

James P. Wickersham on 19th Century Curriculum and Technical Education

By Paul K. Adams

James P. Wickersham was a nineteenth century teacher and school administrator. After teaching and serving as a principal, county superintendent, and normal school principal, he became Pennsylvania's Superintendent of Common Schools from 1866 through 1881 and later the United States Minister to Denmark. As superintendent of Common Schools, Wickersham made recommendations on both curriculum and methods of instruction. Before his appointment as superintendent, he had wide experience in teaching and supervising. He had been an Academy teacher and principal, a county superintendent, and a normal school principal.¹ While principal and teacher at Millersville State Normal School, he gathered notes for the classes that he taught over the years and published two textbooks based on them: *School Economy*² and *Methods of Instruction*.³ These books encompass his ideas on curriculum and instruction at that stage of his career. His *Annual Reports* from 1866 through 1880 and his work as editor of the *Pennsylvania School Journal* reveal his later thinking on curriculum and methods. He lived in an era suspended between the work of Horace Mann⁴ and the emergence of John Dewey.⁵ He had influence, in this period, regarding curriculum and method far beyond Pennsylvania's state boundaries. As Wickersham pointed out, "*School Economy and Methods of Instruction . . . had . . . a large general circulation, and were in use as textbooks in nearly all the institutions throughout the country established for the training of teachers; and they have since been translated into the Spanish, French and Japanese languages, and are read in countries where these languages are spoken.*"⁶

The influence of Pestalozzi, DeFellenberg and Froebel were still strong among American educators during the period of Wickersham's most active

professional work. The work of Herbart was most influential during the last years of Wickersham's superintendency.⁷ Henry Barnard's *American Journal of Education* was a major vehicle for both American and European educational ideas from its genesis in 1856.⁸ The work of Pestalozzi, DeFellenberg and Wehrli in technical education was discussed in the *American Journal of Education* in 1861⁹ prior to the publication of either *School Economy or Methods of Instruction*.¹⁰ In the last year of Wickersham's state superintendency a continuing interest in Pestalozzi, DeFellenberg and Wehrli by American educators was still being indicated.¹¹ Another portion of Wickersham's milieu related to curriculum and method was the still popular text *Theory and Practice of Teaching* by David Page which had been published in 1847. Page had cautioned teachers not to be too eager to adopt new and unproved methods such as Pestalozzi's object methods or Joseph Lancaster's monitorial method of instruction.¹²

In an article published in 1868, Wickersham outlined for popular consumption his ideas on the importance of culture, as he called it, and the methods by which it could be acquired. "Culture," he wrote, "is not designed to subvert talent. Each man is designed for something, each has his place and his individuality should be respected."¹³ All minds, he pointed out, are capable of attaining culture, but mechanical methods of instruction prevent that possibility from being realized. Giving evidence of his debt to Rousseau and Pestalozzi, he said children should be educated according to their natural tendencies.¹⁴ The child has a natural appetite for learning, he noted, and what is needed is to supply the cultural food. Showing his adherence to the faculty psychology of the day, Wickersham recommended use of what he called the law of exercise:

"The law of exercise does not only apply to the body as a whole, but to its every organ; not only to the mind as whole, but to its every faculty. *No bone or muscle can be made stronger without using that bone or muscle. We improve our perceptive powers only by perceiving, our memory only by remembering, our imagination only by imagining, our judgment only by reasoning, our will only by willing. The amount of exercise it induces is a sure test of the value of every lesson given to a child.*"¹⁵

Wickersham had evinced interest in the arts and culture as part of the school curriculum. However, his interest and efforts on behalf of technical education occupied much of his time. Technical education, he felt, should be supported by the state because of its value in national development. He listed in his *Annual Report* of 1873 three reasons that education in this area should be instituted:

1. Scientific skill and scientific appliances have become absolutely necessary to the profitable development of our material resources - coal, ores, oil, etc.
2. Skilled labor and scientific direction are the universal want of our mechanical and manufacturing industries.

3. Foreign nations will flood the country with their productions if we do not learn to compete with them in artistic skill."¹⁶

Having thus noted the significance of technical education to the country as a whole, he included specific recommendations for Pennsylvania in his *Annual Report* for the following year. Wickersham had asked that the legislators consider three proposals relating to technical education. These suggestions, he said, had been developed by a committee which has studied the possibility of establishing a technical high school in Pennsylvania. They had not considered the high school to be feasible. However, the committee, he said, had wished to push forward and incorporate technical education in the public schools. The committee's proposals were:

- "1. That drawing be hereafter taught in all the public schools of the State.
2. That all public high schools connecting with their other courses of instruction a course in the branches usually taught in technical schools shall receive a special appropriation from a fund provided by State Authority.
3. That State aid be given to certain colleges, suitably prepared for the purpose, to enable them to improve their facilities for imparting a technical and scientific education of the highest order."¹⁷

Wickersham had favored the committee's recommendations, but the legislators had not accepted them. In his *Annual Report* of 1874 he pleaded for their acceptance once more.¹⁸ However, there was no law passed by legislature during Wickersham's superintendency which incorporated the features he desired.

Undaunted by his previous setbacks, he decided to approach the problem by devising his own scheme for technical education. He introduced his plan by noting that the old apprenticeship system was dying out. The result, he said, was that "thousands of boys . . . are pushed into the position of seeking a livelihood by their wits."¹⁹ He suggested that a remedy for this unfortunate state of affairs could be found in introducing a system of public technical education.

He asked that the legislators consider mandating the following recommendations:

- "1. That industrial drawing be taught in all public schools.
2. That technical departments . . . be attached to our public high schools.
3. That technical and scientific departments now in operation at several of our colleges be . . . enlarged and strengthened.
4. That the State Normal schools be required to give more attention to drawing and art education.
5. That one or more institutions be established by state aid or otherwise, modeled after the Great English Art Training School at South Kensington.
6. That municipal school authorities should supplement their present

systems of public schools by one or more industrial schools, or schools for artisans."²⁰

The greatest objection, he remarked, that most people had to such a system of technical education was based on their fear of the expense involved. In order to allay his apprehension, he noted that many European countries, smaller than Pennsylvania, had implemented systems of technical education without major problems. Stating that he understood that a venture of this magnitude would not be inexpensive, he nevertheless noted that positive action was necessary. "It is most sincerely hoped," he said, "the legislature and patriotic citizens will give the subject due consideration."²¹

In 1876 he reiterated his desire to see technical subjects included in the curriculum. Noting once again that the European experience had shown that theory and practice complemented each other in the schools, he asked that Pennsylvania learn from the Old World and take action to bring technical education to the commonwealth's public schools.²²

The legislature did not respond to the pleas in his *Annual Reports*. He used another means to encourage and publicize technical education as a result. The *Pennsylvania School Journal* from 1876 until Wickersham's term as superintendent ended, contained several articles on technical education. DeFellenberg's successful school at Hofwyl in Switzerland was the subject of a piece in February 1876.²³ In the same issue Wickersham indicated his pleasure at the prospect of a municipal technical high school being planned in Pittsburgh.²⁴ In November 1877 he called upon the journal's readers to understand that young men educated only in traditional subjects were at a distinct disadvantage if they wished to study architecture or any kind of engineering. The public schools, he said, simply do not prepare pupils for college level work in those professions.²⁵

In the same year, he once again approached the Pennsylvania legislature on the topic of technical education. The Annual Report of 1877 contains the statement that young men must learn to make a living. The answer to the problem he pointed out, was obvious: technical education.²⁶ He explained that there was little need for technical departments in rural schools. "Workshops then," he said, "are needed at the present time only in our large cities and towns."²⁷ There should be, he felt, technical courses in the primary schools such as sewing, modeling, and drawing. The grammar schools and high schools, however, should provide separate rooms or buildings and bring in machinery to teach the skills necessary for employment.²⁸

Once more the legislature remained passive and did nothing to encourage technical education. Wickersham considered next contemporary national problems as a part of his attempt to teach educators that they must support his campaign. In the *Pennsylvania School Journal*, he explained that although "a strike is an indication of growing intelligence on the part of the workingmen who take part,"²⁹ it was still a difficult method for them to use in improving their positions in life. A better method, he suggested, would be for the schools

to provide technical education. This would assist the workingman to "increase his wages, to improve the character of his work, to elevate his condition."³⁰

In the spring of 1878, he called for school shops. The best thing a school can do for a pupil, he remarked, is to give him "a knowledge of practical mechanics that he may be able to help himself by being useful to others."³¹

Wickersham anticipated changing educational thought by noting:

"The word education is evidently to assume a larger meaning. It must, in the future, imply a knowledge of the means of gaining a livelihood as well as a knowledge of languages and accounts."³²

In the following years he voiced similar feelings. Men educated by technical schools were in demand. This need, he said, must somehow be satisfied, and once again he proved to his satisfaction that it was only sensible to include technical education as a part of the public school curriculum.³³

His final article on technical education appeared in the *Pennsylvania School Journal* in 1880. Wickersham was nearing the end of both his superintendency and his editorship. He devoted his entire article to praise of the Manual Training High School of Washington University in St. Louis. He berated the Pennsylvania legislature for not acting on his recommendations for technical education. "We have," he observed, "allowed ourselves to be outstripped by the more progressive people of Missouri."³⁴ He pointed out that the school in St. Louis was well-organized and efficient and as a result of its work numerous young men would be employed. "Many of them," Wickersham noted, "will look back to this school as the institution which helped them to be both willing and able to work."³⁵

Wickersham's attempts to gain a state-mandated curriculum for the common schools which would include such subjects as vocal music, drawing, and technical education were not successful. His proposals simply were not heeded. It is more likely that his greatest influence on curriculum and methods in the schools occurred as a result of the books he published in 1865 and his editorial work and articles in the *Pennsylvania School Journal*. *Methods of Instruction* and *School Economy* were unquestionably influential. The object methods and progression from the concrete to the abstract in teaching were no doubt widespread in Pennsylvania. That the legislature would not heed Wickersham's pleas for innovative change in the schools in no way detracts from his purposeful campaign. He was indefatigable in his efforts if he believed he was right. His defeats did not deter him. Throughout his term as superintendent of Pennsylvania's schools, he kept up the pressure to improve education by improving the curriculum and teaching. He was too far ahead of his time for Pennsylvania.

Endnotes

1. *Dictionary of American Biography*, 1936 ed., s.v. "Wickersham, James Pyle," by Robert Francis Seyboldt.

2. James P. Wickersham, *School Economy* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott and Co., 1865).
3. James P. Wickersham, *Methods and Instruction* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott and Co., 1865). Wickersham is better known in the twentieth century for his classic, *A History of Education in Pennsylvania* (Lancaster, Pa.: Inquirer Publishing Co., 1886).
4. Horace Mann was Secretary of the Massachusetts Board of Education from 1837-48. He wrote his famous *Annual Reports* in that period and founded the *Common School Journal* in 1837. See *The Republic and the School*, ed. Lawrence Cremin, Classics in Education No. 1 (New York: Teachers College Columbia University, 1957), pp. 3-28.
5. John Dewey started his graduate work at Johns Hopkins in 1884. After an illustrious career teaching and writing, Dewey published his last essay in 1952. See John Dewey, Introduction to *The Use of Resources in Education* by Elsie Ripley Clapp (New York: Harper and Brothers Publishers, 1952), pp. vii-xi. See also Curti, *The Social Ideas of American Educators*, p. 592 and Cremin, *The Transformation of the School*, p. 349.
6. Wickersham, *A History of Education in Pennsylvania*, p. 552.
7. Brubacher, John Seiler, *A History of the Problems of Education*, (New York: McGraw Hill Co.), 1947, pp. 222-227.
8. Curti, *The Social Ideas of American Educators*, pp. 166-167.
9. William DeFellenberg, "Pestalozzi, DeFellenberg and Wehrli," *American Journal of Education* 10 (March 1861); pp. 81-82.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 206.
11. Henry Barnard, "Pestalozzianism in the United States," *American Journal of Education* 30 (July 1880): pp. 561-572.
12. Brubacher, pp. 222-223.
13. James P. Wickersham, "Culture," *Lippincott's Magazine*, 1 (March 1868): pp. 280.
14. *Ibid.*
15. *Ibid.*, p. 281. (Italics mine.)
16. PSCSR, 1873, p. xxix.
17. PSCSR, 1874, p. xxv.
18. *Ibid.*
19. *PSPiR*, 1875, p. xxv.
20. *Ibid.*, pp. xxv-xxvi.
21. *Ibid.*, p. xxvi.
22. *PSRiR*, 1876, p. xliv.
23. James P. Wickersham, "DeFellenberg, A Swiss Educator," *Pennsylvania School Journal* 24 (February 1876): pp. 253-255.
24. James P. Wickersham, "Editorial Department," *Pennsylvania School Journal* 24 (February 1876): pp 273-274.
25. James P. Wickersham, "Technical Education: The Missing Link Supplied," *Pennsylvania School Journal* 26 (November 1877): p. 175.
26. *PSPiR*, 1877, p. xvii.
27. *Ibid.*, p. xix.
28. *Ibid.*
29. James P. Wickersham, "Education the Remedy for the Wrongs of the Workingmen," *Pennsylvania School Journal* 26 (February 1878): p. 278.
30. *Ibid.*, p. 279.
31. James P. Wickersham, "School Shops," *Pennsylvania School Journal* 26

(May 1878); p. 374.

32. *Ibid.*

33. James P. Wickersham, "Industrial Education," *Pennsylvania School Journal* 28 (March 1878): pp. 375-376.

34. James P. Wickersham, "Manual Training School at St. Louis," *Pennsylvania School Journal* 28 (April 1880): p. 389.

35. *Ibid.*, p. 393.