

Making the Grade: The Economic Evolution of American School Districts.
By William A. Fischel. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009. Pp.
xi+298. \$55.00.

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In this era of national curriculum proposals and other efforts to increase the educational influence of the national government, William A. Fischel's *Making the Grade: The Economic Evolution of American School Districts* makes the case for the continuing importance and relevance of localism. Through a variety of arguments, relying primarily on economic perspectives, the author asserts that local school districts have been and remain a crucial element in American educational policy. Though he does not directly address the negative consequences of the power of local districts, such as the effects of variable fiscal resources, or the variable quality localism produces, he provides illuminating historical material and a number of contemporary arguments defending the viability of the local school district.

Not being mentioned in the Constitution, education is a matter left to the sovereignty of the states. With a rural population and a small tax base, historically most states left the task of establishing schools and the means to pay for them up to local communities. Since population density was sparse, one-room schools dominated the 19th-century educational landscape. Utilizing tutorial-recitation pedagogy, these schools were wonderfully efficient at providing an education to the diverse group of students who could walk to a given school, Fischel maintains. Attended by students of different ages, levels of educational achievement, and ability to attend regularly, this form of school could accommodate the needs of their sponsoring district. Well into the 20th century, these schools proved their worth.

By using funding from federal land grants, provided by the Land Ordinance of 1785 and later the Northwest Ordinance of 1787, local communities could lower their own taxes to support local schools. Why would the federal government give this land away to support schools? The answer is to increase the attractiveness of the rest of the township's land, and thus its value, so that the other sections could be sold at a higher price. This is the first instance, but by no means the only instance, of schools increasing the value of the local real estate, Fischel argues. The 19th-century spread of local schools was encouraged, then, by the desire of the federal government to increase the value of its land, and of local property owners to increase the attractiveness of their land by providing for the education of children who lived in the area.

Long an important sociological question, explanations for the early expansion of the provision of public schooling, especially in the North, well before the economy rewarded educational attainment, have centered on the motivation to extend evangelical Protestantism, individualistic con-

ceptions of the polity, and freeholder capitalism (e.g., John W. Meyer, David Tyack, Joane Nagel, and Audri Gordon, "Public Education as Nation-Building in America: Enrollments and Bureaucratization in the United States," *American Journal of Sociology*, 85 [1979]: 591–613—misidentified in Fischel's book as Myer, Tyack, Nagel, and Gordon [1979]). Proclaiming the paramount importance of property values in determining educational provision, Fischel identifies a factor not central to prior sociological accounts. Yet he does not address the sociological accounts directly. This reader would have much appreciated an analysis of how Fischel's reading of this period extended or did not extend the prior sociological work on 19th- and early-20th century educational expansion in the United States. Meyer and his colleagues did not emphasize the enhancement of property values as an important factor in the early expansion of schooling, though they did explicitly argue for economic motivations. "It is a mistake," they wrote, "to see the scattered freeholders and entrepreneurs who shaped rural America as isolated and traditional people or to suppose that the cosmologies of the 19th-century evangelists—religious, moral, and political—were concerned only with otherworldly (read 'not economic') life" (Meyer et al., p. 608).

An interesting problem the author sets for himself is to explain the enormous consolidation of school districts that took place from the end of the 19th century through much of the 20th century. Declining from about 200,000 in 1916 to around 15,000 by end of the century (fig. 3.1), school districts increasingly supported graded schools, which required larger enrollments so that a class could be created of students of a similar age—and presumably similar prior academic achievement. This reorganization required an urban population density or mechanized transportation unavailable until into the 20th century. Our "grade schools" were really "age-graded schools" that increasingly prepared students for admission to the rapidly expanding comprehensive secondary schools. The tutorial-recitation pedagogy of the one room school was not well suited to preparing its students for the entrance examinations and expectations of the new high schools. Again, Fischel argues, it was the desire for enhanced property values arising from attractive schools that led communities to invest in education.

There is much to be learned from this book, including how school calendars became standardized, why vouchers have not been attractive in many communities, and information about the evolution of state education funding systems. This reader looked for an analysis of the shift of school finance litigation from equalization to an adequacy logic without satisfaction, however.

Fischel emphasizes the ability of local schools to offer voice to local citizens and to enhance the community's social capital, but the downside is underplayed. Perhaps the best recent example is the vote of a newly elected Wake County School Board to overturn its prior policy of distributing students among its schools, so that none had an enrollment of

more than 40% poor students, in favor of neighborhood schools. Gerald Grant's recent book contrasting Wake County's schools with Syracuse, New York's (*Hope and Despair in the American City: Why There Are No Bad Schools in Raleigh* [Harvard University Press, 2009]) is suddenly moot. Nevertheless, we should applaud the contributions of economists to the study of education and its history. Sociology will benefit from this encounter, especially as the book possesses an admirably accessible and well-organized prose.

Wannabe U: Inside the Corporate University. By Gaye Tuchman. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009. Pp. 256. \$25.00.

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Recent years have seen a cascade of polemical books about the changing U.S. university. Titles such as *University, Inc.* (Basic Books, 2005), *Higher Ed., Inc.* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), *Universities in the Marketplace* (Princeton University Press, 2003), *The University in Ruins* (Harvard University Press, 1997), *College for Sale* (Routledge, 1997), and *In Defense of American Higher Education* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001) suggest a pervasive anxiety among American academics that the character of their world is being transformed—that the university is changing from a place apart from, and perhaps above, the market, into just another business sector. Now comes Gaye Tuchman's *Wannabe U*, an ethnographic account of a public university in the Northeastern United States—unnamed, though one strongly suspects that the specimen is the University of Connecticut, Tuchman's own professional home.

What distinguishes this addictively readable book from many other titles in this genre is the acuity of Tuchman's on-the-ground observations. Little of what the author reports will surprise academic natives who have been awake over the last 10 years; Tuchman nevertheless succeeds in making the familiar strange and, at least to this member of the professoriate, a little bit scary. There is the gradual but relentless growth in numbers and titles of administrators. There is the obsession with measured admissions inputs, academic outputs, and institutional rankings. There is the overlay of organizational and environmental change on intergenerational faculty succession, such that senior faculty, with their purportedly obsolete conceptions of university life, are doomed to codger status. There is the large and pervasive importance of courting big donors. There is the chronic contraction of state support for the university and the constant hunt for new revenue streams. And there is of course the "wannabe" phenomenon itself—the capacious prison of middling status in which countless ambitious schools and their personnel are sentenced to endless, unflattering upward comparisons.