

Making a Mass Institution: Indianapolis and the American High School

By the close of the [19th] century, 2 inter-related facts became clear to Indianapolis school leaders and power brokers. First, the railroads and industry had altered the city's landscape permanently. While the population and economy were booming, the South Side [South of Washington St.], with its train whistles and plumes of smoke, became more and more working class and multi-ethnic; and the North Side, with its tree-lined streets and country clubs, became wealthier and predominantly populated by native-born whites. Second, the public high school [Shortridge], which educated more than 1,200 students in 1893, was in dire need of reform. Its campus on the North Side [at Michigan and Pennsylvania where the federal building now stands], celebrated as it was in the 1870s, was plainly inadequate for the middle-class and wealthy children who lived nearby. To complicate matters, significantly more working-class children, as well as small numbers of African American children, also wanted to attend the public high school, and they found Shortridge too far from their homes, not to mention overcrowded. The city had changed, and the high school with one foot still in the 1860s, had failed to keep up.

What the city school leaders resolved to do, though neither unusual nor irrational, affected the character of Indianapolis's neighborhoods and the high schools that serve them for generations: they mapped the growth of the secondary school system onto the city's emerging social class divisions. They would remodel and expand Shortridge in 1884 and again in 1905. Given its location at Michigan and Pennsylvania streets, it would primarily serve the increasingly college-bound children of the North Side. In addition, the board would open a second high school on the South Side in 1895, unabashedly named Manual High, and it would offer, alongside the traditional academic curriculum, "manual" or "industrial" courses. In contrast to Shortridge, it would primarily serve working-class children whom school leaders euphemistically referred to in official report as "the great masses," the "hand minded" or "those from homes of a different sort."

In short order, and as a direct result of school policy, the children of Shortridge High, dressed in their school colors of blue and white were nicknamed the "Northsiders." And their foes from Manual dressed in red and white, where the "Southsiders." Accordingly, "blue and white" and Shortridge stood for North Side and wealthy; "red and white" and Manual stood for "South Side" and "working-class"; when these two met on those terms, on the football field or elsewhere, the results were predictable. The realities of the 20th-century class antagonism, however implied in their actions were woven into their fights songs, their mascots, their pom-poms and their leather jackets from the start." p. 19-20, Making a Mass Institution by Dr. Kyle Steele

Shortridge and Manual became metaphors for a pyramid built around a class, neighborhood, race, ethnicity, religion, and ability-based Indianapolis high school caste system. IPS became a template for the initial development of other early 1900s school districts. In many ways it still exists today, reflected in the school hierarchy between/among traditional schools and charters.