, Flower Tech catered almost exclusively to poor and working-class black families living on the westside of Chicago by 1978. The school maintained a vocational focus throughout the twentieth century like many urban public schools serving minority students who school officials considered unlikely to attend four-year colleges. Programs at Lucy Flower Vocational High School, as it was remained, mostly prepared male and female students for work in health services, food service, and business management. The school boasted multiple student-run businesses by the 1990s including a cafe, called the Flower Pot, and a printing office that served neighborhood businesses. Lucy Flower
Vocational High School was one of more than a dozen Chicago public schools with majority black and Hispanic student bodies that closed its doors abruptly in the early 2000s.9

The vocational education reforms spearheaded by women at the turn of the century shaped how female students prepared for work in Chicago schools well into the 1970s. By uncovering the role of women and girls in the development of vocational education, “Useful for Life” makes three contributions to the history of school reform and women's reform in progressive-era cities like Chicago. First, this dissertation highlights how and why women shaped one of the most successful school reform movements of the early twentieth century. The concern of mostly white middle- and upper-class reformers for the training of immigrant daughters brought new types of vocational programing into the public schools between 1880 and 1930 and resulted in the creation of new public institutions like Lucy Flower Technical High School. Less successful attempts by labor women to alter girls' vocational education also impacted curricular reforms by pushing school officials like Ella Flagg Young to integrate trade education into the household arts curriculum. That women successfully shaped the vocational curriculum for girls in Chicago confirms the value of looking beyond traditional circles of school administrators and intellectuals in histories of school reform. In this case, vocational programs were created by both education officials and women operating outside the schools with goals rooted in the larger concerns of women's reform movements.

Second, “Useful for Life” highlights the importance of student agency in histories of school reform. Female students were not passive attendees of vocational programs designed by school reformers in progressive-era Chicago. While their options were limited, girls made independent decisions to pursue some vocational programs over others. Their overwhelming demand for commercial education demonstrated a desire for financial stability and social cache at odds with the goals of many women reformers in the vocational education movement. Student demand for white-collar skills not only feminized commercial programs in Chicago public schools but contributed to a radical shift in the gender composition of the clerical workforce by World War I. By 1920, fully 60 percent of female office workers in Chicago were the first-generation daughters of immigrants from Eastern and Southern Europe. Many of these young working women had learned skills like typing and shorthand in their local public high schools.

Lastly, this history of vocational education in Chicago demonstrates the importance of integrating the history of school reform with the history of women's reform. Historians of progressive-era women have underemphasized how schools functioned as sites of reform for white women in particular who debated the best methods of preparing girls for the work of future womanhood. In reforming girls' vocational education, reformist women in Chicago debated whether women's work inside the home was equally important to a women's wage-earning power, and how best to prepare women for their dual social and economic responsibilities of employment and motherhood. Debates between women in the vocational education movement reveal how conflicting views about women, girls, and work shaped the public school curriculum and the education of female students for the better part of the twentieth century.
The most successful women school reformers in Chicago's vocational education movement suggested that female students should prepare for both temporary jobs as wage-earners and life-long careers as homemakers. With native-born white and European immigrant girls specifically in mind, these women created vocational programs that reinforced social expectations of women's economic dependency on men in the school curriculum by assuming girls would exit the workforce in their twenties. Many female high school students in Chicago did just that in the 1910s. But fifty years later, nearly half of American women no longer quit their jobs when they married, or they returned to work shortly after having children. That the girls' vocational curriculum failed to adapt to these changes in women's work disadvantaged families that relied on two heads of household as well as single women who raised children alone or never married.10

The assumptions of women school reformers that working girls would become homemaking women reinforced inequalities between female students based on race and class. Unlike the daughters of many native-born white and European immigrant parents, working-class and African American female students in Chicago did not have the luxury of planning for futures of full-time homemaking. Programs that combined education for wage-earning and homemaking were irrelevant to the future work needs of black female students in particular, who were five times as likely to work while married than their white counterparts in 1920.11 Feminist challenges to vocational education in the 1970s failed these students as well. White female


students benefited from the breakdown of gender-based barriers in vocational education at schools like Lane Tech, where they could pursue new professional career paths and advance to higher education. But a lack of concerted challenges to the racial and class disparities in vocational education continued to leave female students of color with inferior access to skilled job training at schools like Flower Tech. The narrow vision of girls' vocational education instituted by progressive-era women continued to disadvantage these students throughout the twentieth century and into the twenty-first.
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**Journal Articles**


**Dissertations**


VITA

Dr. Ruby Oram graduated summa cum laude from DePaul University in 2012 where she studied American Studies and the History of Art and Architecture. She entered the joint doctoral program in United States History and Public History at Loyola University Chicago in August 2013, where her research focused on the history of women and gender, urban history, labor history, and the history of education in the United States during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

In addition to her scholarship, Dr. Oram is a public historian with expertise in the fields of historic preservation, collections management, public programs, and museum education. She has held positions at Chicago-based cultural institutions including the Chicago Architecture Center, the Newberry Library, and the Art Institute of Chicago. Dr. Oram successfully nominated one of the subjects of this dissertation, the former Lucy Flower Technical High School for Girls, to the National Register of Historic Places in 2017.