

True Believer: The Progressivism of Willard Goslin

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Abstract

Willard E. Goslin's support for progressive education practices in American public schools was a constant theme throughout his many years as a nationally recognized leader in public education. Perhaps most well known for the turmoil surrounding his dismissal as Pasadena Superintendent of schools during the height of the Red Scare, Goslin was a true-believer in the power of education to create and protect a democratic society.

Willard E. Goslin's support for progressive education practices in American public schools was a constant theme throughout his many years as a nationally recognized leader in public education. Perhaps most well known for the turmoil surrounding his dismissal as Pasadena Superintendent of schools during the height of the Red Scare, Goslin was a true-believer in the power of education to create and protect a democratic society; he believed that it took the efforts of the entire community to meet the challenges facing students at mid-century. He believed in the ability of professional-learning communities to empower teachers, administrators, community members and students. Throughout his career he often clashed with school boards over his progressive beliefs, but he never stopped pushing for educational reform. An examination of his writings and career reveal Goslin's passion for progressive education that cements his status as a "true-believer."

The Early Years: Webster Grove

Goslin began his career in the rural school districts of Missouri, quickly rising in the ranks to become a principal at age 22, followed a year

later with his appointment as superintendent for the Slater, Missouri, school district. By 1928 Goslin had moved on to become superintendent of the Webster Grove school district in the suburbs of St. Louis (Parker and Parker 2006) and it is in Webster Grove that Goslin's progressive ideals begin to take shape. A 1940 article, "Community Relationships – An Integral Part of an Educational Program" explains the philosophy as he developed during his twelve year tenure at Webster Grove (Goslin 1940). Goslin argued that for education to be truly meaningful, the entire community should have a stake in creating educational programs, and not just a stake in the education of the community's children, but also in their own education. To facilitate this process he argues that "The job of those of us in education if we are to be charged the responsibility for such a program – and we should be – lies in the direction of discovering the avenues for bringing parents, pupils and teachers into a working relationship" (171). He makes the case that although the main focus of such collaborations should be directed toward "child growth," he also notes that every "opportunity for adults will not be overlooked" (171). Goslin contended that the establishment of learning communities, where teachers, parents, community members, and students work together as a unit to determine the educational needs of the community, is the key to the creation of a successful educational program.

The community partnerships proposed by Goslin were designed to not only build a community of life-long learners, but also to provide teachers, parents, and students an opportunity to build an instructional program around the needs of the pupils in the classroom,

rather than on a set of generalized standards. Through their participation in the educational process parents “will begin to see themselves as an integral part of the educational program surrounding their own children” and eventually parent participation would lead to a more nuanced understanding of their “responsibility in relation to the growth and development of all the children in the community” (Goslin 1940). Goslin critiques “business as usual” in other districts. He pointed out the struggles between parent/teacher groups and administrators, laying the blame for these scuffles at the feet of administrators’ failed leadership. Goslin also notes that many community members are left out of the process when districts solicit input only from parents of enrollees (173), arguing that the potential for increased opportunities for service learning (he mentions housing projects, creating bird sanctuaries, and beautification projects) are limited when community members are left out of educational decisions (174). The ideas postulated in this piece lay the foundation for the rest of Goslin’s career as a progressive education. Toward the end of his tenure at Webster Grove in 1943, Goslin published a second article in the *The National Elementary Principal* outlining the changes made to the system of in-service training beginning in 1937. The key elements of Goslin’s philosophy, outlined in the 1940 article, played a prominent goal in those changes.

Goslin acted upon his conviction that school districts needed to move away from a strictly “top down” administration in which administrators were isolated from classroom teachers and secondary teachers were isolated from elementary teachers. He initiated a systemic change in teacher in-service training based on collaboration between teachers and administrators. Extending over several years, the needed changes were made through a democratic

process. Prior to the beginning of the collaborative process, Goslin noted that steps were undertaken to be sure that teachers felt secure in the jobs-reasoning that the only way for growth to occur would be if teachers felt that their jobs were safe. In particular, paid sick leave was introduced along with health insurance, a teacher credit union and extended contracts so that teachers would be “encouraged to feel that their part in the school system is something more than merely teaching their daily classes” (Goslin 1943).

Goslin’s next step was the formation of a research committee composed primarily of teachers from all levels to act as an advisory body to the administration. The goal of the committee was to identify the training teachers felt they needed, and the development of a system for identifying and addressing problems within both the district as a whole and in individual schools. This initial stage of the program took nearly two years to complete with the first full committee meetings taking place during the 1939-1940 school year. As a result of committee discussions, three questions were posed for study: “In what areas of our school system do you feel that real progress had been made within the past few years? What improvements do you think should be made in our school system? and How do you suggest that we as a faculty go about making these improvements” (Goslin 1940). Goslin’s final appraisal of the project noted that there were weaknesses in the process including the slow pace of change, time constraints on faculty members and the anecdotal nature of the problems identified by faculty early in the process. However, Goslin points out that these weaknesses were to be expected. The “thoroughly democratic fashion” in which the in-service training was revised was more important than the weaknesses inherent in the process (Goslin 1943).

If teachers, parents and community members were to be truly empowered in the educational system, it must be conducted through democratic processes.

Toward the end of his tenure at Webster Grove Goslin made another plea for cooperative action in public schools, arguing that “America needs *now* as it has never needed before a generation of citizens who are able to actively participate in democratic processes – citizens who have a appetite for democratic living because they have had a taste of it” (Goslin 1944). [emphasis in original]. In order for this to become a reality teachers must experience democratic processes in their daily lives, at home and at school.

Goslin’s belief in democratic schooling would continue to grow as he moved from the suburban Webster Grove district, to the urban, and much larger, Minneapolis system. One might think that the democratic processes utilized by Goslin in the smaller rural and suburban districts would be more difficult to implement in larger and more diverse settings; however Goslin successfully continued to integrate his vision of democratic education in his new role.

Progressive Education in Minneapolis

Following his 14 years residence in the suburban St. Louis district of Webster Grove district, Goslin became superintendent for the Minneapolis public schools, a position he held from 1944 to 1948. His arrival in Minneapolis coincided with a decline in student population due in large measure to the depression and World War II (Franklin 1982; Zellie 2005; Parker and Parker 2006). He launched school surveys to assess the student population characteristics and the effectiveness of programs already in place (Franklin 1982). Based on the surveys (and his own belief that schools should teach the whole child), the district installed a Common Learnings

Program. This consisted of a two-hour class in junior and senior high schools taken in lieu of English and Social Studies and which would be organized around students’ social and personal problems. The intention of this program was to make the curriculum more streamlined and efficient, promoting student socialization could into their roles as citizens in a democratic society. In addition, the extended time students spent with a single teacher would facilitate the growth of personal relationships between teachers and students. (Franklin 1982). To round out the Common Learnings Program, Goslin actively pursued community participation in the schools in much the same way as he had in Webster Grove. Goslin’s ideas regarding democratic, community based education continued to evolve along with the Common Learnings program. Taking a unique perspective on the role of community relations for school districts, Goslin pointed out, “If we are successful in enmeshing school and community interests, activities, and resources, we will not need to go to the community with an advertising or selling campaign”(Goslin 1946a). By paying attention to “social and civic literacy” in addition to academic literacy, the general welfare of society would be increased. This argument depended upon students developing habits suitable to democratic living, including the conservation of resources, and understanding of global citizenship. To facilitate the growth of democratic, community based education, the district made school records transparent, encouraged local papers to designate reporters specifically to the school beat, and partnered with local radio stations to broadcast parent-teacher association meetings and student produced programming (Goslin 1946a; Franklin 1982)

In 1946, the Hennepin County Tuberculosis Society awarded a \$10,000 grant to the district at the request of Goslin. The purpose

of the grant was to create and staff a health education program as part of two - year pilot study. The Minneapolis Board of Education would oversee the program. Utilizing a system of committees made up of parents, students, teachers, administrators, public officials and local citizens, the health needs of the community were accessed. This in turn lead to the development of a program of vision, dental and health screenings conducted during the school day, accompanied by instruction in health related topics by the school doctor and dental hygienist. The program actively encouraged the participation of parents and students, as well as community volunteers (Starr 1949). The development of the school health program highlights key features of Goslin's progressive ideas. Although focused primarily on improving student health, the demonstration included the skills, knowledge and resources of community leaders and parents. At the same time students were learning the benefits of good health and hygiene that would safeguard the community welfare. Bringing public health agencies into the school building allowed for the "enmeshing of school and community interests" (Goslin 1946a).

The Common Learnings program and the health demonstration were just two of the larger reforms instituted in Minneapolis schools. Teachers, in their role as community and school leaders, continued to play a role in Goslin's vision of democratic schooling. Teachers were actively encouraged to participate in community activities while principals were encouraged to introduce new faculty and staff into the local community. Through the faculty and community interaction, the community developed a better understanding of the needs of teachers and schools and became more willing work partners in the city educational system (Goslin 1946a; Goslin 1946b). At the same time Goslin encouraged administrators to "know your teacher," an undertaking that required

more than an "incidental talk in the hall or an occasional half-hour conference" (Goslin 1946b). Administrators should be aware of teachers' physical, emotional and financial needs if teachers were to truly be partners in their education.

Goslin's commitment to teachers would be on display during the March 1948 teacher strike. The strike shut down 92 schools sending 64,000 children into the streets. The district was chronically in need of funds. In 1945, the year after Goslin took over the reins in Minneapolis the district was attempting to run its schools on a 1930s budget. The union was striking against a recently passed law implementing a tax ceiling resulting in a \$2 million deficit for the 1948 school year. Although a March 24 vote for a new charter, providing an additional \$4 million in funds, had been set, the Teacher's Federations chose not to wait. Despite the fact that he was in Atlantic City to be inducted as president of the Association of School Administrators, the public did not blame Goslin for the strike. Goslin had openly expressed his own distaste for the law, although he was unable to do anything about it personally (*Time* March 8, 1948). Ultimately Goslin would resign over the lack of funding, stating in his resignation letter that "I cannot lend myself any longer to the neglect and mistreatment of public education which continues in Minneapolis" (*Time* May 2, 1948).

Goslin's work in Minneapolis and Webster Grove led to his being named one of the five most outstanding public school administrators in the country. He was also elected to the board of the John Dewey Society in 1947, although his administrative duties kept him from active board membership much of the time. Subsequently, in 1948, members of the prestigious American Association of School Administrators elected him to become their

president (Van Til 1983; Van Til 1993). At this time he was considering job offers from Harvard, Columbia and New York universities as well as the position of Superintendent in Pasadena, California. After a two - day visit to Pasadena, Goslin accepted an offer to become that city's superintendent (Hulbard 1951).

A Progressive District for a Progressive Educator: Pasadena

As in Webster Grove and Minneapolis, Goslin continued to push the envelope of reform upon his arrival in Pasadena. However, unlike his previous posting where progressive ideas were just beginning to be implemented, Goslin took over the reigns of a system that had already embraced this educational philosophy, and he continued to build upon this base to address problems within the system. Many of the reforms followed the pattern of his previous appointments in that he instituted summer workshops for teacher training and brought in well-known educators as speakers. Vertical alignment teams linking teachers at all levels were put in place to facilitate collaboration among faculty members (Hulbard 1951). He pushed for the development of relationships between students and teachers through the introduction of a core curriculum along the lines of the Common Learnings program, and campaigned for the community to play an active role in the development of the school curriculum (Hulbard 1951). Despite the similarities, Goslin's ideas regarding progressive education continued to be refined as he tackled other areas of the curriculum. Goslin's support for child-centered learning, a key characteristic of progressive education is illuminating. He strongly opposed district requirements that all children learn to read at the same age, arguing that children developed at different rates and therefore the curriculum standards should reflect those

developmental differences, and thus the needs of the children (Hulbard 1951). Goslin's ideas regarding curriculum standards represent a further refinement this stance when he noted in a Phi Kappa Delta article, "I have no particular objection to reading, writing and arithmetic, but you can't save democracy with it." (Goslin 1949a). He went on to explain that man's labor on the land and the conservation of natural resources went hand in hand. Indeed, democracy was dependent upon it as "ideals and freedoms go out the window when the stomach is empty" (Goslin 1949a). He pushed for the development of students' emotional and physical stamina, and called for equipping students with what he termed a "kit of tools." These tools included the basics of reading, writing, and arithmetic as well as an understanding of the principles of democracy (Hulbard 1951). Education for democratic living should be the cornerstone of public education, and everything that is taught should be subservient to that goal.

The involvement of the community in public education continued to play an integral role in Goslin's plans for Pasadena. Goslin urged school personnel to recognize the "potentiality of American education as a great social force" that "offers the American people an unprecedented opportunity to crystallize their beliefs into programs of action." He called for "the most vigorous and dynamic leadership that the profession can muster" (Goslin 1949b). Once again Goslin focused on the need for schools to help the public understand its educational mission and the need for professional cooperation. By this point in time Goslin had honed his arguments, identifying the key elements of democratic schooling including global education, a firm grounding in democratic principles, the conservation of resources, and collaborative learning (Goslin 1949a; Goslin 1949b). He

pointed out the need to take the individual child into account through attending to his or her growth and development, physical and emotional needs. Schools should organize the school day to fit the needs of the pupils, promotion policies should be re-examined and programs should not be dictated by the wants/needs of higher education (Goslin 1949b). Goslin aimed for nothing less than a truly child centered educational program created to meet the needs of the community through democratic processes.

The Red Scare Comes to Pasadena

For the first few months of Goslin's tenure in Pasadena the board rubber-stamped most of his proposed reforms (Hulbard 1951; *Time* May 1951; *Time* November 1950). However, that was not to remain the case for long. At the time of Goslin's arrival in Pasadena, the community was beginning to change from that of a primarily upper-class enclave with a small working class to a more racially diverse community. The need for additional elementary schools to cope with this growth and much needed renovations to existing schools led to an election to raise the tax levy in 1950. At the same time new attendance boundaries needed to be drawn up in order to balance school populations across the district (Hulbard 1951; Zellie 2005; *Time* November 1950). The proposed changes to the attendance boundaries would require integration of the districts schools, particularly at the elementary level. The conflict over the boundary changes along with the proposed taxes exposed friction within the community that would eventually lead to open conflict. The first sign of the pending rift was the formation of the School Development Council.

The Council was originally formed in opposition to the increased tax levy. After the defeat of the tax levy, the School Development

Council began to attack Progressive education in general and Goslin's administration in particular. The Council charged that Progressive education in Pasadena was indoctrinating students into Socialist principles and undermining students' belief in American democracy (Hulbard 1951). Members of the Council charged Goslin with favoring a federal take-over of schools after he spoke in favor of federal aid to education. He was condemned for favoring "modern pragmatic education," a term that was never defined by Council members but which suggested Communist overtones (*Time* May,1951). *The Pasadena Independent* lamented that there was "far too much paint-daubing [and] far too little discipline" (*Time* November 1950). The Council eventually called for a full "ideological investigation" of the district, (Hulbard 1951) charging that Goslin's changes amounted to "a campaign to 'sell' our children on the collapse of our way of life" (*Time* May,1951).

After months of increasing pressure by the School Development Council, the Board of Education moved to terminate Goslin and requested his resignation. As news of the boards' request spread, Goslin's supporters in Pasadena rushed into the fray and demanded the board reconsider (Hulbard 1951; *Time* December 1950). Despite the pleas of supporters the board refused to reconsider and Goslin offered his resignation to the board and a compensation package was agreed upon. Upon presenting his letter to the board he reminded supporters that the voters of Pasadena and properly elected the board; "We are dedicated to representative government. I cannot remain in contempt of democratic action" (*Time* December 1950) adding that "I shall take away no ill feelings when I leave Pasadena, rather a deep regret that I was unable to lead this community to a level which would have produced the best school system in America" (*Time* May,1951).

This is perhaps the best testament to Goslin's commitment to progressive ideals, his willingness to step down in the face of democratic action. A subsequent investigation by the National Education Association's Defense Commission led to the conclusion that although Goslin's administrative style had caused some tension between the community and the school administration, there was ample evidence that Goslin's dismissal was the result of reactionary forces drumming up "Red scare" fears within the community (Foster 2000; Guthrie 2003). Despite his loss in Pasadena, Goslin continued to advocate progressive reforms at a time when Cold War pressures began moving public education away from the progressive ideals of the thirties and forties and toward a "return to basics movement." By the end of the decade the space race would refocus education on science and math and progressive reforms would remain, to some extent, only within the burgeoning New Social Studies movement. Goslin, however, did not abandon the fight.

Peabody & The Korea Project

Soon after leaving Pasadena, Goslin was contacted by Henry Hill, then president of George Peabody College for Teachers, to head the Division of School Administration and Community Development. Goslin accepted the post, although he did not immediately join the faculty. He spent 1951 and part of 1952 in Korea as a member of the United States National Commission for the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization surveying the needs of Korean schools and planning for the reconstruction of the Korean school system (Truman 1950; Guthrie 2003; Truman April 1950).

Upon his arrival at Peabody, Goslin was appointed to the *1953 Yearbook* committee of the

Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development with William Van Til and Harold Benjamin. Along with other eminent educators, Goslin contributed a chapter, as well as serving on the editorial board. Goslin's chapter would be the last essay in the volume and was titled "The People and Their Schools." The essay reflected his years of thinking about the role of schools in American society and within the communities they served. A second article in the *Peabody Journal of Education* the year also tackled this problem. In essence, these two articles represented not only an amalgamation of the ideas over the course of his career, as well as his own experiences, but they also served as a counter-argument to the red-baiters' contention that progressive education was detrimental to democracy and the "American way of life." His concern for public education was well-founded as his textbook *Democracy* was blacklisted that same year in *REaD Reading* (a publication produced by right wing, super-patriot groups) for promoting socialism, undermining democratic principles, and extolling the virtues of the United Nations (Foster 2000).

In "The People and their School System" Goslin outlines a counter-argument to anti-progressive attacks. He argues that the American school system is the great anchor to which our democracy is tethered. "No nation has ever used education to the extent that we have in America to develop our first line of resources—our children—into citizens of a free society who could carry their share of the load regardless of what the times might bring" (Goslin 1952). Goslin criticizes society for its lack of support for public education, decrying that the "American public school system ... is being starved to death for want of enough money to make it a realistic institution that can stand up and face the needs of our times" (196) and castigating a public whose

“morals are faulty to the point that we will pass up the support of the education of our children in order to get something that we selfishly want in terms of our own adult pleasure and privilege” (197). Failure to fully support and fund public education will lead to the weakening of public institutions “to the point of collapse over a long period of time” (198). He concludes that for the United States to continue to uphold the ideals and institutions upon which it was founded, truly democratic education will allow students, teachers, parents, and administrators to “practice our basic American tradition about how we settle problems in this country by standing on a unified front in terms of our common commitments and agreement while we debate our differences around the edges of our common agreement” (200). The integration of the principles of democratic living into the school system, by giving stakeholders a voice, was vital to the continuation of American democracy. A society that does not practice and teach the ideals upon which it was based would be doomed to failure.

The yearbook article which followed in 1953 also contained the themes of community based, democratic education. Goslin stated that children are the link between schools and the community. Too often, Goslin asserted, problems between school districts and communities arise due to misunderstandings, misinformation and distrust, all of which were roadblocks to school improvement. The first step in overcoming these roadblocks was bringing in parents as collaborators in their child’s education. Goslin further suggested that citizens groups be allowed to evaluate the curriculum and recommend changes to reflect the needs of the community. He was adamant in his belief that public education remain in the hands of laity and out of the hands of special interest groups. In a more direct attack on reactionary forces, he declared that teachers

don’t surrender their citizenship rights upon entering the teaching profession. Indeed, to deny teachers their basic rights as citizens undermined their effectiveness in the classroom. America’s public school system was the bedrock of her representative democracy and must be safeguarded if a free, public education for all children was to continue (Goslin 1953).

Goslin’s participation on the yearbook committee provided additional opportunities for him to expand his critique. The 1953 Yearbook was introduced at the annual conference of the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development through sessions held by the contributors. Goslin criticized the yearbook for not going far enough in its identification and denunciation of the reactionary forces attacking American public schools, however, he believed that despite this shortcoming, it was a step forward in the battle against the red - scare tactics of the McCarthy era (Foster 2000).

Through out his tenure at Peabody, Goslin continued to publish and lecture in support of progressive educational programs. The ideals he had espoused throughout his time as a public school administrator continued to play a role in his life at Peabody. He participated in the summer lecture series on “The Great Human Issues of Our Times” held each summer on the Peabody campus from 1953-1956. He was also instrumental in integrating the campus in the late 1950s. Through Goslin’s efforts to institute an all-black seminar on campus during intersession, integration of the regular summer and academic year programs soon followed (Drummond 2006; Parker and Parker 2006). His work for the Korean Education project gave him the opportunity to apply progressive education reform to the rebuilding of Korean schools, which in turn led to an honorary doctorate from Seoul University for his work. Goslin practiced what he preached

throughout his career. His singular focus on the development of progressive educational programs was honed through years of experience with district reforms, most of which were successful. Despite numerous attacks on progressive education in general, and on him personally, he never gave up the dream. He was a true believer in every sense of the word and would remain so until his death in 1969. Many of his contributions to the idea of a truly democratic education are regaining currency in the latest era of educational reform. The upswing in professional learning communities mirrors the teacher committees evident in Webster Grove and Minneapolis; advisory periods to allow for the continued development of interpersonal relationships between students and teachers are also popular. Site-based decision-making attempts to include parents and community members in the decision-making processes of their child's schools and are evident in many districts. Although Goslin was not the only progressive educator of his time, and certainly not the only one to advocate progressive reforms, his practical experience with progressive reform proved to him that the results were worth all of the hard work. It was through his own successes and failures as a progressive reformer that Goslin turned into a true believer, and which led to a lifetime of advocacy for progressive education.

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