

The Purpose of Schooling: The German Community in Indianapolis

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Abstract

German immigrants in the mid-1800s advocated to have German language instruction adopted into many public school curricula across the United States. Though Indianapolis is not unique in how or why Germans desired instruction in their native tongue, the city provides an excellent case study for examining their purposes. The German community in Indianapolis supported bilingual education as a way of helping Americanize their children, as well as instilling German high culture in the community.

Introduction

German immigrants in the mid-1800s advocated to have German language instruction adopted into many public school curricula across the United States. Large cities such as Cincinnati, Cleveland, Chicago, St. Louis, Milwaukee, and Indianapolis each developed some form of bilingual German instruction after the mid-1800s (Ramsey, 2008). Though Indianapolis is not unique in how or why Germans desired instruction in their native tongue, the city provides an excellent case study for examining differences in perspectives in the purpose of education between German immigrants and native-born U.S. citizens because of the impact German migrants had in the establishment of quality schools in Indianapolis and across the state of Indiana (Fessler, 1997). The German community, both religious and secular, fought to promote bilingual education as a way of helping Americanize their children, preserve their culture, and Germanize U.S. students into high culture. It is the last of these purposes

that is relevant to this paper. The influence of the German community on schooling in Indianapolis is particularly important because the German community sought a better education not only for their own children, but all children in the city. They believed Germans had the best quality of schools in the world (Ramsey, 2009). German belief about the purpose of schooling went beyond those of most advocates of public education, for whom key objectives of schooling were limited to educating the masses and later Americanizing immigrants; for them, education was not about sustaining or inspiring participation in high culture, but rather producing good citizens. The Germans in Indianapolis' commitment to introducing and teaching their high culture to their community can be seen in the rise and fall of the most prominent private school in the city of Indianapolis in relation to the rise of public schooling within the city and Clemens Vonnegut's participation in both as President of the German-English School and a trustee for Indianapolis Public Schools.

The Germans in the City

By the mid-1800s free public schooling had yet to be offered in Indianapolis. Though Indiana was admitted into the United States as the 19th state in 1816 and endorsed free public education in its first constitution, the state's financial constraints meant education remained a local issue. Reflecting the state's geographic and educational status, Indianapolis was known as the "capital in the wilderness" for many years (McKinney 1994). By the late 1800s this moniker had begun to change due to the influence of Germans in the city, specifically

within education. Between the state's admittance into the Union and the opening of free public schools in Indianapolis, German immigrants were one of the most active groups in educating youth of the city.

Though Germans were already present in Indianapolis before 1848, and were the state's largest immigrant group, there was a large influx of German immigrants after 1848 due to the revolution in Germany. By 1850, the German population in Indianapolis accounted for 12.9% of the population (Hoyt 1994). Many of the new immigrants, called "48ers" were young idealist revolutionaries who were on the wrong side of the uprising. These new immigrants clashed with the older established Germans in the city, many who had immigrated in the 1830s and primarily were farmers (Dunn 1910, 202). The *Indiana Volksblatt* reported this clash occurred over politics (as cited in Stempfel 1991, 7). For the more political and secular "48ers," language and cultural maintenance was particularly important if they were to return to Germany, which many of them were prepared to do if there was another revolution in Germany. Despite their clashes, both groups valued education as a tool to promote the German language and culture. The German churches in the area also valued education. The Catholics and Lutherans saw the teaching of their language as a sign of the continuation of their Christian faith, and the relation between faith and language can be clearly seen in the parochial school curricula. Despite these different commitments, and the schism between the 48ers and the farmers, the German community, were unified in the importance of bilingual educating for their children because it gave their children access to their culture which they considered to be of the highest quality.

Considering that they immigrated from a highly respected country to a state

considered "the capital of the wilderness," the idea of German cultural superiority is not a far stretch of the imagination (McKinney, 1994). At the time, many Germans considered Germany to be a leader of nations in many ways because of their sophisticated culture, purpose, and character (Stein 1913, 82). Fifty years after the 48ers immigrated to the U.S. they still believed this. In a speech at the opening of a large building used for community gatherings called *Das Deutsche Haus*, on June 15, 1898, Herman Lieber, the President of the Stock Association asked;

is it not rather an expression of American pragmatism when we contribute our share trying to keep alive the German language as much as possible for this country's [U.S'] benefit? After all, this language contains treasures of a thousand years of cultural development in the arts and sciences, in literature, history and philosophy, in all areas of life. Is it not our duty to make sure that the thorough German method of education, from kindergarten on up, will also benefit the common good of the American nation? (Stempfel, 1991)

The Germans in the city believed the language and their cultural values would benefit the U.S. The best way to do these things was to educate their children and the children of the city in the reputed German educational style and in the German language. As mentioned previously, these goals went beyond those of most advocates of public education in the U.S., for whom key purposes of schooling were limited to educating the masses and making good citizens (Kaestle 1983).

Schooling in the City

During the first half of the 19th century, the schools in Indianapolis included a combination of self-education, private

schools, county seminaries, and tax-supported, but not free schools. Free public schools were not introduced to the city until April 25, 1853. Despite opening in 1853, free public schools in Indianapolis would struggle for many years to remain open consistently. At one point during the late 1850s and early 1860s the high school closed for several years due to funding. One example of these irregular terms was in August 25, 1859, the *Indianapolis Journal* announced public schools would not reopen until February of 1860 because of a lack of state funding (as cited in Stein 1913). Besides the inconsistent openings, the schools were often considered in poor condition and there were issues with the quality and effectiveness of public-school teachers. In comparison to the techniques of the trained German schoolmaster, which were considered second to none, public school teachers were often ineffective. The consequences of the inconsistency and poorly trained teachers were that instruction covered only the most basic knowledge. Despite these issues, German citizens presented a resolution to the Indianapolis City Council in 1856 to have German taught and as a medium of instruction in schools. Not only would this help preserve their language, but it would also introduce one teacher to the public schools that had been influenced by the superior German educational system. Though their resolution was rejected, this led to an eventual expansion of German's presence in city schools in 1859, there were still significant funding and quality issues. In response to the lack of quality consistent schooling German private schools had been and continued to open.

These German private schools were not necessarily bilingual, but rather instructed only in German. As early as 1842 there was a German day school in the house of the pastor associated with the German

Evangelical Lutheran Congregation (St. Paul's Lutheran Church 2015). In the early 1850s there were at least four additional German schools located around the city. The Scottish Church at the corner of Delaware and Ohio streets, Zion's Church in the Second Ward between Michigan and Vermont streets, the *Verein Freier Maenner* (Freemen's club), and a school led by Theodore Hielscher on Washington St. opposite the courthouse were all operating during this time (Stempfl 1991, 19). The Zion's Church and the German Reformed Church only taught a German language course. The teachers of these two schools, like other schools associated with churches were often the pastors of the congregations. More emphasis was placed on the catechism than on grammatically correct German (Stein 1913, 11). The Freemen's club, an organization advocating against religious or monarchical governments and for the education of free men (Stempfl 1991, 5), along with the Hielscher School, used German as a medium of instruction for other subjects (Stein 1913, 87). Hielscher's school and several other independently run private schools would open and close their doors periodically through the late 1850s due to a lack of funding. Despite inconsistent funding, these schools were often open ten months of the year.

Amidst the inconsistency and ineffectiveness of the public schools and the German community's desire for a school to Americanize, preserve their language, and introduce their high culture, the most prominent of German schools was envisioned. It is at this moment where the growth and decline of the German private schools became intertwined with the public schools. Though parochial and other private schools had been in existence for nearly two decades, prominent Freethinkers in the city did not become involved until the formation of the German-English School.

Through 1858 and 1859 school funds were collected within the German community for the purchase of a lot and construction of a schoolhouse for the German-English School. One of two German newspapers in Indianapolis at the time, the *Freie Presse*, reported on the progress and meetings of the school's committees. The *Freie Presse* not only reported on the progress of the German-English School but also deplored those in the German community who would not support the school either by funds or by competition (as cited in Stein 1913, 26). Finally, on May 14, 1860 the *Die Deutsche-Englische Schule* (the German-English school) opened (Stein 1913, 14-39). Two private schools within the city, one having been run by Hielscher, were combined with the German-English school. These two schools alone brought 110 students to the school. The school would be open for ten months of the year, quite a contrast from the public schools of Indianapolis.

Not only did the German-English School serve German students, but also French, English, and American students. Parents of other nationalities sent their students for several reasons. First, the public schools in Indianapolis were inconsistently open. For example, many high school students attended the German-English School because the Indianapolis High School, having only been opened since 1853, stayed closed from 1858-1864. Second, parents sent their students to the German-English School because of the strong reputation of a German education. Unlike the public schools that often hired inexperienced teachers with no training, the German-English School hired native German teachers who had been teaching in Cincinnati's thriving bilingual public schools. Cincinnati's public-school German programs were so strong, that in 1867 Indianapolis public schools would send representatives to

observe their program and hire teachers. Even the *Indianapolis Journal*, a newspaper for English speakers, supported German language acquisition and instruction as important to everyone. Their editorials and columns praised German schools' successes (*Indianapolis Journal*, 1859).

The education students received was so strong that by the fall of 1862, the school had enough students to start a third classroom and hire a third English teacher (Stein 1913, 49). Within two years the *Indianapolis Journal* reported plans to build an additional school building and floor. The new construction was needed according to the *Indianapolis Journal* on June 15, 1864 because of the "great and constantly increasing number of German children in the city, whom their parents desire to have educated in both languages" (as cited in Stein 1913, 58-59). The editorial also advocated for German to be taught in the public schools but until it was, exhorted Indianapolis citizens to support the school not out of generosity but justice. The article reasoned the Germans were not only paying the city tax for public schools but also taxing themselves for the German-English school. By this time the school had 180 students. By 1866 the school had a waiting list of students to attend the school (Stein 1913, 59). The increase in numbers might suggest the German parents in the community thought the school was successfully Americanizing their students and promoting the continuation of their high culture and non-German parents felt their students were receiving a quality education.

Despite the success of the German-English School, German community leaders continued to heavily petition the public-school trustees to establish German as a medium of instruction. Clemens Vonnegut, a leader within the German community, and who would eventually become a leader within the city was one of these people. He

was a shop owner in the downtown area, a Freethinker, and heavily involved in the German-Indianapolis community. By 1865 Vonnegut was on the Board of Trustees for Indianapolis Schools. He would serve from 1865-1869 and again from 1871-1894. Not only did he serve as a trustee for the city's schools, but he was a member of the *Schulerverein* (School Club) and became President for the school's last eleven years. At one point he was the President of the German-English School and a trustee member of the city's public schools. It seems Vonnegut was working both sides of the aisle to establish good schools, which included encouraging the acquisition of the German language and exposure to German culture.¹ As a Freethinker he exemplified the belief that the best way to advocate for an ideological or political position was through education. Vonnegut defended the inclusion of the German language through public letters. The letters argued learning German would not supplant the learning of English and German influence in Indiana had been healthy.

Finding their financial situation improved in 1863, the Indianapolis Board of Trustees in May of 1863 established a committee to investigate employing German teachers. They formed this committee after witnessing the growth, popularity, and success the German schools were having at teaching and attracting students. The promulgation of German's high culture was not only evident in the success of the German-English School, but in the manufacturing industries work force where one quarter of all workers were German (Probst 1989, 69). This success would also

¹ Eventually the school board of Indianapolis named the Ninth Ward School, the Clemens Vonnegut School, to honor Vonnegut's work on behalf of public schools in Indianapolis. The school was closed in 1973.

manifest itself in the ability to influence the state legislator.

Up until 1869 there had not been much state support for German as a medium of instruction. State legislator support for German as a medium of instruction in public schools was important for the German community around the state, but particularly in Indianapolis, because the Indianapolis public schools had not moved to include German due to their interpretation of state law. However, in Indianapolis in the late 1860s German implementation gained significant ground because of German leaders and the German press. The German community and the German press of Indianapolis worked hard to promote German as a medium of instruction. Both believed this would improve the local public schools. The German newspapers' demonstrated a strong concern and a desire to reform public education in the state. The papers also encouraged Germans to support public education once improved. The educational reform the press sought allowed a said number of voters in a district to demand the hiring of a German teacher. Though the press was supportive of educational reform, the *Telegraph* on February 1, 1867 recommended parents of children attending the German-English School cautiously inspect the public schools before sending their children to them. If the schools were compared to one another, the *Telegraph* believed public education still left much to be desired (as cited in Ellis 1954, 126).

The *Telegraph* increased the fervor of its reform support when on February 11, 1867 William E. McLean of Terre Haute introduced a bill to the legislature regarding the introduction of German in the state's elementary schools. The paper published editorials on the subject regularly through the month of February (as cited in Ellis 1954, 126). Frances H. Ellis a Professor of German

at Indiana University in the 1940s interprets the frequency of the *Telegraph's* articles as representing the tenacity in which the Germans held onto their language and culture (Ellis 1954, 126). The editorials discussed the origin of the German language, its relation to other European languages and English, the connections between the cultures, and praised the language's beauty.

Although the German community and press pushed for changes in state legislation, there was a delay at the state level. This delay led German leaders in Indianapolis to present a resolution to the city council stating

That the members of our City School Board be, and they are hereby, earnestly requested to introduce, in at least one of the Wards of this city, the system of joint instruction in the English and German languages, by employing at least four teachers who are capable of instructing in both languages. (Proceedings 1867, 754)

The resolution was adopted. Clemens Vonnegut was considered an instigator of the board's support to further German studies. This is an interesting turn of events because eleven years earlier the trustees had not approved the German proposal. One of the reasons had been state law. By this time state law had still not been changed and the city was prepared to use German as a medium of instruction alongside English in part because of the success of the German-English School.

Vonnegut and fellow trustee A.C. Shortridge were sent to Cincinnati to hire the teachers and observe the successful Cincinnati German public school programs. Despite issues at the state level and contrary to state law, Indianapolis moved forward to teach German and other courses in German in the Ninth Ward. On May 29, 1867 the *Telegraph* reversed its questioning of public schools and published a column encouraging

Germans to send their children to the Ninth Ward School. Reasons to support the school included the hope of having more Wards with German teachers (as cited in Ellis 1954, 129). The overwhelming support for the Ninth Ward School led the school trustees to add German instruction in the Sixth Ward School in 1868 (Ellis 1954, 131). In less than three years Indianapolis had gone from having German taught in English to having other courses be taught in German.

Around the same time the Indianapolis compromise took place, the *Telegraph* returned its focus to state issues because the General Assembly was getting ready to reconvene. Editorials gave reasons for why German instruction should be allowed, letters to the editor were published, and petitions and reports on meetings of Germans in the city printed. A committee of German leaders proposed an amendment to state law similar to the one in 1867. Their amendment and petition were published in the *Telegraph* on January 20, 1869. Clemens Vonnegut was one of these petitioners (Indiana 1869, 185). Despite the continued expansion and prominence of the German-English School in the German community, the also supported the state's education reform. Vonnegut and other German-English School leaders at the *Schulervein* meeting on January 24, 1869 decided to adjourn early in order to attend a meeting of the state legislature. The leaders, including Vonnegut, joined other petitioners for the inclusion of German in public schools at the legislator (Stein 1913, 77). These actions beget the question of why school leaders would petition for teaching German in the public schools even though teaching German in free schools would surely undermine their constituency base?

John R. Coffroth introduced the proposed amendment to the house with one change, the minimum number of voters needed to request German instruction in a

school was reduced from forty to twenty-five (Indiana 1869, 415). A representative suggested the amendment be recommitted to the committee for a report that there would not be a greater expense to the state (Indiana 1869, 437). Other objections included the bill favored Germans, immigrants should be Americanized through English not by being educated in their native language, the bill did not represent the majority of citizens in Indiana, it would open the door for other subjects or constituents to make demands on the curriculum, it endangered public well-being, there could be issues with teacher certification, the school terms were short and already struggle to cover the expected curriculum without having to teach in a second language, and it could result in an unwanted language (possibly referring to Pennsylvania Dutch). Arguments on behalf of the amendment as stated in the *Indianapolis Journal* on February 9, 1869 included the benefit children gained by knowing two languages, German immigrants would be attracted to the state, German literature and science would be understood in their original form, Americanization of immigrants would be hastened because Germans would begin attending public rather than private schools, Germans were the largest minority and paid more in taxes than other minorities, and the minor additional expense was not enough to prevent a desirable bill to be rejected.

In the middle of the previous list, is the idea that knowing the German language would give access to German literature and science. This is important to notice because it suggests even the legislator respected the high culture of the Germans. Though English newspapers like the *Indianapolis Journal* suggested objectors would have voted for the bill because it would hasten Americanization of immigrants, it is clear proponents of the bill valued German language for its relation to German culture.

After several weeks of engrossments, the *Telegraph* rounded up support and encouraged supporters to go to the state house on February 10, 1869 and make their desires known.

Finally, on February 17, 1869 the state passed legislation that included German in the course of study. The bill stipulated that if there were twenty-five parents or guardians in a school district demanding German, then German as a branch of study would be introduced. The bill passed the House by a vote of 77 to 7. The *Telegraph* had worked hard to report and support the passing of the bill. At this point the bill stalled again on its way through the state senate. The senate convention was half over when the *Telegraph* began writing editorials to encourage action. One editorial drew attention to the large population of approximately 2000 students attending private German schools in Indianapolis (as cited in Ellis 1954, 135). The *Telegraph* published a letter written by Vonnegut, Sediensicker, and Köhne in response to the newspaper's call to action on April 26, 1869. The letter called for the gathering of those interested in the passage of the bill at 9am the following morning to go together to the senate chamber. Supposedly, when the senators saw the flood of Germans entering the State House the senate immediately organized for business, suspended the rules, and moved the bill up to the third order of business. The German delegation made it known they would not leave until a vote was cast (as cited in Ellis 1954, 135-136). After some deliberation it passed the Senate by a vote of 37 to 3 (Indiana 1869, 535). Vonnegut and the *Telegraph* had won the passage of the bill. All that was needed was the signature of the governor to make it law. The *Telegraph* cautioned for the supporters of the bill to keep vigilance but their concern was for naught. When the governor received the bill on the fifth he signed it into law.

Similarly to the *Indianapolis Journal's* quote earlier about the justice of helping the German-English school, reflections on the passage of the law say the bill was passed in recognition of the services of the German community (Dunn 1910, 214). What were these services to the greater community, they were the running of strong businesses, promoting the welfare of the city, and helping build a stronger educational system.

Though the passage of the law would be the deathblow to the school by 1882, the German-English School's attendance began to decline because of the inclusion of German as a medium of instruction and therefore the growing effectiveness of the Indianapolis public schools under the influence of Clemens Vonnegut and the German press within the state. By 1882 there were at least ten public schools in Indianapolis teaching German or using it as a medium of instruction. The German-English School had existed for over twenty years and was known for its thoroughness and high standards. This might demonstrate the real purpose Germans had for education. Supporting German in public schools was a way to continue to promote their heritage and Americanize their students, but it was also a way to promote a higher culture throughout the city.

Vonnegut and the German community would continue to bring German educational innovations to the Indianapolis public schools throughout the rest of the 19th century. In the 1880s, Vonnegut along with other leaders also introduced both manual training, the *Gewerbeschul* (vocational school), and physical education to Indianapolis public schools (Probst 1989, 100-01). The Vocational School would meet in the old German-English School building. Subjects such as descriptive geometry, architectural drawing, design work, machine draughting, ornamental drawing, and ornamental modeling were taught. At one

point, the school applied to the school board for a monetary appropriation. Though the board could not legally financially support the school, they assigned William H. Bass as a teacher there for a year. The manual training curriculum was considered a great contribution to the city and one of the few programs like it at the time. In fact, within a few years after watching the *Gewerbeschul's* success, the school board opened their own program at Shortridge High School in 1888 under the direction of Mr. Bass. Six years later the school board opened Manual High School dedicated to manual training (Dunn 1910, 276).

Physical education was introduced into public schools through Vonnegut and the Turnvereins, a German gymnastics club. Vonnegut was also founding member and President of the Turnvereins at the time of physical education's introduction to Indianapolis public schools. Physical education was an important part of German high culture. The Turnverein club was made up of many 48ers who believed a strong mind grew best in a strong body (Probst 1989, 89). These types of innovations alongside the introduction of German as a medium of instruction demonstrate how the German community was not only interested in educating their own children, but in raising the culture in Indianapolis to their cultural standards.

The German Press and Vonnegut

State acceptance of German may not have happened without the German press. The newspapers, especially *Der Täglicher Telegraph* in Indianapolis helped advocate, organize the movement, and provide reports on the progress of German's acceptance. Alongside the newspaper, were critical leaders such as Clemens Vonnegut. He would go on to serve twenty-seven years on the Board of Trustees for Indianapolis Schools. For a stretch of eleven years he was the President of the German-English School

and a trustee on the Board of Trustees. When the German-English School closed in 1882 he continued to serve as a Trustee for the city schools until 1894. As a Freethinker and an astute businessman, he used his connections to hire other German Freethinkers to hold important positions in the public schools. Vonnegut helped hire his fellow Freethinker, Charles E. Emmerich, as the administrator over the German program in the city. Emmerich held the post into the early 1890s.

Under the guidance of Vonnegut and Emmerich the German program quickly flourished. The state law passed in 1869 only called for German to be added to the course subjects, however, in Indianapolis, under the instigation of Vonnegut and other leaders the public schools would offer German-English bilingual education in some schools. By 1883 there were sixteen public schools in the city providing German language instruction to 2,432 students (Twenty-Second 1883). Unlike other cities that had adopted bilingual instruction in their public schools as a mechanism of assimilation (St. Louis) or as a political concession to appease the large minority population of Germans (Chicago), though these reasons were present in Indianapolis, it was the Germans themselves who had pushed for the inclusion of German through their participation in local and state politics as well as being civically active. The Indianapolis political climate more closely resembled that of Cincinnati, where German-English bilingual education was highly valued for its reputation, than St. Louis or Chicago (Ramsey 2008, 285). Also like Cincinnati, Germans had quickly taken up some of Indianapolis' leading political positions and ran prosperous businesses. Though it had taken many years to get German into the school system, once it was there it grew quickly. By 1888, 1,200 students were enrolled in the bilingual

German-English programs in the city (Twenty-Seventh 1888).

Conclusion

It is interesting how the German-English School grew out of necessity and declined in necessity. When the public schools were unable to provide adequate education for the community, German community leaders formed their own highly respected school. These same German leaders, especially Clemens Vonnegut and other Freethinkers, fought for the inclusion of German in the public schools for the benefit of all children. Had Vonnegut and other members of the *Schulerverein* not lent their support to the public schools or encouraging German to be a part of the course of study there is a strong possibility the German-English School would have survived until 1919. Consider the state law to include German in any school was passed during the peak years of the German-English School. Without the German press and Vonnegut's support, state educational law would not have been changed. However, when the time was right, the *Schulerverein* shut down the German-English School and put all their support behind the public schools. The German community had helped Germanize the local school system in order to provide a better education for all students.

Epilogue

After the German-English School closed in 1882, the public schools' German programs took off. Though there would be obstacles to German's inclusion in public education in the late 1880s, it would not be until 1919 when the state whipped itself into a nativist hysteria that the McCray Bill was passed. The bill made teaching German illegal and a punishable offence (Indiana 1919, 133).

Though other foreign languages were permitted under the McCray Bill, it would not be until the U.S. Supreme Court ruled in

Meyer v. Nebraska in 1923 that Indiana would remove the McCray Bill from state law. Despite this ruling in 1923, bilingual education in Indianapolis has taken a slow path to return for at least two reasons. First, Germans after WWI did not work to reestablish the once flourishing German program in the city. Second, nativists concerns have continued to play a role in the shaping of language acquisition in Indianapolis. It was not until 1994 that two schools opened up in Indianapolis that have language immersion programs. One is the private International School of Indiana. The other was Forest Glen Elementary School in Lawrence Township. It took until the early 2000s for Indianapolis Public Schools to open their own elementary immersion program in School 74. The two public schools are application only magnet schools. One reason these schools have grown over the last few years is a shift in the purpose of language acquisition in the minds of many. Though bilingual education exists as a process of Americanization, these schools are less about assimilation into American culture and more about language acquisition to participate in a global world (Clevinger 2015).

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