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Chicago's Turners: Inspired Leadership in the Promotion of Public Physical Education, 1860–90

During the month of November 1889 a conference held in Boston brought together the most famous advocates of several systems promoting physical education for the American schools (Barrows 1889). An editorial published the following month in *The Gymnasium* described the meeting as ". . . the first serious attempt to introduce physical development in the public schools" (LeGarde 1889, 1). This assessment was seconded by Jesse F. Williams who wrote in 1926 that the Physical Training Conference marked ". . . the beginnings of physical education in the schools of the United States" (286).

The role of this conference in the development of the American system of physical education has been continuously cited by sport historians (Pesavento 1966; Kroll 1971; Spears and Swanson 1978), despite the fact that years earlier several cities had established physical education programs which developed from and responded to the needs of their unique populations (Hartwell 1893). This study describes in detail the efforts of the Chicago turners and various educational leaders who initiated the city of Chicago experience as a forerunner, not a follower, of the Boston conference.

Initial Efforts by the Board of Education

In 1859, more than three decades prior to the Boston conference and only seven years after the Chicago *Turngemeinde* (German-American Social and Gymnastic Union) was established (Hofmeister 1976), turner and education leaders in the city of Chicago began to call for a system of physical training in the public schools (Dupee 1859; Haven 1860). Charles A. Dupee, principal of the high school, wrote that the amount of time which students spent in their studies was so great as to endanger their health. He suggested that time should be set aside for activities which would parallel the values of the German turner system and which might bolster the effects of the present marching and recess activities.

He stated that ". . . one cause of the power of endurance of the German students is found in the fact that physical exercise constitutes so considerable a portion of their education" (1859, 75).

Based on the knowledge of what was occurring in other cities, it was suggested that physical exercise could improve the health of the students, for it was viewed as a remedial cure for those youths who suffered from such conditions as mental fatigue, shoulder stooping, wan complexion, and enfeebled physical constitution (Wells 1860). Thus German community and school leaders urged that a department be formed to supervise the much needed exercises. It was proposed that these exercises should mirror many of the activities being conducted in the local *Turnverein* fraternities (Dupee 1860).

In 1860, after much discussion, the Chicago school board suggested that a program of physical culture be adopted for elementary students. This program, named "Free Gymnastics," was based on the exercises published for the regular course of study for primary schools in Oswego, New York. It was adapted for Chicago through the committee work of two school principals, a high school teacher and "three lady teachers" from the Chicago public schools (Wells 1861, 68).

There were twenty-seven exercises in all, designed to be performed while either sitting at one's desk or standing by the side of the desk (Dore 1861). They consisted of directed breathing exercises with calisthenics or marching to the accompaniment of singing or repeating verses of poetry. The exercises were led by classroom teachers for a period of three to five minutes, as often as once every half hour (Wells 1861). The students exercised by moving their arms and legs, marching in place or changing positions, on command and by a special count (Pesavento 1966). Although other systems had been attempted, including Dr. Dio Lewis's bean-bag tosses (Wells 1862), the marching and calisthenics were deemed by the committee to be the best suited for Chicago's youth (Dore 1861).

All primary and grammar school children participated in the exercises, which, according to Chicago Superintendent William H. Wells, made the Oswego and Chicago schools unique. With the exception of these two cities, no other school system in the country was known to have introduced a thorough course of exercise as a part of an obligatory daily routine (Wells 1862).

Physically exercising the students for the health-related benefits which the participants accrued, was promoted by board of education members and teachers alike. Examples given were that the exercises apparently reduced the fatigue of studying, rejuvenated the students and kept them alert (Dore 1861). Although the exercises were considered beneficial, there was some discussion about the most appropriate time during the school day for the exercises to be conducted. President of the Board, John C. Dore, suggested that the exercises be confined to the morning, noon and afternoon recess sessions (1861).

The discussions were concluded in March 1861 when the board of education implemented a graded and sequential program of instruction for all of its regular course work (Wood 1881). Prepared by the

Superintendent of Schools, William H. Wells, and supported by District Superintendent, Ella Flagg Young, orderly exercises which fostered physical strength and development became a part of the daily elementary and primary levels' in-class school activities (but without academic credit). The support for these exercises was well grounded, as Wells and various board members traveled to other cities (such as Cincinnati) to witness new developments in German-influenced gymnastics instruction (Wells 1864).

During the next few years, as Wells began to prepare for retirement (in 1866), his efforts primarily focused on delineating the general curriculum (for elementary, primary and secondary schools). Young continued her efforts on behalf of physical education at the lower levels. Eventually, she not only promoted physical exercises for all grades, but she also spoke at many city-wide and national forums on the benefits of physical activity for school-aged children (Young 1906). Her efforts to maintain a program and to provide additional adequate space for physical activity were rewarded in 1862, when the plans for a new building, the Haven School, located in the heavily German populated South Division, included a gymnasium, with three additional rooms to be built in the basement specifically for recreational purposes (Board of Education 1863). This work culminated in 1867, when the newly erected W. H. Wells school was specifically constructed with a basement room to be used as a place for recreation for boys during inclement weather (Committee on Buildings and Grounds 1867).

The Turner Influence and the Board's Concerns

The board of education continued to support the notion of physical training, but whether or when the exercises were performed was left to the discretion of each classroom teacher. Eventually, few teachers led the exercises on a regular basis. Members of the *Turngemeinde*, concerned with this condition, brought the matter to the attention of the board of education (Board of Education 1866). Specifically, they pressured the board to focus their efforts on the upper level and to hire an exercise "specialist" for the secondary students according to *Die Staatszeitung* (Chicago) dated 6 September 1866 (Board of Education 1866). Although concerned about the added expense, the board consented to allow a special teacher on campus (Committee on High School 1866).

The board was amenable to the idea of a specialist, since earlier, in 1859, an open-air, outdoor gymnasium had been erected by male students for the sum of $100 (with apparatus donated by parents). Although the equipment was heavily used, only one teacher (Charles Dupee, who later became principal) had been willing to supervise the exercises during recess (Dupee 1860). Many of the students had played on the apparatus without instruction, which at times had led to injuries (Committee on High School 1866).

The suggestions of the turners and fear of student harm convinced the board to hire temporarily an exercise specialist as part of an educational experiment. The specialist, an instructor from a local *Turn-*

verein, was to introduce the turner method at the high school level during the upcoming spring and summer semesters in 1867 (Pickard 1868).

At the conclusion of this "experiment," reports submitted to the board attested to the high attendance and improved physical health and strength of the general student body. But the board felt compelled to cancel the continuation of a paid teacher, pleading financial constraints (Brentano 1868). The burden of meeting the instructor's part-time salary was deemed too much.

Although the board's failure to make the necessary funds available for an exercise specialist held back the continued development of high school level physical education, the need was still publicized. J. L. Pickard, superintendent of schools in 1868, suggested that students from the Normal School (the teachers college) should become specially trained in the methods of systematic physical culture. That way, ". . . thorough instruction could be given, in some well balanced system, to all the classes of the High School" (Pickard 1868, 196–97).

Pickard's plan for implementing a program which specifically trained general educators in physical culture was short-lived. In 1871, fifteen school buildings, most of the board of education's records and the curriculum burned during the Great Chicago Fire (Pickard 1872; Howatt 1946). In rewriting it, the board added a physiology-anatomy exam requirement for all student-teachers as a concession (Pickard 1873). Although this could be construed as an initial effort to promote physical health concerns, no other considerations were put forth for the provision of special teachers for the high school until 1885 (Sullivan 1877).

Meanwhile, at the lower levels, the board began requiring that classroom teachers supervise not only physical education within the classroom setting but also the recreation taking place on the school grounds. According to the board of education's "Duties of Teachers," the supervision was to take place before and after school and during all recess periods (Board of Education 1874).

Revival of School Gymnastics

Efforts to integrate physical education as part of the curriculum continued for fifteen years at a slow pace as the citizens of Chicago rebuilt the city (Pickard 1872; Board of Education 1886). Then, in 1884–85, as Chicago began to stabilize, a revived impetus for the reintroduction of a system of physical culture in the schools was created through the joint efforts of turners and turner-influenced board members.

This breakthrough was the culmination of many factors which gained momentum and eventually contributed to the turners' educational and social influence in Chicago. For instance, by 1884, Germans residing in Chicago numbered 209,631 (Hofmeister 1976), accounting for roughly one-third of the total foreign population (Ulrich 1885). Beside the sheer number of first and second-generation Germans, they influenced much of the politics in the city, through strong labor unions

(Townsend 1927), numerous German-language newspapers and active participation in local matters (Chambers 1987). German influence can be documented by such examples as a second-generation German appointed as school board president in 1867 and the fact that, by 1870, a total of eleven German-born aldermen had been elected to Chicago's city council (Hofmeister 1976).

The revival of school-based physical education in 1885 was specifically spearheaded on three fronts by the influence of Germans. First in importance, Dr. Ernest Fuchs (1885), a physician consultant to the board and a turner member, reported to the board that there was an increasing number of children developing myopia. Dr. Fuchs called for frequent breaks during study time, which should be spent in physical activity. Second, Adolf Kraus (1884), president of the board of education and a turner member, and his predecessor on the school board, James Doolittle (1885), began to promote the concept of physical health as a requirement for optimal intellectual health. They both believed that Americans largely ignored physical development, especially in the public schools of large cities (Doolitte 1885). Third, local turner societies, which were led by adult second-generation forty-eighters (Ulrich 1885; Spears and Swanson 1978), decided to promote physical education at all levels in the public schools (Kroll 1971). In Chicago, they urged the board to establish a regularly scheduled exercise program, to be led by a specialist (Kopp [n.d.]).

Once again, bowing to public pressure as they had almost twenty years earlier, the board of education appointed a "Special Committee on Physical Culture." This committee consisted of various community leaders, one of whom was Louis Nettlehorst, president of the Chicago *Turngemeinde* (Kopp [n.d.]; Pesavento 1966). The committee's main mission was to develop a program of practical gymnastic instruction, based on the turner calisthenic model, which could be conducted by regular classroom or special gymnastic teachers in the public school aisles and corridors (Pesavento 1966).

The committee implemented a pilot program at Ogden School (which was located in the same neighborhood as the turner hall) with Henry Suder, teacher of physical education of the *Turngemeinde,* as instructor. Little is known of Suder's early life. It is believed that he was born in Eckernförde, Germany, in 1851. Later, after emigrating to America, he attended the Normal School of the North American Gymnastic Union in Milwaukee.

Shortly after Suder was hired, Suder and his students demonstrated a gymnastic and calisthenic program and its adaptability to the school setting, in the absence of gymnasia. As a result, in January 1886, the board appointed a committee on physical education to hire an instructor to oversee the introduction of this program in four grammar schools. Again, Henry Suder was called upon (Special Committee 1886; Kopp [n.d.]).

Six months later, in June 1886, by request of the principals and teachers of the four schools and of local physicians who had been invited to visit the sites, the board agreed to introduce the turner

method of physical education into all forty-eight elementary schools. Henry Suder was promoted to the position of supervisor of physical culture. Eight special teachers (seven of whom had been turner-trained at the Normal School of the North American Gymnastic Union in Milwaukee) were appointed. The eighth special teacher to be named was Friedrich Ludwig Jahn, grandson of "Father Jahn," the originator of the turner system in Germany. Each of the teachers were to visit six schools twice a week and teach calisthenics and marching (Special Committee 1886; Kopp [n.d.]).

This special committee on physical culture made four recommendations, which were also accepted by the board. These included that simple exercises be required activities in all grades, that special equipment be purchased (four hundred pairs of dumbbells and wooden wands), that Suder be hired to oversee all classroom teachers' physical education activities (at $1,000 per annum), and that the school day be increased by twenty minutes on the days when exercises were to be conducted by the special teachers of physical culture (Board of Education 1886).

One of Suder's first duties, as directed by the board, was to oversee the adoption of the new program of gymnastic instruction. In order to insure that all students were being instructed in a similar fashion (either by the classroom or the special teacher), Suder designed a manual specifically written for elementary level teachers (Kopp [n.d.]; Suder 1886). The manual contained fifty sequential beginning exercises (or calisthenics), with explanations, purposes and counts for all movements (Suder 1886). This was just the beginning of a program which was later to include gymnastics, tactics, dancing, and breathing exercises.

Early in 1887, Louis Nettlehorst and the special committee members also recommended the expansion of physical culture to the primary grades. By a unanimous vote of the board, four more special teachers were hired to visit all twenty-four schools twice a month (Board of Education 1887a; Board of Education 1887b; Pesavento 1966).

Following Nettlehorst's and Suder's initial successful efforts, the board of education decided to support District Superintendent Young's recommendation to appoint an exercise specialist for the high school level. In May 1889 within two and one-half years of Suder's initial involvement, less than two years since the first Association for the Advancement of Physical Education Convention meeting (where C. G. Rathman, a turner, proposed that the association promote the inclusion of exercise for all schools) (Kroll 1971), and several months before the Boston conference, Henry B. Camann (a former turner instructor) was hired as a full-time director and special teacher of physical education for the high school (Kopp [n.d.]). His duties included providing one period of instruction per week, per student, for all students in the three existing high schools in Chicago (Board of Education 1901; Kopp [n.d.]; Pesavento 1966).

This was followed by other significant events. For example, in January 1889 physical culture was extended to the primary grades, with special teachers hired to supervise all classroom teachers' physical

education activities (Howland 1889). In 1890, North-West Division High School was erected in the heaviest area of German-American population. William Kopp, one of the first special physical culture teachers to be hired (in 1886), was named to supervise the first fully equipped school gymnasium in the city (Pesavento 1966). Finally, in September 1891, physical culture was extended to all of the schools in the annexed districts of Chicago (Suder 1892).

Entrenchment of School Physical Culture

Coinciding with the developments taking place in Chicago, outstanding physical training specialists and educators, the majority of whom came from Boston, New York or other east coast cities, were attending the Physical Training Conference in Boston (Seaver 1889). The general recommendations of this meeting were to adopt a program which would not require much time, money, equipment, or many specially trained teachers, and could be conducted in the classroom setting (Suder 1902).

These conference proposals did not influence the developments in Chicago, where events had taken the board far beyond the modest Boston recommendations. By 1889, the hiring of Camann initiated a period of financial commitment by Chicago for the inclusion of physical education as part of the curriculum at all school levels (Barrows 1889). In addition, shortly after Camann assumed his duties (1890), the first secondary level gymnasium was erected on the grounds of North-West Division High School and Henry Suder was promoted to supervisor of physical culture for all of Chicago's schools. During the remainder of Suder's tenure (which lasted until 1913), he published three more exercise manuals and insisted that a gymnasium be provided for each newly erected high school (Williams 1926).

By 1890—only one year after the Boston conference—Chicago's commitment to physical education as a valued, integral part of the total education curriculum (Special Park Commission 1901) was clearly well beyond the Boston recommendations. In a sense, the Boston conference leaders' suggestions followed rather than led what Chicago had already achieved.

These Chicago efforts continued unabated (Pesavento 1966) and by 1900, physical education began to be divided into specialty areas with different emphases reflecting national trends (Suder 1901). The sections consisted of light gymnastics (with a Swedish influence), heavy gymnastics (totally German) and recreative gymnastics (Suder 1901).

Physical culture reached a peak in the 1890s when $22,866.65 was appropriated for special teachers and equipment for the program by the board in 1892 (Board of Education 1893). By 1895, all elementary schools were equipped with apparatus (Pesavento 1966). During this time, special teachers provided lessons to high school students once a week for periods of twenty minutes to one hour. In the grammar schools, lessons were given twice a week for ten minutes and in the primary schools, lessons were given twice a month for ten minutes. The lessons

were taught by the special teachers of physical culture (the majority of whom were turners) at certain intervals, and when they were not available, classroom teachers were required to supervise daily practice of the activities (Suder 1892).

Conclusion

The turners' influence on the school board's policies toward the hiring of an exercise specialist cannot be overstated. In 1867 and again in 1885, their pressure made the difference (Townsend 1927; Pesavento 1966). The political influence of the Germans established physical education, mirroring the activities of the *Turnverein*, as a valued and entrenched part of the curriculum of the Chicago public schools (Seaver 1889).

Chicago's early physical culture efforts were not self-consciously "American." By 1900, however, the curriculum had been revitalized and improved many times during its forty-year history and could have served as the "American" model for other communities. For Chicago schools, the Boston conference's recommendations, therefore, were more the recognition of an ideal realized than a call to action.

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