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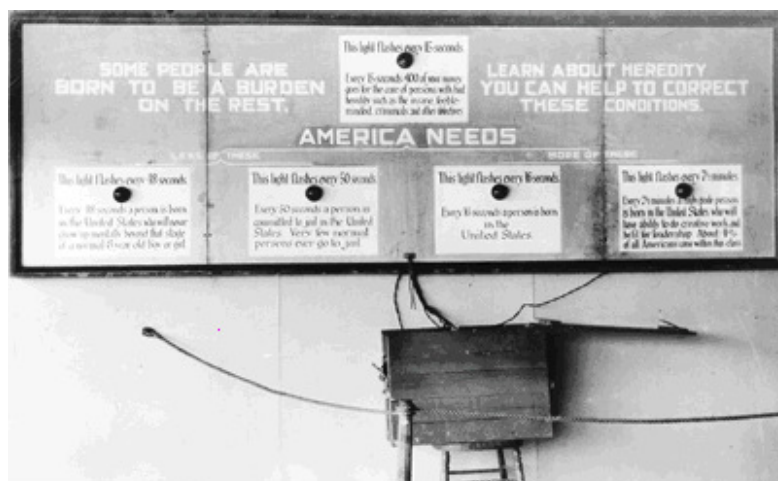
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## The Forgotten History of Eugenics

*High-stakes testing has its origins in the eugenics movements and racist assumptions about IQ. We forget, at our own peril, that this legacy hangs over current demands for increased testing*

By Alan Stoskepf



**A display from the American Eugenics Society at a fair in Topeka, KS, in 1929. The sign on the top, for example, reads: "Every 15 seconds, \$100 of your money goes for the care of persons with bad heredity, such as the insane, feeble-minded, criminals, and other defectives."**

(NOTE: The footnotes in this article are hot-linked. Click on the highlighted number to go directly to that footnote. Click on the number in front of the footnote to return to the place in the article you just left.)

At the beginning of the century, one of the most damaging experiments in public education began. Under the banner of educational reform, the American eugenics movement captured the hearts and minds of some of the nation's most influential educational researchers and policy makers. While the history of the eugenics movement has been virtually written out of American history textbooks, it nonetheless has had an insidious effect on the lives of students and the organization of public schools. It also has become part of an unexamined legacy that shadows today's standards and testing movement.

What was eugenics? The English mathematician Sir Francis Galton first coined the term in 1883. He wrote, "Eugenics is the study of the agencies under social control that seek to improve or impair the racial qualities of future generations either physically or mentally."<sup>1</sup> What Galton saw as a new branch of scientific inquiry became a dogmatic prescription in the ranking and ordering of human worth. His ideas found their most receptive audience at the turn of the century in the United States.

Eugenics fed off of the fears of white middle and upper class Americans. In the

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early 20th century, the United States was experiencing rapid social and economic change. As the nation became more industrial and urban, millions of poor immigrants from southern and eastern Europe flocked to the United States seeking a better life. Simultaneously, thousands of African Americans were beginning a great migration to northern cities from the Jim Crow South. Competition for jobs intensified existing frictions along class and racial lines.

Periodic economic recessions created further social unrest. Labor unions, civil rights groups, and the woman's suffrage movement pressed for greater equity. At the same time nativist and racist groups like the Ku Klux Klan pulled in the opposite direction. It was out of this cauldron of social upheaval that the American eugenics movement emerged. It promised prosperity and progress, not through strikes or ugly race riots, but through a new science that would combine advances in the field of genetics with the efficiency of the assembly line.

Eugenicists used a flawed and crude interpretation of Gregor Mendel's laws on heredity to argue that criminality, intelligence, and pauperism were passed down in families as simple dominant or recessive hereditary traits. Mainline eugenicists (those eugenicists who were explicitly preoccupied with issues of race), believed that some individuals and entire groups of people (such as Southern Europeans, Jews, Africans, and Latinos) were more predisposed to the "defective genes." Charles Davenport, a leader in American eugenics, argued for laws to control the spread of "inferior blood" into the general population. He told an international gathering of scholars "that the biological basis for such laws is doubtless an appreciation of the fact that negroes and other races carry traits that do not go well with our social organization."[2](#)

Davenport's wishes were partly realized. Eugenic advocates convinced 30 state legislatures to pass involuntary sterilization laws that targeted "defective strains" within the general population, such as the blind, deaf, epileptic, feebleminded, and paupers. On the national level, eugenic supporters played a decisive role in the Congressional passage of the draconian Immigration and Restriction Act of 1924, which established blatantly racist quotas. President Calvin Coolidge embraced the eugenic assumptions behind the law when he declared, "America must be kept American. Biological laws show É that Nordics deteriorate when mixed with other races."[3](#)

While those laws have been repealed, the impact of eugenics on public education was more enduring. Eugenic ideology worked its way into the educational reform movements of the 1910s and 20s, playing a key role in teacher training, curriculum development, and school organization. It also provided the guiding ideology behind the first IQ tests. Those tests were used to track students into separate and unequal education courses, establish the first gifted and talented programs, and promote the idea that educational standards could be measured through single-numbered scores. Eugenic ideas about the intellectual worth of students penetrated deeply into the fabric of American education.

Eugenics was a common feature in college curricula. Universities "offering courses in eugenics increased from 44 in 1914 to 376 in 1928."[4](#) A recent analysis of 41 high school biology textbooks used through the 1940s revealed that nearly 90% of them had sections on eugenics.[5](#) Major figures in education were attracted to eugenics and wrote books for teachers and the general public. Eugenics became a top-down model of "education reform" for these educators. A cadre of university experts trained in the latest testing methods and embracing eugenic principles believed they could make schooling a more efficient enterprise. Schools would be the place where students both learned basic eugenic principles and also were tracked into their future roles as dictated by their biological worth.

A sampling of influential textbooks used in colleges of education gives us a better sense of some of the eugenic visions of educational reform. Lewis Terman, Professor of Education at Stanford University and originator of the Stanford-Binet intelligence test, is remembered today as an early proponent of tracking. Not as well known is that his views on tracking and school organization were rooted in a eugenic conception of humanity.

Terman expressed these views in his textbook, *The Measurement of Intelligence* (1916). The book would be used for decades in teacher training. He wrote that:

Among laboring men and servant girls there are thousands like them [feeble-minded individuals]. They are the world's "hewers of wood and drawers of water." And yet, as far as intelligence is concerned, the tests have told the truth. ... No amount of school instruction will ever make them intelligent voters or capable voters in the true sense of the word.

... The fact that one meets this type with such frequency among Indians, Mexicans, and negroes suggests quite forcibly that the whole question of racial differences in mental traits will have to be taken up anew and by experimental methods.

Children of this group should be segregated in special classes and be given instruction which is concrete and practical. They cannot master, but they can often be made efficient workers, able to look out for themselves. There is no possibility at present of convincing society that they should not be allowed to reproduce, although from a eugenic point of view they constitute a grave problem because of their unusually prolific breeding. (pp. 91-92)

Terman and other educational psychologists successively convinced many school districts to use high-stakes and culturally-biased tests to place "slow" students into special classes, rigid academic tracks, or entirely separate schools. The racist and class assumptions behind these recommendations were justified as scientifically sound because the "tests told the truth." IQ tests soon became the favorite eugenic tool for identifying "superior and inferior" students and then charting their educational destiny.

The tests were also seen as an instrument to identify students deserving special treatment. Today's gifted and talented programs had their origins in the eugenic use of IQ tests in the 1920s. Leta Stetter Hollingworth, a professor at Teachers College at Columbia University, was a founder and persuasive advocate of gifted and talented programs in schools. She and other educational leaders thought only the students from the right biological stock were capable of achieving high academic standards.

*In Gifted Children: Their Nature and Nurture* (1926), a book that is frequently cited by researchers of "gifted" programs today,<sup>6</sup> Hollingworth wrote:

One result recurs persistently wherever American children are tested by nationality of ancestors. American children of Italian parentage show a low average of intelligence. The selection of Italians received into this country has yielded very few gifted children. (p.71)

[Eugenics would] ultimately reduce misery if the stupid, the criminal, and other mentally, physically, and morally deficient would refrain from reproduction. (p.199)<sup>7</sup>

As with Terman, Hollingworth's ideas were not on the margins of educational thought. Eugenic themes proliferated in educational journals and textbooks from the 1910s through the 1930s. In particular, the popular belief took hold that IQ tests could label and accurately place students into academic tracks according to their inherited abilities. For example, an educational consultant for the San Jose school system recommended that the district use test scores to guide "children for their proper economic life activities in accordance with their abilities." The great majority of Mexican-American school children in the district were to assume lower academic tracks because the tests supposedly revealed their inferior intellectual quality.<sup>8</sup>

We do not know all the ways eugenic notions affected public education. We do know that by the early 1920s, more than 2 million American school children were being tested primarily for academic tracking purposes.<sup>9</sup> At least some of

the decisions to allocate resources and select students for academic or vocational courses were influenced by eugenic notions of student worth.

It is important to recognize that an active minority of educators, journalists, labor groups, and parents resisted these ideas. In particular, there were informed critiques by African-American scholars such as W. E. B. Du Bois, Horace Mann Bond, and Howard Long. They decried the use of these tests to rank racial groups. In "Intelligence Tests and Propaganda," Horace Mann Bond issued a warning about the misuse of IQ tests:

But so long as any group of men attempts to use these tests as funds of information for the approximation of crude and inaccurate generalizations, so long must we continue to cry "Hold!" To compare the crowded millions of New York's East Side with the children of Morningside Heights [an upper class neighborhood at the time] indeed involves a great contradiction; and to claim that the results of the tests given to such diverse groups, drawn from such varying strata of the social complex, are in any wise accurate, is to expose a fatuous sense of unfairness and lack of appreciation of the great environmental factors of modern urban life.<sup>10</sup>

Too few white Americans read these words. It was not until the 1960s that these early rebuttals were widely recognized as important contributions to the body of academic literature refuting racist and biologically determinist interpretations of IQ tests.

Bond's cautions also were not heeded by Richard Herrnstein and Charles Murray when they wrote the best-selling *The Bell Curve* in 1994. Many reviewers within the academic and lay communities have criticized the thinly veiled racism and the voluminous but misleading use of data found in the book. These tendencies were reminiscent of the eugenic advocates' interpretation of tests in the 1920s. Furthermore, Murray and Herrnstein rewrote history when they claimed that the eugenic use of tests was not used to draw any negative conclusions about immigrant groups in the country and played no role in the immigration hearings of 1924.<sup>11</sup> It has been this kind of denial of history that makes it all the more important to re-examine how standardized tests are being used in educational reform today.

Standardized tests can provide important diagnostic information for educators. Achieving standards of academic excellence through ongoing assessment of student work is a vital component of a young person's learning. However, too often, standards and assessment have become synonymous with top-down, externally mandated tests. Learning becomes reduced to test preparation and test taking. Test scores are often seen as proxies for intelligence or as the most important indicators of what students are learning. Quick judgments and quick fixes are the products of this kind of reform. And this phenomenon is not just a relic of the past.

Even if many supporters of high-stakes tests might recoil at the assumptions underlying the use of standardized tests earlier in the century, the consequences of this version of education reform might not be so different from the 1920s. This becomes even more apparent when performances are compared between poorer and more affluent school districts. Doing well on these tests is strongly correlated with income levels and only reconfirms the educational inequities that have characterized American education throughout the century. The academic tracking begun by "yesterday's" eugenicists is an institutional legacy we live with today. Education reform that is driven by high-stakes tests stands a good chance of entrenching that legacy.

The history of eugenics in American education needs to be examined in more depth and brought to bear on arguments supporting the use of high stakes tests to raise academic standards in public schools. This history raises some challenging and disturbing questions for all of us today. What is the economic and political context in which the contemporary version of educational reform is being touted? What are the assumptions about student learning that fuel the current wave of testing? What are the effects of this testing on the lives of students and the educational climate of schools? How do these tests affect the equitable distribution of educational resources and opportunities between different school districts?

These questions need to be discussed with educational policy makers and representatives from diverse communities in open forums. Parents, students, and teachers have to be brought into these conversations. The eugenics movement is a reminder of what can happen when the assumptions and consequences of educational reform are not put to the test of real life experience.

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### For Further Reading:

Stephen Selden, *Inheriting Shame: The Story of Eugenics in America* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1999).

Russell Jacoby and Naomi Glauberman, ed. *The Bell Curve Debate: History, Documents, Opinions*, (New York: Times Books, Random House, 1995), chapters 6-8.

Alan Stoskopf, et al, *Confronting the Forgotten History of the American Eugenics Movement* (forthcoming from Harvard/Facing History Project, Fall 1999).

### Footnotes

1. Francis Galton, *Inquiries into Human Faculty and its Development* (London: Macmillan, 1883), frontispiece.
2. Steven Selden, "Conservative Ideology and Curriculum," *Educational Theory* 3 (Summer 1977), p. 218.
3. Calvin Coolidge, "Whose Country is This?" *Good Housekeeping*, 72 (February 1921), p. 14.
4. Hamilton Cravens, *The Triumph of Evolution: American Scientists and the Heredity-Environment Controversy, 1900-1941* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1978), p. 53.
5. Steven Selden, *Inheriting Shame: The Story of Eugenics in America* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1999), p. 64.
6. *Ibid*, p. 102.
7. *Ibid*, p. 103.
8. David Tyack, *The One Best System: A History of American Urban Education* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1974), p. 213.
9. Sarah Glazer, "Intelligence Testing," *CQ Researcher* (July 30, 1993), p. 660.
10. Horace Mann Bond, "Intelligence Tests and Propaganda," *The Crisis*, 28 (1924), p. 64.
11. Richard Herrnstein and Charles Murray, *The Bell Curve: Intelligence and Class Structure in American Life* (New York: Free Press, 1994), p. 5.

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