

## Renaming Schools Advisory Committee

November 7, 2016

Mary V Rorty

The problem facing our community at the moment at this forum seems to be the question of whether to retain or change the name of three schools in our district. I've been asked to respond to the guiding questions.

**Question I:** *What is most important for the PAUSD community to understand about the history of eugenics, including its key supporters and opponents, and the roles of Jordan, Terman and Cubberly?*

It seems most important to me to understand that the history of eugenics is part of **two** ongoing stories.

There's a *scientific story*. Eugenics<sup>1</sup> is an early chapter in a story that includes epidemiology, the development of the social sciences, and the expanding (and increasingly important) science of human (and animal) genetics.

And there's a *social story*. At the early part of the last century, the nascent science of genetics, like many advances in knowledge, was turned -- in many countries, and in many states, including our own -- to what seem to us now reprehensible and morally problematic uses.

Eugenics as a social movement had two sides; scholars speak of 'positive' and 'negative' eugenics.

One side of the story was to encourage the birth of children with heritable characteristics that might be hoped to improve the species; who can fulfill their potential and contribute to the improvement of the human condition. To this end there were at the turn of the century pictures of winners of "fitter families" contests at state fairs, modeled on the stock and produce shows at those same fairs. The winners received the same blue ribbons that were handed out for the best cows or begonias. **Positive** eugenics was intended to encourage the 'fit' (read handsome, healthy, successful, well-to-do) to marry each other and have HUGE families.<sup>2</sup>

The other side of the social story was **negative** eugenics, discouraging the birth of children with heritable potentially undesirable characteristics. And the science story was still very young, and very unreliable: among the characteristics considered at the time to be potentially heritable were not only deafness, chronoplasia (=dwarfism) and feeblemindedness, but also laziness, shiftlessness, criminality, drunkenness and poverty. The social story was classist and racist;

---

<sup>1</sup> The term was coined in 1883 by an Englishman, Francis Galton, as a shorthand name for developing the evolutionary theory of his cousin Darwin toward the improvement of species through selective breeding.

<sup>2</sup> This is an aspiration as old as Plato, who encouraged a state-run program of marriage to strengthen the Guardian class, and indeed persists, no doubt, in each of our hearts for our own children, whom we wish to marry well and do well.

different races—indeed, to some extent even populations of different countries—were considered as if they were analogs of different species. The social story led -- very quickly -- to compulsory sterilization laws.<sup>3</sup> The term fell into irretrievable disrepute with Hitler's implementation of eugenics in the '30s and '40s, and his genocidal policy of extermination of gypsies and jews. By that point every organization that had the word in its title or self description **renamed** itself.

So there is a sense in which the second of our stories—the social story—came to a screeching halt. The scientific story continues. Now we call it “genetics.”<sup>4</sup>

So what about Jordan, Cubberly and Terman?

Jordan was a zoologist. He had a medical degree<sup>5</sup>, and was a relentless and well-traveled naturalist. Before coming to Stanford as its first president in 1891 he had been a professor of natural history and a president of Indiana University. The scientific story continued—indeed, still continues—to develop, and he was a very important contributor to it. His main interest in life seems to have been fish. In his chatty biographical work *Days of a Man* (vol 2, 1922) he talks endlessly about his trips around the world begging samples of new fish from colleagues and strangers in Japan, Australia, New Zealand, and Europe, and was responsible for adding many many new species to the developing science of ichthyology. He was on many national and international government commissions for what we would nowadays think of as conservation work, and also a founding member, by 1910, of several eugenics societies. He was an enthusiastic pacifist; much of his pamphleteering published by the Unitarians.

Cubberly and Terman were among the faculty Jordan brought to Stanford. None of the three were “ivory tower” academics; all three did what we'd now call empirical research on their subjects of interest. Jordan's research on the effect of the civil war on the population of several Virginia Counties was an early example of

---

<sup>3</sup> The first state to pass one was Indiana in 1907. California passed one in 1909, and by 1931 some 30 states had similar laws. Some sources estimate that in the next 50 years about 60,000 people were sterilized, mainly in institutions—1/3 of them in California. The Human Betterment Society of Pasadena published a pamphlet in 1937 [*Human Sterilization Today*] which estimated that California had by then sterilized 12,000 insane and feebleminded patients. The California law wasn't repealed until 1974, and 19 states still had such laws in 1985. Governor Gray Davis made a public apology in in 2003, the fifth state to do so. (Or was it 1979, as one of y fellow panelists suggested?)

<sup>4</sup> Ask genetics what its name was before it passed through the Ellis Island of history...

<sup>5</sup> --Of which he was not particularly proud; he descried the educational standards of medical schools in those days as being ‘in the medieval period.’ [Carlson, E.A. (2001): *The Unfit: A History of a Bad Idea*, 185.] His own standards for what a medical school should require he put into effect when he established the Stanford Medical School.

epidemiological research, and a contributor to his passionate pacifism.<sup>6</sup> Cubberly, like Jordan himself, was an educational theorist.<sup>7</sup> He was for 40 years one of the most influential theorists of education, demanding of schools some degree of administrative expertise—and justifying his recommendations by doing empirical studies across the country of what worked and what didn't in extant school systems. Terman was an early psychologist, and very interested in the genetic study of genius. He was chair of the psychology department at Stanford for 20 years, and retired only in 1942. He was the father of the Stanford-Binet IQ test, for which he sought empirical confirmation by initiating a longitudinal study which followed the careers of 1500 young students.<sup>8</sup>

I know for sure Terman served with Jordan on the boards of various eugenics associations; and something I read claimed he was in favor of compulsory sterilization. I'm not sure whether Cubberly counts as a 'key supporter' of eugenics or not.

**Question 2:** *What factors and perspectives are most important when making value judgments about eugenicists?*

For me, one of the most important things to consider is the historical context. What was the **state of knowledge** about the subject in question at the time the people we are considering held their positions? And the subject in question, here, is *genetics*.

We haven't yet answered all questions about what traits are heritable. People still worry about a 'genetic predisposition' to alcoholism; but we often acknowledge that for the most part the only heritable cause of poverty is that the people in question did not inherit any money or property.

And we speak from our state of knowledge, and from our (historically conditioned) perspective. In our liberal constitutional state we try (with varying degrees of success) to be very conscious of the dangers of racism and classism. Some people try harder than others, but for the most part we think it's better to minimize them. I suspect this whole controversy has its roots in some such aspiration.

And for me, a second crucially important factor is the difference between **voluntary** and **compulsory**. Compulsory sterilization for the sake of imposing a standard of "fitness" is ethically (and since 1974 in California, legally) negative and

---

<sup>6</sup> Jordan DA, Jordan HE (1914): *War's Aftermath: A preliminary Study of the Eugenics of war as illustrated by the civil war of the United States and the late wars in the Balkans.* The pamphlet, like several other of Jordan's papers, was published by the Unitarians.

<sup>7</sup> Jordan is described by Carlson as being responsible at both Indiana and Stanford for the innovation of the liberal arts curriculum, where students take general education courses in their first two years and only specialize ("major") in their last two.

<sup>8</sup> It may be going on still, if there are any surviving 'Termites,' as they described themselves. I became very fond of Terman, reading about his life; I think of him as an early champion of the Nerd.

invidious. Voluntary sterilization, by vasectomy or tubal ligation remains a social option for contraception. Some of the literature speaks of this as ‘liberal’ eugenics—premised on principles of privacy, the liberty of people to make reproductive choices, and individual, rather than state sponsored.<sup>9</sup> As the scientific story has developed, prenatal testing for genetic diseases has become possible, but discussion about the conditions under which it is legal to interrupt a pregnancy continue. And some issues associated with our scientific story of genetics are state sponsored and thus in some sense *involuntary*. California requires newborn screening for a range of things, some heritable, some not; and it requires it not only for hospital births, but for home births as well.<sup>10</sup>

And-- even voluntary genetic testing is open to question and deserves (and is getting) some discussion. Some disability activists are inclined to draw analogies between contemporary genetic testing practices and the holocaust.<sup>11</sup>

**Question 3:** *How is the academic, social and emotional well-being of students, families and community members impacted when they experience what they believe is insensitivity and bias in schools?*

I think there is no doubt that everyone in this room—on either side of the renaming question—can agree that bullying, ridicule, exclusion, rudeness and any form of incivility and denigration has a negative effect on our children.

I’m not sure that the name of the school they attend rises to that degree of disrespect—especially in light of the national ranking of Palo Alto schools.

**Question 4:** *What, if anything, should be done about the fact that PAUSD has schools named for prominent eugenicists who may also have been key figures in forming and developing our community?*

History is a bear. It’s a puzzle, a quicksand, a conundrum. It doesn’t even exist. It’s a creation at every moment of the people telling the story, and of the people hearing the story.

---

<sup>9</sup> Personally, I don’t like the language of ‘liberal’ eugenics, myself. I think the word has been thoroughly appropriated by the social, not the scientific, story, and, irredeemably tainted by its social history, should be dispensed with.

<sup>10</sup> This may be justified by public health considerations (like the law requiring children in public schools to be vaccinated, strengthened since this August to no longer allow religious or philosophical objections)—or just by the consideration that some of the conditions that can thereby be discovered are medically remediable, so the requirement is to everyone’s advantage.

<sup>11</sup> I edit an on-line newsletter for the American Philosophical Association that publishes, among other things, lots of discussion of the continuing possible misuse of contemporary (and future) genetic science, which is advancing at a rapid rate. Much contemporary science fiction books and film explore those possibilities, as does the literature on post-humanism.

You can keep the names of our schools, and make some history of those memorialized by them obligatory for all students in those schools, or in the district. You can tell a story that speaks only of the positive: that emphasizes the contributions of our three figures to the history of primary and secondary education in America, of the development at the turn of the century of psychology and the birth of the American model of education—indeed, of the empirical and quantitative sciences in general and of some very hard natural sciences in particular, memorialized in the names of your schools.<sup>12</sup>

You can tell a story that speaks only of the negative. There is displayed, in the writings and the social activism of our three figures, their relative ignorance of what we, a century later, may have learned about the issues with which they concerned themselves.

In either case, you will be choosing what history you will write, and what history your children will hear.

Is it a partial history?

Is it a revisionist history?

Or: you can change the names of your schools.

Is that a denial of history, an attempt at erasure? The evil that men do (Shakespeare tells us) lives after them; the good is oft interred with their bones. So let it be with David Starr Jordan. Is that a minimization of the importance of history? Someone<sup>13</sup> once warned that to fail to learn from the mistakes of history is to be doomed to repeat them. There are some mistakes here; can they, as the progress of the scientific story of genetics marches on, be repeated? All scientific advances have social implications. The sciences associated with genetics are no exception.

And its **our children** who will have to figure out what those possibilities are, and how to deal with them; how to avoid repeating, in a different form, the abuses of the past.

The options are under discussion; and as far as I am concerned, the hero of this controversy is the seventh grader who did some reading, and thought about it, and wrote about it, and raised the question. So the question has been raised. What to do with it?

I'd like to suggest that this controversy is a priceless educational opportunity for our schools and our children, and for the social decisions that this coming century will bring. Use the past to look forward. There must be **some** educational possibilities that are being overlooked in this controversy about the

---

<sup>12</sup> I borrow the term 'memorialized' from a letter written by David Kennedy to his alma mater Princeton University on the occasion of a dispute about whether to rename the Woodrow Wilson School of International Studies. To 'memorialize' is to remember. Not necessarily to honor, as I understand it—if so, holocaust museums would be so named to honor, rather than deplore, the events they commemorate.

<sup>13</sup> George Santayana, I think, or Winston Churchill.

names of our excellent schools. Renaming, or not renaming, can't be the only options.

Although I'm very grateful to have been invited to participate on this panel, and have learned a lot, there's a sense in which I'm an outsider to this particular debate. Although I now live in the unified school district, my own children were educated, not in Palo Alto schools, but in a school established in 1968 and named for the then-head of the school board (in Charlottesville Virginia -- a town not without some problems with its own history...) It is **this** community that has to decide the re-naming question.

But I'm also an educator, in my own rather narrow area—and I'm very conscious of the fact that this is a controversy about the names (and their implications) of—**SCHOOLS**.

So: you've invited a crazy incomer to talk about what to do about this historical, if awkward, fact. I have a suggestion.

Your three historical figures were researchers, empiricists, scientists.

Don't decide now.

Do some research—on the good, as well as the ill.

Conduct a STUDY—of the people to whom it IS important—your children.

They are the ones who have to address the issues the future might raise.

(1) Ask, of the present students in, and of a 4 year cohort of previous graduates of, those schools,

*Does the name of your school matter to you? How much? Why?*

*What, if anything, do you know about the person for whom your school was named?*<sup>14</sup>

(2) With our own excellent teachers, and the school board, and the resources available to you in this community, develop a curriculum unit or two—for the science course, or the history course, or just for itself. Institute it in our schools for some period of time—say—a year.

You and your teachers can talk to your children about all of the things these three men did, the good and the bad—and about the history of—**both** stories of -- the eugenics movement.

(3) Then, at the end of that time, revisit those two questions. If—and only if—more students care one way or another about the name of their school, the School Board can revisit the question of renaming; only this time, you'll have some small amount of data to help you decide what to do.

And whatever THAT decision is—either way, re-naming or deciding it doesn't matter – your children will be better prepared to face their futures.

---

<sup>14</sup> An audience member at the Forum suggested a third question: What does your black fellow-student think of that person? An excellent addition!

We want our children to know who we are, and who we aren't, and what we aspire to be, and what we want them to aspire to be. And they learn that not from the names of their schools, but from the stories that they hear, and those are the stories that we choose to tell them.

It's quite a responsibility. And I know you take it seriously, or you wouldn't be here this evening.