

The Coalition That Supported the Smith-Hughes Act or a Case for Strange Bedfellows

John Hillison
Virginia Tech

Synopsis

It took a powerful coalition of unlikely allies to support and gain passage of the Smith-Hughes Act in 1917. This coalition had labor interests, manufacturers interests, a professional educators' organization, two political parties, agricultural interests, and home economics interests. It had powerful and interesting individual personalities. The coalition was held together by the National Society for the Promotion of Industrial Education, a forerunner of the American Vocational Association. Because of natural antagonisms, the coalition lasted long enough to pass the Act and then disintegrated very quickly. When the selfish differences of the coalition members were put aside, strong Federal vocational legislation was achieved. Contemporary supporters may learn a great deal from such accomplishments.

Many organizations and individuals played influential roles in the coalition that supported passage of the Smith-Hughes Act. An examination of their points of view demonstrated many initially antagonistic perspectives. This article examines the historical perspectives of the prominent agencies and individuals involved and notes how differing points of view were compromised and altered. Several positions had to be moderated in order to establish a successful coalition. If these conflicts, both real and potential, had not been resolved, the Smith-Hughes Act would not have become a reality in 1917.

From 1900 to 1917 a great deal of activity occurred with reference to Federal vocational legislation. More than 30 bills introduced in Congress had implications for vocational education. By 1912 the Page-Wilson Bill proposed support for cooperative extension services and vocational education. By 1914 these were separated with passage of the Smith-Lever Act and creation of the Commission on National Aid to Vocational Education. By 1914 it had become obvious that passing a bill providing federal support for vocational education would not be simple. Strong leadership in the Congress, a supportive President, and a powerful coalition were needed.

Members of the Coalition

National Society for the Promotion of Industrial Education (NSPIE)

The NSPIE was founded in 1906 for the purpose of bringing together the forces interested in supporting passage of federal legislation supporting vocational education (Richards, 1906). Richards went on to report that the organization's members consisted of "... prominent men of affairs, employers, representatives of labor, social students, and educators." Charles Prosser became executive secretary of the NSPIE in 1912 and later served as a member of the 1914 Commission on Aid to Vocational Education. The organization proved to be very politically astute and provided the glue that held the coalition together long enough to ensure passage of the Smith-Hughes Act. After its primary objective

was accomplished, the NSPIE was dissolved and became a forerunner of the American Vocational Association. The NSPIE was the most important part of the coalition, and in one sense, a microcosm of it.

American Federation of Labor (AFL)

A primary interest of the AFL was to maintain a modestly elitist status for its members, as most were employed in skilled occupations. They wanted to have similar opportunities for their own children. If their children dropped out of school before obtaining high school diplomas, they would probably not be able to obtain skilled jobs. If their children went on to college, they would probably find professional jobs and join the intellectual elite – a group typical AFL members did not trust. A high school education was just right for the typical member's child, and vocational education would encourage that child to stay in school and assist with the development of desired technical skills.

Because of mistrust of private trade school vocational education, leaders of the AFL believed that vocational education should be part of the public school system. Part of the union's concern was that manufacturers might gain control of private trade schools (Lazerson & Grubb, 1974). In 1907 the AFL passed a resolution showing distaste for private trade schools, “... having in mind the experience of many of our national unions with the so-called trade school, which attempted to teach a short cut to trade and which on some occasions was used as a weapon against the trade union movement do not favor any movement having this ulterior object view” (Report of Proceedings, 1907, p. 173).

The AFL passed a resolution at its 1907 convention which stated: “Resolved that we do endorse any policy, or any society or association having for its object the raising of the standard of Industrial Education and the teaching of the higher technique of our various industries” (Report of Proceedings, 1907, p. 173).

Samuel Gompers, the feisty and diminutive president of the AFL, was a strong supporter of vocational education. He wrote editorials supporting it in the *American Federalist* and testified before Congress. In addition, the NSPIE was prepared to have Gompers visit President Woodrow Wilson as soon as any legislation was passed, ensuring the President's support (Minutes, 1915). In order to accomplish all of this support and become a part of the coalition, the AFL had to overcome a natural antagonism with such other coalition members as the United States Chamber of Commerce and the National Association of Manufacturers.

National Education Association (NEA)

Early on the NEA had speakers at its national convention making points such as: “Generally speaking, one-third of our menfolk are in agriculture, and one-third in the non-agricultural productive areas; while two-thirds of our women are in the vocation of homemaking” (Hayes, 1908, p. 1).

As early as 1896, the National Education Association had a department of business education (Wirth, 1980). During its 1907 convention, a committee was appointed to make recommendations at its next annual convention for manual training (Journal, 1910). The Secretary of NEA, D. W. Springer, testified to the 1914 Commission on Vocational Education stating the organization's support of Federal legislation on vocational education (Report, 1914). While publicly supporting the Smith-Hughes Act, the NEA had misgivings about the possibility of a dual school system. In fact, in 1918 the NEA called for repeal of the Smith-Hughes Act if it meant the establishment of a dual school system (“War Platform,” 1918). An even earlier concern was that no educators were appointed as members of the 1914 Commission.

National Association of Manufactures (NAM)

Members of NAM were concerned about the quality and ability level of new employees. In general, the membership considered their new employees to be poorly trained. Both NAM

and its members viewed vocational education as a way of better educating and training new employees.

Eleven years before passage of the Smith-Hughes Act, NAM was asking important questions about industrial education. An example came from the 1907 convention:

Here is an exceedingly important part of the general labor question. Industrial education will transform children's work into play, and at the same time equip the children to do the highly skilled and high salaried work for which we manufacturers now, in a large degree, rely on foreigners, our apprentice system having been virtually abolished in many trades by the labor unions. (Proceedings, 1907, P. 41)

A publication endorsing the Page-Wilson Bill of 1912 made several points about the advantages of Federal support for vocational education. The NAM publication made statements such as: "The whole country is awakening to the imperative need of industrial education" (Federal Aid, 1912, P. 1) and "This country cannot prosper nor be socially sound with only individual states or communities giving proper education. The whole country must give it" (Federal Aid, 1912, p. 1). NAM had to overcome its natural mistrust of Samuel Gompers and the AFL to support publicly funded vocational education.

U. S. Chamber of Commerce

The United States Chamber of Commerce was interested in having a well prepared workforce that would enhance industrial efficiency. As early as 1913, the Chamber passed a resolution supporting Federal support for vocational education.

At its first annual meeting, in January 1913, resolutions were adopted by the National Chamber endorsing Federal aid and encouragement in the establishment of vocational schools of manufacturing, commerce, agriculture, and home economics. The resolutions also endorsed the Page bill in its essential provisions and urged enactment (Referendum, 1916).

In 1916 leaders of the U. S. Chamber conducted a national survey of its membership to determine their thoughts on the topic of Federal support for vocational education. An example was the statement, "The committee recommends liberal Federal appropriations for promotion of vocational education in the United States" (Referendum, 1916, p. 1). The vote on the statement was 831 1/2 votes in favor and 109 1/2 against. The committee concluded that the Chamber was committed to all of the questions submitted to the membership as more than one-third of the members voted and more than two-thirds of the votes cast were in favor of federal support for vocational education (Referendum, 1916).

National Democratic Party

The Democratic Party supported Federal funding for vocational education in delegate-endorsed platform planks at both the 1912 and 1916 conventions. "The Democratic convention passed a strong declaration for national grants to agricultural education, household arts, and industrial training" (Minutes, 1912).

Although Senator Carroll Page of Vermont, a Republican and strong supporter of Federal support for vocational education, introduced what was to be called the Page-Wilson Bill, he was not successful in obtaining support in the U. S. Senate. Page eventually had to trust and turn over Senate leadership to Hoke Smith, a Democrat from Georgia. As a result of Democratic success in the election of 1916, Smith assumed a greater leadership role in the Senate and was more likely to succeed as a member of the majority party. The Smith-Hughes Act was also endorsed by and signed into law by a Democratic President, Woodrow Wilson.

Progressive (Bullmoose) Party

"The Progressive Party endorsed the idea of part-time and continuation schools and favored agricultural education, ..." (Minutes, 1912). The champion of the Bullmoose Party

and its presidential standard-bearer in 1912, Teddy Roosevelt, was a strong supporter of vocational education. While serving as President (and a member of the Republican Party at the time), Roosevelt stated, "Our school system has hitherto been well-nigh wholly lacking on the side of industrial training, of the training which fits a man for the shop and the farm" (Roosevelt, 1907, p. 3). While a member of the Republican Party, Teddy Roosevelt appointed the Country Life Commission which brought further attention to vocational education when it suggested, "... the public schools were asked to incorporate courses in vocational agriculture and nature study in the curricula" (Ellsworth, 1960, p. 168).

American Home Economics Association (AHEA)

The American Home Economics Association was founded for the purpose of securing recognition of subjects related to the home in the curriculum of existing schools and colleges. In 1912 AHEA appointed a committee on legislation whose purpose was to provide guidance to the organization on the issue of Federal support for vocational education (Editorials, 1912).

Mary Schenck Woolman (1916), a member of the AHEA legislative committee and a member of the committee on the Smith-Hughes Bill of the National Society for the Promotion of Industrial Education, recommended support with comments such as:

The United States is an increasingly important industrial nation. Success will depend largely on her working people. Neither the public schools nor systems of apprenticeship are meeting the need of adequate education for workers. Therefore the majority are able to obtain only unskilled jobs. Some means must be provided by which the call of the skilled industries must be met. (p. 241)

The Commission gave serious thought to the question of training girls in Home Economics. It was felt that every girl no matter what her future calling was to be, should be prepared for the varied duties of the home as an integral part of general education in the elementary and high school. (p. 245)

One area of concern to AHEA that had to be settled had to do with equal pay for women in vocational education. An early version of the Smith-Hughes Bill provided that the Federal specialists in agriculture and industry would receive salaries of \$7,000 apiece while the specialist in home economics would receive a salary of only \$6,000. When challenged on this point, Senator Hoke Smith commented, "I ... understand that the very ablest teachers of home economics make a salary of but \$5,000 a year ..." and "A great leader of industrial education could take the superintendence of a big plant and command a high salary; his knowledge gives him an opportunity to make more: and my advice was that the very highest salary should be paid to a teacher of home economics ..." (*Congressional Record*, 1916, p. 11874). The final version of the Smith-Hughes Act did not specify salaries for service area specialists.

General Federation of Women's Clubs

In 1914 the General Federation of Women's Clubs asked Charles Prosser to write about vocational education for its membership. In his article Prosser (1914) emphasized such points as a definition of vocational education which included preparation to be intelligent producers of the goods of life – including the understanding of the work done. He viewed general education as preparing people to be intelligent consumers. Prosser went on to emphasize that the nation needed vocational education because the country's prosperity and the well-being of wage earners were at stake. The first suggestion he made to members on how to support the funding of vocational education was to co-operate with other agencies. Prosser described the coalition as, "All kinds of organizations, national, state and local in scope, and commercial, agricultural, civic, social, philanthropic and educational in aim are working at the problem of vocational education" (1914).

Helen Louise Johnson (1915), chair of the home economics department of the General Federation of Women's Clubs, wrote a letter to Alvin Dodd, executive secretary of NSPIE, emphasizing her organization's position on the inclusion of home economics in the Smith-Hughes Bill:

I had a most interesting conversation with the members of the Bureau of Education when in Washington, in relation to the Smith-Hughes Bill, and am glad to report that they are very ready to insert the term home economics where it is omitted from the bill. (p. 1)

One of the things which astonishes me is that after all these years of strenuous work and endeavor on the parts of those who are leading the home economics movement is this common misunderstanding of what we include under this term. Cooking and sewing, as such, are such minor parts of home economics that every endeavor must be used by those who represent this group of subjects to prevent any move which would seem to emphasize the activities of the household as being of major importance, instead of means to a very much greater end, which home economics definitely teaches. (p. 2)

Wallace's Farmer

Before the days of radio and television, a very influential form of mass media was magazines. One prominent rural magazine was *Wallace's Farmer*. This magazine was an early critic of the status quo in public education and supporter of vocational education. For example, "If the director could induce the teacher to lay aside the book and present problems likely to come up in farm life, it would tend to make a good deal better farmers out of the next generation" (A Word, 1908, p. 338).

A suggestion to combine general education and aspects of vocational education was also made:

It would be a great thing for the next generation of farmers if the pupil were taught in the common school a number of terms which they will be obliged to use as farmers hereafter. It is very hard for many a middle aged farmer to get a clear idea of what is meant by protein, carbohydrates, fats, nitrogen free extract, etc. Now, these terms are no harder than many which the pupils learn and which are of no earthly use to them in their every-day lives. (A Word, 1908, P. 338)

Hoard's Dairyman

This influential magazine was published by W. D. Hoard, who served a term as governor of Wisconsin and as a member of the board of trustees of the University of Wisconsin. As early as 1895, Hoard noted a need for vocational education to help prepare farmers:

We are in a strange state, agriculturally speaking, in this country. We have a great army of farmers, and not one in ten thousand has been given the advantage of any special course of study, or systematic course of reading in behalf of his chosen life work. No other business has such a record as that and no other business, except farming, could stand it for a single year. Indeed, the farmer would soon perish at his task were it not a kind Providence does most of the work. May be (*sic*) that is the reason why he believes so little in the advantages of special agricultural study. If he was situated like the carpenter, shoemaker, or blacksmith, having to frame and fashion the outgrowth of his own work, with no intervention of Providence to help him out, in the shape of a "good season," we believe he would be more keenly alive to the cultivation of thought and study. (Hoard, 1895, p. 419)

Farmers Union

In a 1909 publication Barrett noted that the Farmers Union "has led an unprecedented fight within the ranks of its own membership for schools that would train the farmer boys in practical farm science" (p. 89). The Farmers Union was an early supporter of an agricultural

school known as the cotton school. Barrett (1909) noted that Alabama held a most successful cotton school at Auburn in 1907:

The purpose of these cotton schools was to teach the farmers how to grade cotton. Boys from every section of the state in which the school was held flocked in droves to the schools. They were eager to learn. The agitation which had been going on for several months; the debates in the conventions and other meetings of the Union, and numerous newspaper articles, by farmers and others interested in these schools had created a thirst for this kind of knowledge that was little short of marvelous. (p. 91)

At its annual convention in 1912, the Farmers Union endorsed all pending vocational legislation before Congress (Blauch, 1933).

National Grange

The National Grange took stands on education as early as the 1870s. In 1879 the Grange advocated compulsory education (Buck, 1913). Several state Granges worked on educational issues during this decade. Chief among them were Wisconsin, Indiana, Maine, and Michigan (Buck, 1913). Buck also noted the chief concern was uniform textbooks to be offered at cost.

Concerning vocational education, Blauch (1933) stated "the greatest interest among farmers was expressed through the Grange" (p. 82). He further noted that numerous state Granges and local organizations were active in promoting the Page-Wilson Vocational Bill of 1912. The National Grange encouraged every state Grange to assist with the enactment of the Page-Wilson Vocational Bill and to make the influence "rigorous and continuous" (Blauch, 1933, p. 82). The National Grange claimed a degree of credit for passage of the Smith-Hughes Act when it stated that the Grange "Fathered legislation creating the Vo-Ag program – and consistently supported advancement of the work since it was established ..." (Robinson, 1967).

Association of American Agricultural Colleges and Experiment Stations

This organization had two concerns with Federal support of vocational education. One had to do with the location of experiment stations which the organization feared would be attached to Congressional District Agricultural Schools, as they were in Alabama. The second concern had to do with merging of the co-operative extension service and vocational education. Both the Dolliver Bill of 1910 and the Page-Wilson Bill of 1912 made such a proposal. As soon as this organization was assured that experiment stations would not be allied with schools and that the extension service was separated from vocational education in the Smith-Lever Act of 1914, it became a supporter of the Smith-Hughes Bill. Wirth (1980) noted the importance of passage of the Smith-Lever Act, "A period of fascinating politicking went on until the enactment of Smith-Hughes, including a *quid pro quo* agreement whereby the Smith-Lever Act for the farmers was passed in return for support of agriculturists for Smith-Hughes, which became law in 1917" (pp. 91-92).

Dr. A. C. True, president of the Association of American Agricultural Colleges and Experiment Stations, read a statement to the 1914 Commission which had passed at its 1912 convention:

Resolved, that this association reaffirms its declaration favoring "Federal aid for public schools of secondary education in agriculture, home economics, the trades and industries, including manual training of teachers for these schools in the several states, as may be determined by the legislature." (Report, 1914, p. 223)

Other Interests

A few other members of the coalition played lesser roles in guaranteeing passage of the Smith-Hughes Act, but were, nonetheless, members of this truly remarkable coalition.

Settlement house reformers, such as Jane Addams, supported vocational education as a way to permit the downtrodden to participate more fully in the nation's economic system. The *National Vocational Guidance Association*, led by Frank Parsons, favored the alternative careers permitted by vocational education. In fact, by 1912 this organization had started to hold national conventions in conjunction with the NSPIE. *The Women's Trade Union League* supported vocational education as establishing career opportunities for women. *Normal schools* were interested in the possibility of providing training for vocational teachers and were mentioned prominently in bills preceding the Smith-Hughes Act.

Summary

Seldom has any segment of the political scene at the Federal level witnessed a coalition as diverse and as successful as the one that supported the Smith-Hughes Act. Its diversity was one of its major strengths. When normally antagonistic groups such as the United States Chamber of Commerce and the American Federation of Labor; two rival political parties; land-grant universities and normal schools; rival agricultural organizations; rival agricultural magazines; and normally inactive women's organizations worked together, they were certain to accomplish a great deal.

Diversity was also one of the coalition's weaknesses. It existed only long enough to ensure passage of the Act. Disintegration started as soon as the NEA became concerned with the possibility of a dual school system. The National Association of Manufacturers and the American Federation of Labor quickly agreed that again there was little on which to agree. Other natural rivalries re-emerged.

One of the important lessons of the coalition is that when selfish interests can be put aside, even temporarily, much can be accomplished. Federal vocational legislation passed since 1917, especially in recent years, has often represented a patchwork quilt of special interest groups that refused to compromise. Coalition members were willing to compromise and did so for the benefit of vocational education.

References

- Barrett, C. S. (1909). *The mission, history and times of the Farmers' Union*. Nashville, TN: Marshall & Bruce.
- Blauch, L. E. (1933). *Federal cooperation in agricultural extension work, vocational education, and vocational rehabilitation*. United States Department of Agriculture Bulletin No. 15, Washington, DC: United States Government Printing Office.
- Buck, J. S. (1913). *The Granger movement, a study of agricultural organization and its political, economic and social manifestations 1870-1880*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University.
- Congressional Record*. (1916, July 31). Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office.
- Editorials. (1912). *The Journal of Home Economics*. 4(2), 186-187.
- Ellsworth, C. S. (1960). Theodore Roosevelt's country life commission. *Agricultural History*. 24(4), p. 168.
- Federal Aid for Industrial Education. (1912). National Association of Manufacturers. New York.
- Gay, L. R. (1976). *Educational research*. Columbus, OH: Charles E. Merrill.
- Hayes, W. M. (1908, February 25). *Agriculture, industries, and home economics in our public schools*. Address delivered before the Department of Superintendents. Chicago: University of Chicago.
- Hoard, W. D. (1895, July 19). The effect of our school text books. *Hoard's Dairymen*, p. 419.
- Johnson, H. L. (1915, December 15). Personal letter to Alvin Dodd. Alexandria, VA: American Vocational Association.
- Journal of Proceedings and Addresses. (1910). Forty-eighth annual meeting held at Boston, MA College of Agriculture and Life Sciences. Wianan, MN: National Education Association.
- Lazerson, M., & Grubb, W. N. (1974). *American education and vocationalism – A documentary history*. New York: Teachers College, Columbia.

- Minutes of the Meeting of the Board of Managers. (1912, October 19). National Society for the Promotion of Industrial Education. Alexandria, VA: American Vocational Association.
- Minutes of the Meeting of the Executive Committee. (1915, September 15). National Society for the Promotion of Industrial Education, Alexandria, VA: American Vocational Association.
- Proceedings of the Twelfth Annual Convention, National Association of Manufacturers for the United States. (1907). New York.
- Prosser, C. A. (1914). What can members of the General Federation of Women's Clubs do to aid the Movement for Vocational Education. Alexandria, VA: American Vocational Association.
- Referendum on the Report of the Committee on Education Regarding Federal Aid for Vocational Education. (1916). United States Chamber of Commerce.
- Report of the Commission on National Aid to Vocational Education. (1914). Hearings before the Commission. Washington, DC: U. S. Government Printing Office.
- Report of the Proceedings. (1907). Twenty-seventh annual convention of the American Federation of Labor. Norfolk, VA.
- Richards, C. R. (1906, December 18). Personal Letter. Alexandria, VA: American Vocational Association.
- Robinson, W. L. (1967). *The Grange 1867-1967: First Century of service and evolution*. Washington, DC: The National Grange.
- Roosevelt, T. (1907). *The man who works with his hands*. Office of the Secretary, Circular No. 24. Washington, DC: United States Department of Agriculture.
- War platform. (1919, August 16). *School Life*, 1(2), p. 11.
- Wirth, A. G. (1980). *Education in the technological society: The vocational-liberal studies controversy in the early twentieth century*. Washington, DC: University Press of America, Inc.
- Woolman, M. S. (1916). The Smith-Hughes Bill. *The Journal of Home Economics*, 8(5), pp. 241-246.
- Word to school directors. (1908). *Wallace's Farmer*, p. 338.