

# **SOME FISCAL ASPECTS OF PUBLIC EDUCATION IN AMERICAN CITIES**

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**EDWARD CHARLES ELLIOTT**

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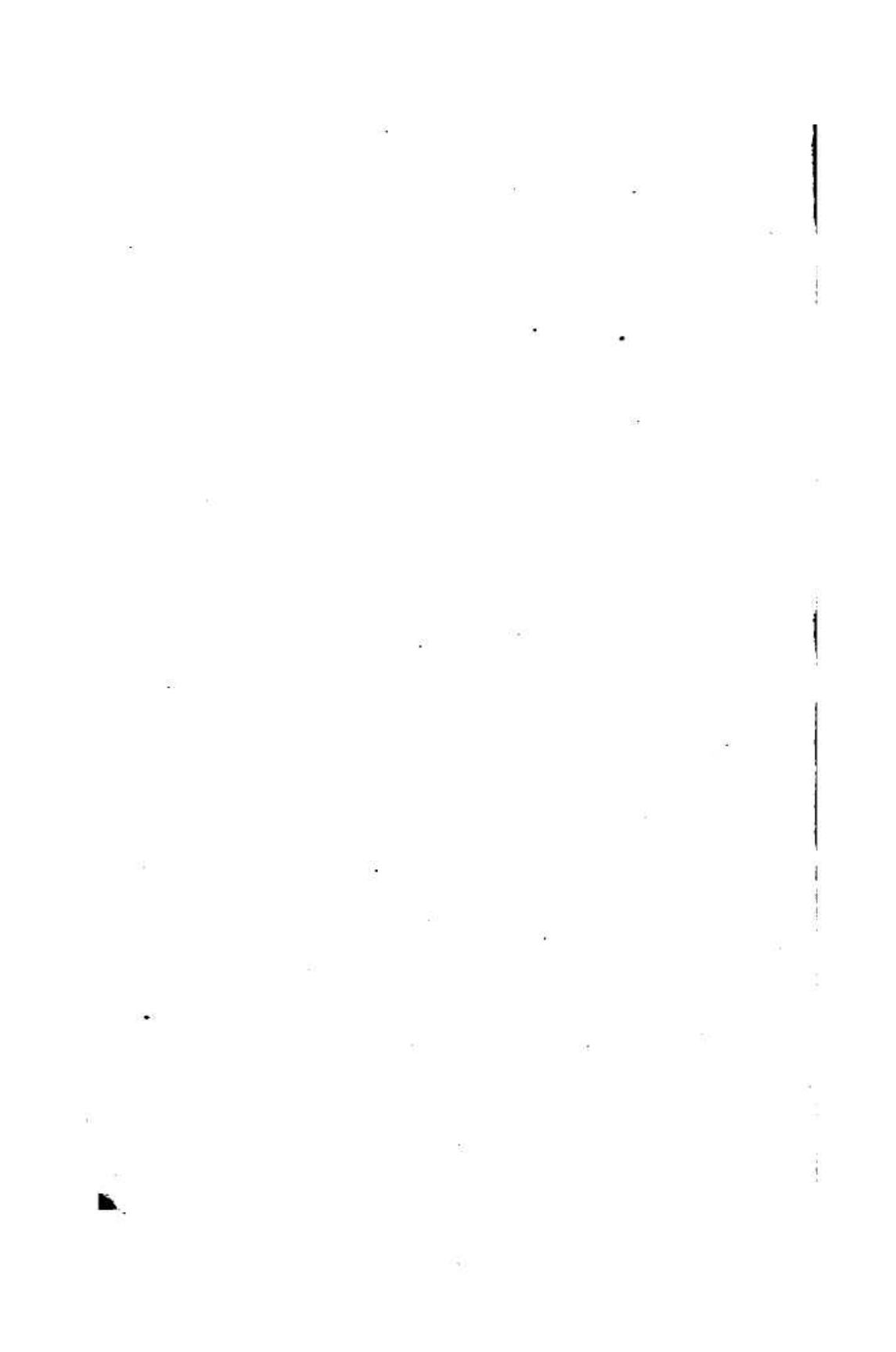
Some Fiscal Aspects  
of  
Public Education in American Cities

By  
Edward Charles Elliott, A.M.

Submitted in Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements  
for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy  
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# Some Fiscal Aspects of Public Education in American Cities

## I. INTRODUCTION

*Twofold Aspect of Present Educational Thought.*—There are at the present time two well-defined tendencies in our public educational thought and activity, which may be designated as the *scientific* and the *economic*. At the outset, it may be well to anticipate the possible obscurity or confusion arising from the use of these terms, possessing, as they do, meanings of both variable content and application.

*The Scientific Aspect of Education.*—The so-called scientific spirit is as old as modern science, and its invasion of the field of educational activity has been as extended and as rapid as those sciences, fundamental and cognate to education, have developed to act as guides and leaders for the advance.

This scientific aspect, as it concerns organized public education, is best defined by the many and varied efforts of the day to evaluate the results of educational endeavor; to measure in terms of some standard unit the relation between effort and result; to give to education, in a degree at least, some of the exactitude and precision which have grown up within the physical, biological, and social sciences. It has, as it were, assumed three phases. On the one hand is the child; on the other, the teeming and multiplex super-organism of society; between, stands the school as an adapting institution. Each of these primary elements of the educational process has been, and

is being, subjected to that searching inquiry, criticism and judgment characteristic of the scientific attitude, in order that there may be wrought into the structure of the organization, curricula, and aim of the school the established fundamental principles of human development and social efficiency. Every concrete study and investigation of the ever-changing and developing physical, mental, moral, and social capacities of the child; every attempt to define and estimate the working efficiency of the practices of the school, by means of more adequate standards; every measurement of the results of the school in terms of those values established in the social medium; every critical interpretation of the educational method and organization—the number and frequency of these during recent years furnish ample evidence of the ceaseless and ever-spreading scientific activity that seeks a rational purpose beneath educational practices and ideals, which, too frequently in the past, have been grounded in tradition, prejudice, or social inertia.<sup>1</sup>

*The Economic Aspect of Education.*—The application of the word "economic" to education may appear to be of doubtful validity or propriety. The materialistic elements and biased political associations of the word seem to have prevented its intrusion into the terminology of education; yet there are ample reasons to warrant the belief that there is soon to be developed a definite field of knowledge to which may be applied, with aptness as well as precision, the term "economics of education."

In a wide sense, the scientific aspect of education is inclusive of the economic aspect. Economics as a science, and in its broadest significance, comprehends the laws of the correlation and conservation of social energy. In this sense, all applications of scientific method to each of the threefold phases of public education have a final economic aspect; for every series of

<sup>1</sup> The argument here is not at all concerned with the doubtful discussion as to the existence of a "science" of education. Any attempt to establish a complete individuality for educational knowledge is likely to end in specious contention. However, the application of *scientific method* to the problems of education is another and different matter. Through this means will the problems be carried toward a rational, logical, and unbiased solution. Indeed, by it also, the problems themselves will become more clearly defined as the study of the appropriate phenomena progresses.



observations upon the workings of the developing mental, bodily or moral organization of the learning child, every alteration of administrative system and every revision of curricula have as a goal the influencing and improvement of the conditions under which the educational process may take place with the least of retardation, and with a minimum of waste of effort or energy. This is necessarily true if such observations are conducted above the plane of mere scientific dilettanteism, and if suggested administrative and instructional changes are posited as results of rational inquiry.

In its larger meaning, too, all education—especially all schemes for national public education, representing as they do the supreme conscious effort of peoples for the conservation and correlation of their social forces and for the perpetuation of their social traditions—has a definite economic significance. As the wealth, enlightenment, ideals and progressive character of peoples are determined in a large measure by their opportunities for education, so are their opportunities for education fixed by the material and ethical elements of their existence.<sup>1</sup>

*Public Education as a Producer and Consumer of Social Energy.*—As an instrumentality for the development of individual wholeness, for effecting the amalgamation and cohesion of diverse racial and cultural elements into a national unity, and for directing social energy towards social progress, we of the United States have doubted but little the total productiveness of our plan of education. Our faith has been instinctive rather than rational, for we have always lacked any definite standards by means of which its individual or social results could be tested with any degree of accuracy.

Qualitatively, through the roughly and ill constructed subjective standards of public opinion, it has been assumed that every investment of public funds in public education yielded an immeasurable dividend in the form of an enlightened, moral, and efficient citizenship.

Quantitatively, these dividends are almost impossible of measurement. Aside from the rather inadequate standards, established by statistical investigations of the illiteracy, crime,

<sup>1</sup> Seager, H. R., *Introduction to Economics*, pp. 233 ff., gives a short, yet definite, exposition of the reciprocal relation of education and economic condition.

poverty, and earning capacity of our population, we have had no gauges with which to determine in any exact or satisfactory manner the amount of those elements of culture and worth, entering into individual and social values, which could be traced back to the influence of public education. This has been necessarily so, and there will perhaps always be a total absence of standard values in estimating the larger effectiveness of public education. For the forces generated and directed by organized education cannot be subjected to those modes of measurement applicable to physical forces which display a constancy and universality foreign to the activities of education, functioning as these latter do under the widely varying conditions of race and individual capacity, and of economic state and class ideals which arise in natural consequence of our democracy and freedom of competition.

On the other hand, the recognition of this phase of the economic aspect of the educational process, as a *problem*, is the first condition for the application of a scientific method for its solution. As our knowledge of the mental and physical capacities of individuals increases, and as our recognition of social necessities is expanded, we shall be enabled to accommodate and direct educational effort toward the largest, most economical and efficient ends.

Throughout whatever recognition and knowledge we have had in the past of the values derived from public education, and in most of the enthusiastic efforts to increase these values, the school has been viewed almost entirely as a *producer*<sup>1</sup> of social efficiency. While not entirely disregarded, the thought of public education as a *consumer* of social energy has not yet been developed in a manner likely to give a clear and accurate notion of its economic cost. The vast and increasing expenditures for the support of public education are, however, directing more and more the attention of publicists and those charged with the administration of the affairs of the public schools to the necessity of the possession of more reliable and accurate knowledge concerning the cost of this education we have established.

<sup>1</sup> I recognize the objections to the use of this term *producer*. Its real meaning will, I think, be readily comprehended. Its use enables me to carry out what seems to be a valuable analogy from economic science.

While the real cost of public education is, in some respects, as difficult of accurate measurement as are its results, there are certain objective phenomena by the measurement of which a more or less accurate statement of the consuming capacity of the public schools can be made. Even when limited to the amount of public money devoted to public education—and this by no means represents the total cost of such education<sup>1</sup>—our present-day notions of the cost of education are of a crude and inaccurate kind. It might be said in all truth that we do not know how much we are paying for public education, in spite of the overwhelming mass of apparently reliable information and statistics. The commonplace of “millions spent” and “millions spending” has benumbed our economic sense, and that clown of statistics—the average—has been made to perform grotesque antics to please and win the applause of both the unthinking and those inspired with ulterior motives.

Whenever doubt has arisen concerning the effective working of our educational plan, its shortcomings have been felt in an indefinite and vague manner. Not infrequently reforms are attempted through the transformation of the mode of legal and administrative control, or by means of remodelled curricula. In the main, however, one or the other of two standard remedies is generally proposed to-day to remove any recognized weaknesses of the plan and to provide for its rapidly expanding activities and functions: better prepared and more able teachers, and a more generous and adequate support. In our present social conditions the application of the first of these is recognized as being conditioned by the second. “More money” has become the banner word of those who, either through honesty of conviction or an unweening enthusiasm, hope to have realized within, and from, the public school those ideals and results consistent with its primary importance as a conservator of national efficiency.<sup>2</sup>

*Public Education and Public Taxation.*—However well-grounded in our American polity the idea of public taxation for

<sup>1</sup> See Giddings, F. H., *The Legal Aspect of Compulsory Education, Proceedings, National Educational Association, 1905*, for pertinent suggestions regarding the real social and economic cost of compulsory education.

<sup>2</sup> See Eliot, C. W., *More Money for the Public Schools*, for a virile and timely statement concerning this point.