*History of Education Quarterly* (2025), 1–7
doi:10.1017/heq.2025.8

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

https://doi.org/10.1017/heq.2025.8

IN MEMORIAM

# The Enduring Relevance of Arthur G. Powell

Robert L. Hampel

Professor Emeritus, School of Education, University of Delaware, USA
Email: hampel@udel.edu

Growing up middle class in New York City, Art Powell spent his adult life in and around top-tier New England schools. He died in July 2024, in his Cambridge house one mile from the Harvard campus where he earned a PhD and became the associate dean of the Graduate School of Education (HGSE) in 1968. From 1978 to 1990, he rode the subway from Cambridge to Boston, where he worked as the policy expert for the National Association of Independent Schools. Toward the south was Brown University, where Art often visited Ted Sizer, his close friend, a former HGSE dean, and collaborator on Coalition of Essential Schools and Annenberg Institute projects in the late 1980s and 1990s. Driving west, Art went to Amherst College reunions, fondly recalling the creative interdisciplinary core curriculum. To the north, his family and relatives spent each August on a small Maine peninsula bought by ancestors of Barbara Schieffelin, an HGSE doctoral student he married in 1968.

Art admired but also criticized the rarefied schools in his life. What he wrote about Harvard and private K-12 education described fragile achievements and missed opportunities alongside many praiseworthy accomplishments. He was harsher on public high schools, but he understood the greater challenges and constraints they faced. If independent schools in the 1980s and 1990s had lessons to teach public schools, the wisdom was tempered by the recognition that even the most advantaged can fall short or fail.

Art only published twice in this journal, and he rarely attended our annual meetings.[1] He never sought a faculty line, relying instead on foundation grants, administrative jobs, work with Sizer, and a few program evaluations. Yet he always considered himself an historian, even as his activities took him closer to the worlds of independent schools and education policy than to history of education forums. The three books he published depended on historical evidence and enriched what we know about the evolution of twentieth-century ed schools, high schools, and prep schools. The following analysis of two central themes in his writing tries to bring Art Powell back to us.

Full disclosure: I worked with Art several times. From 1981 to 1984 I was a research associate for "A Study of High Schools," a research project directed by Art and Ted

[1] Arthur G. Powell, "Speculations on the Early Impact of Schools of Education on Educational Psychology," *History of Education Quarterly* 11, no. 4 (Win. 1971), 406–12; Arthur G. Powell, "Notes on the Origins of Meritocracy in American Schooling," *History of Education Quarterly* 41, no. 1 (Spring 2001), 73–80.

© The Author(s), 2025. Published by Cambridge University Press on behalf of History of Education Society.

https://doi.org/10.1017/heq.2025.8

Sizer. In 1991 I interviewed faculty and staff at five prep schools for Art's third book, and I also helped with two smaller projects. We often read each other's drafts. Art was a friend and a mentor, so I offer this retrospective with affection as well as respect for his remarkable life.

## "The Vulnerability of Educational Communities"

This phrase is a chapter title from Powell's final book, but this lifelong insight first emerged in a doctoral seminar Powell attended on American universities from 1860 to 1920. Five papers from the class appeared as a 1965 book focused on Harvard, including Powell's essay on the education of educators.[2] From 1890 to 1920, Harvard's commitment to this new academic field was weak. Arts and Sciences faculty were skeptical, budgets stayed small, and President Charles Eliot thought research less important than the dissemination of best practices. The first professor, Paul Hanus, dreamed of education as a single discipline, but prospective students wanted an array of separate courses for various administrative roles. By World War I, "education had become many pursuits, not a single one."[3]

The paper from that seminar grew to a dissertation (1969) and then a book (1980) still unsurpassed as the finest history of a school of education. The lack of continuity, "the debilitating sense that nothing at all was assured," is its central point.[4] Sweeping changes in mission came and went in the push and pull among deans, presidents, faculty, donors, and practitioners. In the 1920s, for example, a two-year, full-time master's for recent college graduates replaced the old reliance on part-time electives for mid-career educators. A core curriculum led to a mandatory general examination. As with the MBA degree in business, uniform training for different jobs would supposedly turn young rookies into savvy professionals. No higher degrees would be necessary. President A. Lawrence Lowell and Dean Henry Holmes supported the plan, but the faculty disagreed on the core curriculum and the exam, while schoolmen continued to prefer the low cost/high reward of graduate credits earned in the summers and evenings.

Harvard's gyrations reflected major uncertainties throughout the field of education, as the book's title suggests. Four basic questions persisted: What education jobs were the most crucial? Did recruitment and selection matter more than coursework for finding a vanguard with nimble minds and admirable character? What forms of research and writing could create the "knowledge base" that modern disciplines need to sustain their legitimacy? And looking outward, how did the profession see its responsibility for helping Americans solve difficult social, political, and economic problems? Four tough questions for all educators and for each ed school. No wonder Harvard gave different answers at different times.

[2] Arthur G. Powell, "The Education of Educators at Harvard, 1891–1912," in *Social Sciences at Harvard, 1860–1920: From Inclusion to the Open Mind*, ed. Paul Buck (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1965), 223–74.

[3] Powell, "The Education of Educators at Harvard," 272.

[4] Arthur G. Powell, *The Uncertain Profession: Harvard and the Search for Educational Authority* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1980), 279.

https://doi.org/10.1017/heq.2025.8

Powell appreciated the school's periodic support of new ventures and fresh approaches. Shared purpose was not unknown. And when divisions precluded clear institutional commitments, Powell praised the school's willingness to face the issues, discuss options, and respect the dissenters. The faculty engaged rather than avoided the major challenges. "No illusions could be sustained for very long" in a disputatious community with a shared commitment to "constant reassessment."[5]

Powell found fewer shared commitments and less self-scrutiny in *The Shopping Mall High School*, the second of the three books from "A Study of High Schools." In the eleven public schools examined in 1981–82 by thirteen researchers in three rounds of interviews and classroom observations, Powell's team observed extraordinary variety in the curricular and extracurricular fare. Schools promised something for everyone, and from that abundance, students had unprecedented freedom to pick and choose. "It's all up to you," as one student said. College entrance requirements exerted surprisingly few constraints—the rapid expansion of higher education offered a place for almost everyone regardless of what they took in high school.

Nearly all educators embraced variety and choice, but beyond that, they rarely created or even discussed educational, let alone moral, priorities. *Neutrality* was Powell's word for the live-and-let-live spirit. Tolerance of diversity, the one rallying point, often meant the avoidance of conflict rather than working together. It also meant a reluctance to set performance standards beyond showing up, behaving, and trying as the basis for passing most courses. High schools had to enroll and graduate as many adolescents as possible in a country without a consensus on what skills and knowledge should earn a diploma. Hence the appeal of neutrality.

Within his figurative "mall," Powell identified five enclaves with much less variety, choice, and neutrality. Those "specialty shops" included honors courses, special education, vocational-technical fields, competitive extracurriculars, and programs for truants and troublemakers. Seemingly worlds apart, the shops all monitored students who sought specific outcomes. To get into Princeton, master carpentry, or overcome dyslexia required completion of certain tasks. Lower student-faculty ratios coupled with dedicated teachers yielded personal attention and clear expectations that reduced the risk of getting lost or drifting aimlessly in the mall. In contrast, the "unspecial" students outside the shops had less oversight, fewer resources, more lenient teachers, and remarkably little awareness of being shortchanged.[6]

When Powell's team looked at four private schools, they found the traits of specialty shops extended to the unspecial. That is, average-ability students who enrolled often benefited from the explicit purposefulness of the school. For teachers, students, and parents, learning was paramount. That alone set it apart from the mindless distractions in American youth culture and the laissez-faire neutrality in the mall. Private school peer pressure supported academic intensity—it was socially acceptable to study hard and excel. Shared values for conduct and character also built the schools' ethos, with solidarity reinforced by hiring new faculty who embraced the school's priorities,

[5]Powell, *The Uncertain Profession*, 287.

[6]In 2017, Art told his son that media coverage had made the "unspecial" more aware and more resentful of their anonymity. In 1981–82 he had observed passivity; in 2017 he sensed anger, displayed most overtly in school shootings and Donald Trump's supporters. Arthur G. Powell, email to Allie Powell, Oct. 2, 2017.

https://doi.org/10.1017/heq.2025.8

especially the commitment to personal attention and the extra push to challenge every student.

So how were those strong communities vulnerable? Purposeful schools celebrated as special places could feel like unreal havens isolated from the wider world, even though most private schools became more and more diverse after midcentury. Tight old parameters—single-sex, boarding, military, religious, socially elite—ended or eased thanks to coeducation, mergers, minority recruitment, and financial aid. Sometimes the variety, choice, and neutrality of the shopping mall seemed like reasonable accommodations of the more inclusive and heterogeneous community. Alternatively, the growing interest in private schools tempted some places to enroll fewer and fewer unspecial students. "Schools by the 1960s were judged more on who their students were than on anything else, and this standard grew exponentially by the late 1970s."[7]

That last sentence is an example of Powell-as-historian in *Mall.* He refers to recent shifts rather than going farther back in time. Throughout the book, he notes how the key features of the mall intensified after the mid-1960s. Remarks on integration, Title IX, special education, and student rights could have been developed in more detail, but there are enough references to change over time that alert readers should realize that an historian wrote these pages. Shopping mall high schools were not brand new—two of us who worked with Powell explored their earlier history—but their long-standing commitment to be comprehensive had taken on greater urgency.[8]

In *Lessons from Privilege*, Powell combines a wider array of evidence. He extends *Mall*'s exploration of the specialty shops' three Ps—purpose, push, and personal attention—by devoting more space to their evolution. He read more than a hundred published school histories, mined three archives, and read journal and magazine articles. He said, "I used historical materials when they helped make a point, but have not written a history book," although it is the most thorough account in print of twentieth-century independent schools. To understand the 1980s and early 1990s, Powell and several assistants spent twenty days at ten independent schools and also analyzed four large federal databases. With characteristic modesty, he said he could have done much more, but his connection of past and present in each chapter is remarkable.[9]

In regard to vulnerable communities, *Lessons from Privilege* emphasizes the power of shared educational values to check the centrifugal force of greater and greater economic, racial, and gender diversity. Rich or poor, black or white, male or female, independent school parents and students respect the academic work ethic. Cutting class, cheating, and skipping homework happened less often than in affluent suburban public schools. College admissions counseling from ninth grade on fostered the universal expectation of college graduation. Even when the shared norm was to seek one's "personal best," the different goals evoked similar commitments to hard work and perseverance.

[7] Powell, *Lessons from Privilege*, 230.

[8] David K. Cohen wrote chapter 5 of *Mall* (titled "Origins"), and I wrote *The Last Little Citadel: American High Schools since 1940* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1986).

[9] David Cohen said that Art underestimated his accomplishments, recalling that in graduate school, one professor told Art that Harvard PhDs succeed if, and only if, they transform their fields.

https://doi.org/10.1017/heq.2025.8

External risks can be a blessing when they intensify internal solidarity, Powell argued. Vulnerability to state and federal regulations, unfavorable court decisions, and economic recessions means that these schools are not truly independent. Few have the endowment to escape legal and financial jeopardy. Survival depends on satisfied families. Accountability inclines the schools' adults to work together. They all have a stake in sustaining the purposeful communities that welcome diversity within an overarching dedication to academics.

## Beyond Academics: Enduring Intellectual Passions

Powell modified his praise of independent schools by regretting their meager attention to long-term intellectual interests. Course grades and test scores focus students and teachers on the here and now, even though the ultimate justification for the liberal arts, Powell argued, is a more meaningful adult life. To forge enduring interests of mind should be a higher priority.

Powell acknowledged many reasons for this unfortunate neglect—anti-intellectualism is of course a crucial one. We scholars don't always realize how many people see the love of ideas as unreal, effete, snobbish, or exhausting. More than most educators, Powell worried about the childhood origins of this attitude. He lambasted pop culture in the movie-music-television industry as "antiread, antiwrite, antithink, and antitalk. It celebrates and rewards instant gratification and short attention spans." Even before the rise of the internet, Powell called pop culture "the enemy" that is "hostile" to intellectual exertion.[10] Education reformers underestimate the power of that enemy, dwelling instead on the differences among various improvement strategies rather than banding together to fight anti-intellectualism, the forgotten ism in comparison to racism, sexism, ageism, and other prejudices.

To read, write, and think long after graduation and outside the workplace sounds so reasonable, but it is risky to stipulate specific long-term objectives for serious leisure. "There is no consensus on an interest as benign as mature reading," so more ambitious cognitive goals could be resented as elitist presumption.[11] Furthermore, the early cultivation of enduring habits of mind requires enthusiastic adults who display those habits. "A young person must see interests of mind with his or her own eyes. The more visible the interest, the better." Brief exposure is not enough—one reason why parents usually exert more influence than teachers. There is more time to observe the pursuits and feel their pleasures. "In such families interests of mind are a normal part of how life is lived."[12]

[10] Powell, *Lessons from Privilege*, 12, 14.

[11] Arthur G. Powell, "Interests of Mind: Mapping the Territory" (unpublished manuscript, Brown University, Annenberg Institute for School Reform, 1997), chap. 6. Art wrote two subsequent essays with sections on enduring habits of mind: Arthur G. Powell, "Reflections on a Century of Independent Schools," in *Lessons of a Century: A Nation's Schools Come of Age*, ed. Staff of *Education Week* (Bethesda: Editorial Projects in Education, 2000), 226–29; Arthur G. Powell, "American High Schools and the Liberal Arts Tradition," in *Brookings Papers on Education Policy 2003*, ed. Diane Ravitch (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Papers, 2003), 7–37.

[12] Powell, "Interests of Mind," chaps. 6, 11, and 12.

https://doi.org/10.1017/heq.2025.8

Obstacles notwithstanding, Powell thought independent schools should make lifelong intellectual curiosity and passion a priority. He pinned his hopes on a few top-notch required courses jointly developed, taught, and assessed, with staff meetings of the instructors as exciting as the sessions with students. The models he had in mind were Contemporary Civilization at Columbia and the post-World War II New Curriculum at Amherst, which President Cole compared to a "sharp hunting knife" graduates would use to "cut through the labyrinth of life." Amherst's director of admissions said that incoming freshmen had "feeble little sparks of intellectual interests [that] can be caught and fanned into flames in the first year," and the "intellectual adventure" of the core courses would "overcome the insistent call of such competing enterprises as movies, dates, sports and extracurricular activities."[13]

Powell's interest in long-term habits of mind wasn't just a legacy of his own college years. In his decades working with Ted Sizer, he continually wondered how ambitious reforms would change the students by graduation. How would they differ from high achievers at traditional schools? Would restructuring the daily schedule, lowering student-teacher ratios, creating senior-year projects, or lecturing less yield adolescents who acted, talked, and wrote differently from their friends at other schools? As he drafted *Lessons from Privilege*, he told me, "I see no signs of customer dissatisfaction except regarding cost. People do not have a clear picture in their heads of an alternative product of schooling. This [prep school] is still regarded as top-of-the-line. But then where are the great new models?"[14]

At times he mused about very practical, very specific interventions to improve education. Maybe enduring habits of mind would take forever to gain traction. In 2018, the American faith in medication prompted his prediction that "the next big reform—within ten years, I bet—will be DRUGS (and eventually gene manipulation) that will stimulate motivation to learn certain stuff and the capacity to retain it."[15] Earlier, when philanthropist Walter Annenberg gave $500 million for ambitious school reforms, Powell proposed focusing on one big crisis—gun violence—rather than spreading the money across a dozen different projects.

Art worried that we historians also spread ourselves too thin. In over one thousand departments and colleges of education, the mandate to "publish or perish" was filling the journals and bookshelves with material that would sink from sight within five years, he claimed. When the Coalition of Essential Schools (CES) urged Jossey-Bass to publish a dozen short books, Art wondered if one or two large books made more sense. He feared the short books would become primary sources—products of CES ideology—rather than first-rate research. In his own career, he shelved insightful work for hire that others would have rushed into print: evaluations of internships for rookie teachers, an appraisal of the Teach for America summer institute, a literature review on competency-based education, and six essays on enduring habits of mind. He wanted

[13] Arthur G. Powell, "Our Amherst, 1954–1958 and Afterward," in *Amherst 1958—50th Reunion Classbook* (Amherst College, 2008), 8, 10. For a full account of the planning (1945) and review (1954) of the renowned Amherst curriculum, see Gail Kennedy, ed., *Education at Amherst: The New Program* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1955).

[14] Arthur G. Powell, letter to author, April 4, 1994.

[15] Arthur G. Powell, email to author, March 30, 2018.

only his best writing to be published. The result is less to resurrect, but more reason to do so.

## Books by Arthur G. Powell

*The Uncertain Profession: Harvard and the Search for Educational Authority* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1980)

*The Shopping Mall High School: Winners and Losers in the Educational Marketplace* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1985), coauthored with Eleanor Farrar and David K. Cohen

*Lessons from Privilege: The American Prep School Tradition* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996)

**Cite this article:** Robert L. Hampel, "The Enduring Relevance of Arthur G. Powell," *History of Education Quarterly* (2025), 1–7. https://doi.org/10.1017/heq.2025.8

https://doi.org/10.1017/heq.2025.8