

HES Presidential Address

Individuality, Freedom, and Community: Ella Flagg Young's Quest for Teacher Empowerment

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After teaching shifted from men's to women's work in the second half of the nineteenth century, women pushed into newly created realms of educational leadership. They earned appointments to principalships and, buoyed by the growing woman's suffrage movement, they began winning elected superintendent and school board positions. However, fearing that women might overtake men in running the schools, a multifaceted backlash movement emerged to rein in women's advancements. A tightly organized national network of influential male educators sought to centralize power, standardize and mechanize practices, and otherwise push women out of leadership positions while simultaneously making teaching an increasingly servile

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profession. Ella Flagg Young, Chicago's superintendent of schools who had long advocated for expanding women's public service, staunchly resisted this disempowerment of teachers. Instead, through her leadership, she vividly illustrated how schools might work if freedom, individuality, and community were truly honored.

On July 30, 1909, Ella Flagg Young became one of the most famous women in the country when newspapers coast-to-coast carried front-page news that she would be Chicago's next superintendent of schools. The Chicago Board of Education, after launching an extensive search specifically seeking a man for the position, instead chose a woman to lead the schools of the nation's second-largest city.¹

The news was surprising, perhaps even shocking, to some. At the time, though, some significant forces had aligned in Young's favor. Teaching had shifted over the previous century from men's to women's work. Women also had begun winning elected county superintendencies.² Suffrage activists, many of them current or former teachers, had campaigned partly so women educators could vote on matters affecting their working conditions, and because their service as school leaders might prove the public good that women might accomplish. And crucially, some of Chicago's teachers, awakened to their need for collective power, had organized the Chicago Teachers' Federation (CTF) to counter antagonistic city and corporate officials. In 1909, the Federation had sought a superintendent who wanted to improve teachers' conditions—and Young stood out as their best bet (see [Figure 1](#)).

Beyond these external conditions, Young also brought extraordinary personal gifts to her work—and she did so just as opportunities for women opened in education. She had studied at Chicago High School nearly a half-century earlier, precisely at its inflection point when young women were beginning to graduate in greater numbers than young men.³ Throughout her long and distinguished career, she was

¹“A Woman Head of Schools,” *New York Times*, July 30, 1909, 1; “Soft Pedal on Fads: Woman Head of Schools Favors the Three ‘R’s,”” *Washington Post*, July 30, 1909, 1; “Woman Head of City’s Schools,” *Los Angeles Times*, July 30, 1909, 1; and “Mrs. Ella Young for School Head,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, July 30, 1909, 1.

²Thomas D. Snyder, ed., *120 Years of American Education: A Statistical Portrait* (Washington, DC: US Department of Education, 1993), 29; and Jackie M. Blount, *Destined to Rule the Schools: Women and the Superintendency, 1873–1995* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998), 61–90, 181.

³“Report of the Principal of the High School,” *Sixth Annual Report of the Board of Education, Chicago, 1860* (Chicago: Press & Tribune, 1860), 49; and “Report of the Principal of the High School,” *Ninth Annual Report of the Board of Education, Chicago, 1862* (Chicago: Evening Journal, 1863), 57–58.



Figure 1. Portrait of Ella Flagg Young, Superintendent, 1910. (*World's Work* 20, no. 4 [August 1910], 13223).

one of the first, if not the first, woman to rise through a succession of new levels of educational leadership: After teaching for only three years, she became a teacher of teachers, then one of the first women principals of a large school, one of the first women assistant superintendents, among the earliest women professors at a major university, and eventually the first woman elected president of the National Education Association (NEA). Along the way, she cleared paths for other women to join her.

Young thought that women's school leadership would continue expanding, something she confidently predicted after becoming superintendent.⁴ From her perspective, conditions also appeared ripe for teachers to free themselves from the constraints of stale older methods

⁴"The Highest Salaried Woman in the World," *Western Journal of Education* 14, no. 10 (Oct. 1909), 515.

as well as those pushed by a new class of administrators bent on centralization and standardization. She envisioned teachers enjoying greater freedoms in schools while cultivating their unique gifts and nurturing those of their students. She expected teaching to become ever-more intellectually and creatively engaging work. And she believed that the women who overwhelmingly dominated the ranks of teachers would work together with their allies in a spirit of community, buoyed by the suffrage-driven women's movement.

As her career progressed, Young built community among educators. At the same time, she fiercely promoted "Individuality. Freedom for the teacher and freedom for the pupil," which she described to a reporter as her hobbies.⁵ Young staunchly opposed the efforts of some prominent male education leaders seeking to increasingly centralize power in schools, mechanize their operations, divide units into discrete and often disconnected parts, and disempower the largely female teaching force. She instead shared power with teachers, facilitated their working together toward ends they determined collectively, and respected their individuality, all while insisting on high-quality work. As superintendent, she and Chicago's educators and students soon demonstrated that a large school system could defy prevailing administrative trends by empowering rather than disempowering its members, by working together rather than retreating into isolation, and by improving the quality of the system through volition rather than compulsion. Morale soared during much of her superintendency, as she supported teachers' and students' efforts—and as they in turn supported hers.

Ella Flagg Young's story, then, sheds light on an important historical moment when officials increasingly configured school administration for men, enlarging their administrative powers while simultaneously stripping away freedom, individuality, and a sense of community from the recently feminized teaching force. In this way, the gender polarization of schoolwork aligned closely with the movement to disempower teachers. Young's story also reveals the important ways she resisted this trend. She essentially sought to build community among educators while simultaneously enlarging their freedoms and respecting their individuality. They in turn organized, grew more powerful, and rallied to support her and each other through an array of vexing challenges. This mutual support was vital to her superintendency as well as to the welfare of teachers and students alike.

Though Young thought that women would exercise ever-greater leadership in education, from the classroom to the superintendent's

⁵"Howland's Possible Successor," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, Aug. 27, 1891, 1.

office, the question remained open as to whether her superintendency would prove to be a fluke or a harbinger of deep change.

Early Life

Young's pursuit of individuality and freedom began early. She was, after all, a gifted and eccentric child in a family that valued uniqueness. Her parents urged their children to learn on their own rather than by attending school. Her mother read avidly. Her father, orphaned as a child, quickly earned his freedom from a metalworking apprenticeship to become a renowned fine-instrument maker. Young's older brother, an aspiring artist, enlisted at the start of the Civil War; then, as a talented "base ball" pitcher, he founded one of the earliest baseball teams and leagues in the country.⁶ Young's brilliant older sister, whose name she never spoke publicly, supported herself as a seamstress; then in early adulthood, she was committed to the House of the Good Shepherd, where she lived as an inmate until her death at sixty-one. Flagg family members followed their own paths.

Ella Flagg did not learn to read until she wanted to—at eight or nine. After her mother read aloud a newspaper account of a fatal school fire, Ella was inconsolable over the tragedy and, with her mother's help, studied the article. Reportedly, she read voraciously from then on.⁷ At thirteen, she attended grammar school for a couple of months, but found classwork so boring that she dropped out. At fifteen, her friends persuaded her to take the teachers' examination, and though she passed, she was too young to get a teaching certificate. Instead, the superintendent invited her to enroll in Chicago High School's new Normal Department.⁸ First, however, she needed to pass the

⁶John McManis, *Ella Flagg Young and a Half-Century of the Chicago Public Schools* (Chicago: A. C. McClurg, 1916), 15. See also "Flagg, Charles F.," Illinois Civil War Muster and Descriptive Rolls, Illinois State Archives, <http://www.ilsos.gov/isaveterans/civilMusterSearch.do?key=83272>. This record also describes him as single, a native of Buffalo, and employed as a coppersmith. For a detailed account of the 19th's campaigns, see J. Henry Haynie, ed., *The Nineteenth Illinois: A Memoir of a Regiment of Volunteer Infantry Famous in the Civil War of Fifty Years Ago for Its Drill, Bravery, and Distinguished Services* (Chicago: M. A. Donohue, 1912). Charles Flagg issued a challenge to have his 19th Regiment Turchin Base Ball Club play Chicago's baseball club, a challenge published as: Charles Flagg, "To the Base Ball Club of Chicago," *Chicago Tribune*, April 18, 1864, 0_1; and Peter Morris et al., eds., *Base Ball Pioneers, 1850–1870: The Clubs and Players Who Spread the Sport Nationwide* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2012), 210, 217–18.

⁷McManis, *Ella Flagg Young*, 20–21. McManis studied with Young and Dewey at the University of Chicago before Young hired him as a faculty member at the Chicago Normal School. He wrote his biography of Young with her assistance; she likely provided this anecdote.

⁸McManis, *Ella Flagg Young*, 24.

admissions examination. Principal George Howland asked her to recite a poem—which she did in an idiosyncratic manner by accenting syllables in odd places. Perplexed, he asked her why she had done this. She explained that she intended to keep the poem from being too smooth. Howland laughed and admitted her.⁹ In later years, he became superintendent and hired her as assistant superintendent, eventually even recommending her as his possible replacement.¹⁰ From the start, the unconventional Ella Flagg thought about schools from an outsider's perspective, but she eventually flourished with support from accepting mentors like Howland.

Principal Young

Ella Flagg began teaching in 1862 as men enlisted for service in the Civil War. Women already held all of Chicago's grade school teaching positions other than principal.¹¹ She quickly excelled in some of the city's toughest classrooms. After her third year, she became principal of the new School of Practice, charged with preparing the city's future grade school teachers (see [Figure 2](#)).¹² The superintendent soon lauded the School of Practice. With her leadership, he explained, it "is not excelled by any similar school in the country."¹³ Notwithstanding his exuberant praise, Young ran into trouble when Board members pushed her to admit weak students. Instead, she refused and resigned, returning to teaching a regular class.¹⁴

After Illinois passed a law in 1873 allowing women to hold elected school offices, ten women quickly won contested county

⁹"Chicago Notes," *Intelligence*, Oct. 1, 1891, 235.

¹⁰"Mr. Lane Is the Favorite," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, Aug. 28, 1891, 8. Howland recommended that either Albert Lane or Young succeed him, but Young immediately declared that she would not be a candidate.

¹¹"Schools and Teachers," *Ninth Annual Report of the Board of Education, Chicago, 1862*, 74–76.

¹²*Chicago School Board Minutes*, vol. 1, Oct. 31, 1865, 72, Illinois Regional Archives Depository, Northeastern Illinois University, Chicago; and "Teachers of the Public Schools," *Thirteenth Annual Report of the Board of Education, Chicago, 1867* (Chicago: Prairie Farmer, 1867), 249–61.

¹³*Twelfth Annual Report of the Board of Education, Chicago, 1866* (Chicago: Rounds & James, 1866), 6. Two years later, the superintendent proclaimed, "The success of the School of Practice is established beyond a question. Our Schools owe more to this agency than to any other—I am tempted to say than to all others." "Report of the Superintendent," *Fourteenth Annual Report of the Board of Education, Chicago, 1868* (Chicago: Church, Goodman & Donnelley, 1868), 184–85.

¹⁴Minutes, Feb. 7, 1871, *Proceedings of the Board of Education of the City of Chicago* (Chicago: Board of Education, 1871), 138; and "Educational Intelligence," *Chicago Schoolmaster* 4 (March 1871), 79–80.



Figure 2. Ella Flagg Young as principal of the School of Practice, ca. 1865. From John McManis, *Ella Flagg Young and a Half-Century of the Chicago Public Schools*, 1916.

superintendencies.¹⁵ During this early wave of Illinois women moving into school administrative positions, the Chicago Board appointed Young to a full principalship, making her “one of the first five or six

¹⁵Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Susan B. Anthony, and Matilda Joslyn Gage, eds., *History of Woman Suffrage, 1876–1885*, vol. 3 (Rochester, NY: Susan B. Anthony, 1886), 577.

women principals [of large schools] in the country,” as she later recounted.¹⁶ The Board promoted her again three years later, this time to the principalship of one of the largest and most visible schools in the city.¹⁷ She worked closely with teachers in this school, urging them to cultivate unique pedagogical approaches. They made decisions together. And rather than holding meetings at school, she regularly hosted teachers in her home, where she served lavish refreshments and encouraged lively discussions of books that teachers chose. Her school became known as one of the finest, if not the finest, in the city, and visitors regularly requested tours. Many of the school’s inspired teachers soon rose to leadership positions across the city.

Superintendent Howland was confident enough about Young’s capabilities that he asked her to lead meetings of the city’s Principals’ Association in his absence—rather than any of the more long-serving male principals.¹⁸ Howland also invited A. E. Winship, a prominent education journalist, to visit Young’s school during the Chicago portion of his national tour of schools in 1887. Winship observed the one class Young taught while principal. He left saying, “That is the most remarkable teacher I ever saw.”¹⁹ Winship then lavished her with praise in speeches he delivered around the country and in articles he published, bringing Young to national attention.

Leveraging Assistant Superintendency for Women’s Greater Power

A few months after Winship lauded her, the Board promoted Young and another woman to assistant superintendencies, the first women

¹⁶The 1877 “Report of the Superintendent” indicates that four women served as grammar school principals in Chicago during the 1875–76 year and seven the following year, Young’s first year as a grammar school principal. Chicago may have been on the leading edge of the practice of promoting women into these positions. *Twenty-Third Annual Report of the Board of Education, Chicago, 1877* (Chicago: Geo. J. Titus, 1877), 35; and Aug. 29, 1876, *Proceedings of the Board of Education, September 1875–September 1876* (Chicago: Board of Education, 1876), 135; and “The Highest Salaried Woman in the World,” 516.

¹⁷For more information about Young’s promotion into principalships, see Joan K. Smith, “Progressive School Administration: Ella Flagg Young and the Chicago Schools, 1905–1915,” *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society* 73, no. 1 (Spring 1980), particularly 28. See also, “Skinner Elementary School,” box 17, file 29, “Schools, Sc-Sq,” Chicago Board of Education Archives; and June 25, 1880, *Proceedings of the Board of Education, September 1879–1880* (Chicago: Board of Education, 1880), 182.

¹⁸McManis, *Ella Flagg Young*, 58.

¹⁹A. E. Winship, “Mrs. Ella Flagg Young,” *Journal of Education* (Aug. 31, 1905), 250–51; and “Chicago Notes,” *Intelligence*, April 15, 1887, 87.

to reach this level in Chicago's history and certainly among the first in the country. Young's selection surprised no one.²⁰ Persistent pressure from Chicago Woman's Club members had contributed to this breakthrough.²¹

The Chicago Woman's Club invited Young to join after she became assistant superintendent. She accepted and then helped members understand the intricacies of the city's significant school-related matters.²² The Club immediately intensified its efforts to lobby for women to be appointed to the Chicago Board of Education, an effort that had run aground in the past. With Young's guidance, however, their efforts finally paid off. Chicago soon had its first woman Board of Education member—and in the years to come, more would be named including Jane Addams.²³

Young's stature grew during her years as assistant and then district superintendent. Though cozy teachers' meetings in her residence were no longer feasible, she instead created a teachers' council to stay in close communication with educators throughout her sprawling district, which extended well over a hundred city blocks from north to south. This was perhaps one of the first, if not *the* first, teachers' councils organized for decision-making rather than simply as a professional association. Other assistant superintendents in the city followed her example.²⁴ Young also organized a series of popular Teachers'

²⁰On the other hand, however, one reporter described how "the election of Miss Hartney [the other new woman assistant superintendent] was a surprise to everybody else as well as to herself," a move perhaps hinting at the conflictual political considerations in play. See "Chicago Notes," *Intelligence*, Sept. 1, 1887, 148.

²¹Prior to this, the Chicago Woman's Club had lobbied city officials to name women to the Board of Education, but to no avail. After continued pressure, Board of Education members conceded by appointing women assistant superintendents as the administrative team expanded to keep pace with the city's growth. See *Thirty-First Annual Report of the Board of Education, Chicago, 1885* (Chicago: George K. Hazlitt, 1886), 18–20; "Will a Woman Be Named?," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, May 14, 1887, 9; June 29, 1887, *Proceedings of the Chicago Board of Education* (Chicago: Board of Education, 1888), 228; and appendix, *Thirty-Third Annual Report of the Board of Education, Chicago, 1887* (Chicago: Jameson & Morse, 1888), 258.

²²Dorothy Edwards Powers, "The Chicago Woman's Club (Illinois)" (PhD diss., University of Chicago, 1939), 60.

²³Katherine Edmondson Tulley to Ernst Prussing, Oct. 1, 1888, Tulley, Katherine Edmondson folder, Chicago History Museum; *Thirty-Fifth Annual Report of the Board of Education, Chicago, 1889* (Chicago: Hack & Anderson, 1890), 3; and *Thirty-Seventh Annual Report of the Board of Education, Chicago, 1891* (Chicago: Hack & Anderson, 1891), 3.

²⁴For further discussion of Young's teachers' council, see Ella F. Young, "History of the Movement in Chicago," *Chicago Teachers' Federation Bulletin* 6, no. 8 (Jan. 18, 1907), 3; Joan K. Smith, *Ella Flagg Young: Portrait of a Leader* (Ames, IA: Educational Studies Press, 1979), 121; and "Exercises in School," *Chicago Tribune*, Oct. 20, 1892, 9.

Institutes. One attendee said, “Her lectures are largely attended not from duty, but from pleasure. She is a fascinating speaker.”²⁵ As a further expression of admiration, some Chicago women principals formed an organization they called the “Ella Flagg Young Club” in her honor, despite her protest.²⁶ When the city created a teacher pension fund in 1895, Young became a trustee, winning by far the greatest number of votes among all school employees.²⁷ One writer explained that the lopsided vote reflected teachers’ “high personal respect for her” and that she had “every reason to be proud of this expression of the esteem and affection in which she is held by the teachers of Chicago.”²⁸

Young also capitalized on her growing reputation by helping to instigate a statewide meeting of women teachers and administrators in 1888. Men already had their state education associations she reasoned, but women had none. So during this founding event, attendees formed not one but two new associations of women educators: the School Mistresses’ Club, which selected Young as its first president, and the Illinois Women’s Teachers’ Association.²⁹ Before the gavel brought the meeting to a close, these new, conjoined groups decided to lobby the governor to appoint a woman to the Illinois Board of Education. The governor responded immediately by naming Young, who then became the first woman on the state Board, serving for twenty-five years with distinction.³⁰

Taking a Stand

Young enjoyed the years with Superintendent Howland at the helm. He engaged the city’s administrators in spirited discussions about a

²⁵ Cited in McManis, *Ella Flagg Young*, 85.

²⁶ “A History of the Ella Flagg Young Club, 60th Anniversary,” 1956, 56, folder: “Young, Ella Flagg, 1845–1918,” Chicago Board of Education Archives; and “Chicago Notes,” *Intelligence*, Feb. 15, 1898, 126. The Ella Flagg Young Club may have been founded or co-founded by Helen Bryant, as described in her obituary: “Helen Bryant Funeral Tomorrow; Former Teacher,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, May 3, 1931, 16.

²⁷ “Superintendent’s Report,” *Forty-First Annual Report of the Board of Education, Chicago, 1895* (Chicago: J. M. W. Jones Stationery & Printing, 1895), 49–53; and “Victors in the Contest,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, Nov. 23, 1895, 14.

²⁸ *Chicago Daily Tribune*, Nov. 24, 1895, 32.

²⁹ *Intelligence*, June 1, 1888, 164–65. For further detail about the creation of these two groups, see also *Intelligence*, April 15, 1888, 116; and “State Notes: Illinois,” *Intelligence*, June 1, 1888, 172.

³⁰ “State Notes: Illinois,” *Intelligence*, June 1, 1888, 172; and *Proceedings of the Board of Education, Illinois*, Record Group 471.001, Illinois State Archives, Springfield, IL. Board meeting minutes from Dec. 11, 1889 to April 23, 1913, the years of Young’s service, show that she was an active contributor to this Bloomington, IL-based group; and Brayton, “Young, Ella Flagg,” 5.

wide range of issues and vigorously supported those who implemented innovative programs. He granted them independence if their schools performed well, creating an environment in which Young thrived.³¹ She also respected Superintendent Albert Lane, who succeeded Howland. Matters quickly changed, however, when Benjamin Andrews became superintendent in 1898.

William Rainey Harper, the University of Chicago's ambitious president, served briefly on Chicago's Board of Education. He thought the city needed a new superintendent, one with superb academic credentials rather than a career educator who had risen through the ranks, as had been the tradition. Harper wanted Benjamin Andrews, former president of Brown University and Harper's old friend and mentor.³² Harper and other board members then pushed out the amiable Superintendent Lane and instead hired Andrews. Once Andrews settled into his new work, he said, "I never in my life was engaged in so absorbing a work as this. . . . The work is hard, much harder than that of a college president, but also much more important."³³

Harper then cycled off the Board. He went on to lead the Chicago Education Commission, or "Harper Commission," in formulating its famous report arguing for reducing Board of Education powers while increasing those of the superintendent—a change teachers derisively called "one-man power." The Commission also proposed that men be paid more than women so more men could be hired, which women teachers found particularly odious.³⁴ Finally, the Commission recommended that the city stop hiring married women teachers.³⁵

Ella Flagg Young wasted no time in criticizing some of the Commission's recommendations. In January 1899, she delivered an address to a packed gathering of two thousand people from several new educators' organizations in the city. She decried the recommendation that men be paid more than women in comparable positions. She adamantly disapproved of barring married women from teaching.³⁶

³¹"Chicago Notes," *Intelligence*, Jan. 15, 1890, 22.

³²Karen Graves, "Tracing Granville Connections to an Epic Education Battle," *Historical Times: Quarterly of the Granville, Ohio, Historical Society* 35, no. 3 (Summer 2011), 1–8.

³³*Chicago Teacher and School Board Journal* 1, no. 1 (Jan. 1899), 17.

³⁴Article 4, Section 9, "Recommendations of the Educational Commission of the City of Chicago," *Chicago Teacher and School Board Journal* 1, no. 2 (Feb. 1899), 63; and quotation in Article 6, Section 4 "Recommendations of the Educational Commission of the City of Chicago," 64.

³⁵"Rule Concerning Married Women as Teachers," *Chicago Teacher and School Board Journal* 1, no. 3 (March 1899), 121.

³⁶"City Items," *Chicago Teacher and School Board Journal* 1, no. 2 (Feb. 1899), 87–88.

She particularly criticized the Harper Commission for dodging “the woman question,” even though she contended that it attended in detail to other matters of much less concern. She said, “Why [the commission] ... could not recognize its inability to cope with the woman question ... puzzles some of us.”³⁷

Young then criticized the new class of administrators who contributed to the Commission’s report, asserting that they wanted to exert minute control over teachers. She argued that the Commission had failed to include teachers meaningfully in its process, hiding its true aims while wasting teachers’ time with pointless committee work. In the end, she said, “Teachers have been forced to resemble too closely the housewife who goes about from room to room, making sure that no speck of dust rests therein,—the housewife who deceives herself into thinking that she would enjoy a brush with the world outside, or things in art, literature, and science if she only had time after attending to the important, the essential things of this world—the specks of dust.”³⁸

Young completed the link between the condition of teachers, mostly women, and the increasing strictures on their work. And she envisioned what must happen instead to inspire needed changes: “One condition is essential—an evolution of individuality in principals, teachers, and superintendents; that is, an evolution of the gifts peculiar to each soul.” Each person possesses individual gifts, she argued, but these often remain undeveloped. For individual talents to be realized, “we must have opportunity for what is called play of [thought]. If our daily work contains so much of the directions and plans of others that the feeling of drudgery permeates it and us, then that necessary free play of [thought] is lacking.” The “serious defect in the organization of our schools,” however, is that teachers are required to carry such heavy curricular loads that “the sense of uneasiness from superficial preparation and the sense of weariness from continual skimming result in a feeling of drudgery.”³⁹

Young closed by congratulating teachers in the city for creating their new organizations in the face of these challenges, especially the CTF. She encouraged them all to grow stronger—the room thundered with applause.⁴⁰ Hundreds of teachers crowded around her after she finished, thanking her for having articulated their thoughts so accurately.⁴¹

³⁷“Women Teachers Answer Report,” *Chicago Sunday Tribune*, Jan. 15, 1899, 5.

³⁸Ella Flagg Young, “The Educational Outlook,” *Intelligence*, June 1, 1899, 411.

³⁹Young, “The Educational Outlook,” 412.

⁴⁰“City Items,” 87–88.

⁴¹“Women Teachers Answer Report.”

A few days later, Young resigned from her district superintendency, ending her thirty-seven years of service to the Chicago schools. Her long-time companion, Laura Brayton, explained: "The time came when the autocratic regime, which reduced assistants to mere machines, and the everlasting playing of politics in the office of the Superintendent of Schools, became unbearable and she resigned."⁴² Young herself said, "The present ideal seems to be a one-man power, and my work is rendered unnecessary."⁴³

The news shocked and devastated teachers around the city. One lamented, "The women teachers of the Chicago schools needed Mrs. Young's help and guidance now more than ever ... to help them against the policy of the school management," which seemed "disposed ... to remove women from positions of responsibility."⁴⁴ The editorial board of the *Chicago Daily Tribune* described Young's departure as a "grievous loss" for the city.⁴⁵ Another editor deemed it a calamity because "it is next to impossible to place a man or woman in her position who can hope to win the unanimous support and goodwill of teachers, patrons, pupils and supervisors to the extent which Mrs. Young has possessed them."⁴⁶

Young and the Federation

Young then completed her doctoral studies with John Dewey at the University of Chicago, and joined the faculty, first as associate and then as full professor. From this vantage, Young stayed near the city's teachers—and they regularly packed auditoriums to hear her speak. However, while teachers largely admired her, her early positive relationship with the Federation, and its founding teachers she had originally supported, grew more complex.⁴⁷ On the other hand, she later explained, "I saw the beginnings of the Chicago Teachers' Federation, and I felt very uneasy; I feared those teachers were becoming too grasping. ... I was not large enough in the beginning to see ... that these

⁴²Laura T. Brayton, "Young, Ella Flagg," *Biographical Cyclopaedia of US Women*, vol. 2 (New York: Halvord Publishing, 1924–25), 5. Young married William Young in 1868, but he died a few years later of tuberculosis. Eventually, Young and Brayton became companions, living, traveling, socializing, and otherwise being together until Young's death in 1918.

⁴³"Ella F. Young Resigns," *Chicago Sunday Tribune*, June 4, 1899, 2.

⁴⁴"Ella F. Young Resigns," 1.

⁴⁵"Mrs. Young's Resignation," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, June 5, 1899, 6.

⁴⁶"Editorial," *Chicago Teacher and School Board Journal* 1, no. 6 (June 1899), 305–306.

⁴⁷Meta Wellers, "The Birth of Teachers' Organizations," *Journal of Education* 84, no. 16 (Nov. 2, 1916), 440.

women were realizing that they had not the freedom, the power, which people should have who are to train the minds of the children.”⁴⁸

Despite any misgivings she may have developed, Young found ways to assist Federation members as they pushed for a greater leading presence of women teachers in the NEA. As the Federation’s Margaret Haley demanded the right to speak from the floor of the NEA general assembly and Catherine Goggin devised strategies to broaden women teachers’ powers in the association, Young worked in concert with them, but from a different vantage. Remarkably, Young served on the NEA’s National Council of Education, the group David Tyack called the “educational trust,” or old guard.⁴⁹ In this role, though, Young refused to be muzzled by Council members. Instead, during a general assembly, she spoke out against the consolidation of power by other members of the Council. She charged that “high salaried” NEA officials happily pointed the “way to educational perfection” to extremely low-salaried teachers who also paid the greatest part of the dues.⁵⁰ With Young’s help, Haley, Goggin, and other teachers began tipping the balance of power in the NEA.

First Year as Superintendent

Before Young became superintendent in 1909, the city’s schools had suffered through a period of administrative and political dysfunction, first during Benjamin Andrews’s brief tenure in office and then during Edwin Cooley’s tenure. Cooley had antagonized teachers by implementing his notorious secret teacher evaluation system, among other things. He continually battled with teachers, particularly the CTF. His health consequently suffered and he took extended leaves to recover.⁵¹ He finally resigned early in 1909.⁵² Meanwhile, the assistant and district superintendents, who worked together to lead the city’s schools in Cooley’s absence, performed so admirably that members of the Board

⁴⁸Ella Flagg Young, “A Reply,” *Addresses and Proceedings, National Education Association, 1916* (Ann Arbor, MI: NEA, 1916), 357–58.

⁴⁹David B. Tyack, *The One Best System: A History of American Urban Education* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1974), 170 and 265.

⁵⁰“What Happened in Boston,” *Chicago Teachers’ Federation Bulletin* 2, no. 33 (Sept 11, 1903), 1–2.

⁵¹Jan. 15, 1908, *Proceedings of the Board of Education, July 1, 1907–June 30, 1908* (Chicago: Board of Education, 1908), 402–403; April 8, 1908, *Proceedings of the Board of Education, July 1, 1907–June 30, 1908* (Chicago: Board of Education, 1908), 684; and “Cooley Off to Find Health,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, April 2, 1908, 3.

⁵²“Report of the Superintendent,” *Fifty-Fifth Annual Report of the Board of Education, Chicago, 1909* (Chicago: Board of Education, 1909), 176–77.

presented a resolution to eliminate the superintendency altogether.⁵³ The resolution failed, but its authors had made their point.

Chicago's mayor strongly opposed women holding such public office, and by mid-July 1909, the Board had considered fifty men for the next superintendent.⁵⁴ Nonetheless, the Board ultimately interviewed six finalists, including Young. The first five candidates spoke with the Board for about twenty minutes each, but Young engaged with them for over two hours. Board members reportedly "forgot she was a woman" as "the irresistible impression of ability, of sympathy, of tact, of power and broad mindedness ... emanated from her." Then they "thought only of getting her to rule the schools," and they voted unanimously for Young.⁵⁵ A woman Board member said, "I consider [Young] the best educator in the United States, so far as public school work is concerned. ... The selection of Mrs. Young as superintendent of schools is the wisest thing that the board could possibly have done." She then noted that Young would address the Board's pressing concerns about the relationship between the new superintendent and organized teachers: "She will harmonize the whole teaching force. The teachers haven't felt in the past that they had the sympathy of the superintendent and this is the one thing the Chicago schools need more than anything else."⁵⁶ And finally, Haley later recounted that Board members had asked each candidate what they would do about the Federation. She explained that other candidates dodged and "side tracked," but Young simply replied, "I'd treat it as an educational organization." Haley concluded, "They gave her the job."⁵⁷

On Young's first day, she vowed to keep her door open to the city's six thousand teachers, a promise she kept. She stressed her readiness to "receive representatives of the Chicago Teachers' Federation and I hope that all of us, working together, may bring harmony and the highest efficiency to the school system of Chicago."⁵⁸ This was particularly important because Young sometimes had opposed Federation efforts in its early years—and the *Chicago Daily Tribune* even reported that, "The choice of Mrs. Young was a blow to the Teachers' Federation.

⁵³"Head of Schools Is Useless—Post," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, June 3, 1909, 3.

⁵⁴"Mrs. Young's Stock Up in School Head Race," *Chicago Record Herald*, July 28, 1909, 11; and "Board Seeks Man for Cooley's Job," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, July 18, 1909, 5.

⁵⁵John Evans, "A Woman at the Head of Chicago's School System," *The World's Work* 18 (Sept. 1909), 11992–11993.

⁵⁶"Mrs. Young Own Aid," *Chicago Record-Herald*, July 31, 1909, 3.

⁵⁷Margaret Haley, interview with Alice M. Adams, Aug. 6–Oct. 29, 1935, transcript, Chicago Teachers' Federation Collection, box 34b, folder 1, 93, Chicago History Museum.

⁵⁸"Mrs. Young Begins Open Door Policy," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, Aug. 3, 1909, 7.

... At the time of its formation it had the sympathy of Mrs. Young, but not after she perceived the uses to which it was being put."⁵⁹

Young had to mend her relationship with the Federation, and she soon saw a path to this end. After she moved into her new office, city officials learned that President Taft would visit Chicago in a few weeks. They asked Young to stage an enormous rally of Chicago's students to welcome him, so she and a team of organizers immediately got to work. When the day arrived, well over a hundred and fifty thousand students and teachers from Chicago Public Schools lined a twelve-mile route, singing, dancing, performing instrumental music, and displaying their artistic handiwork as Taft's motorcade slowly drove through. Amazingly, the entire event went off without a hitch, much to the surprise of worried city residents. Reportedly, Taft said he had never witnessed any demonstration like it, both in scale and meaningful intent.⁶⁰ He reflected that these "150,000 Chicagoans ... are growing up to follow in the footsteps of their fathers and mothers, and make this the greatest—certainly one of the greatest centers of influence—for good, and the elevation of the human race, that the world knows."⁶¹

The great success of this enormous spectacle translated into strong political support for Young and the city's schools. Soon after "Taft Day," Young pushed for and won pay increases for teachers, the first in over two decades. She eliminated Cooley's teacher evaluation system.⁶² She also won sick pay for teachers, long opposed by Cooley.⁶³ With these changes, she convincingly gained teachers' support. Then Young and teachers campaigned together for a broad array of other reforms. For four years, Young enjoyed unprecedented support, not only from teachers but also from the people of Chicago, as the city's schools became a source of immense pride—rather than shame.

⁵⁹"Mrs. Ella Young for School Head," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, July 30, 1909, 1. Kate Rousmaniere traces the complex dynamics between the Chicago Teachers' Federation and leaders of the Chicago Public Schools, including Young, in her remarkable biography *Citizen Teacher: The Life and Leadership of Margaret Haley* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005). See also Kate Rousmaniere, *City Teachers: Teaching and School Reform in Historical Perspective* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1997), and Wayne Urban, *Why Teachers Organized* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1982).

⁶⁰"Taft Sees Giants Win," *Washington Post*, Sept. 17, 1909, 1.

⁶¹"All Chicago Host to Taft for Day," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, Sept. 17, 1909, 1.

⁶²"Urge More Pay for Teachers," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, Sept. 12, 1909, 5.

⁶³"Principals Given Higher Salaries," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, Sept. 23, 1909, 4. Though Cooley had opposed granting sick leave for teachers, he ultimately needed an extended sick leave himself.

At the end of Young's first year as superintendent, Chicago's teachers staged a massive celebration in her honor. They packed the great Auditorium Theatre, filling its five thousand seats, overflowing into the large lobby, and spilling into the street. Teachers planned the event for nearly a year through representatives they elected from each school. The elaborate celebration featured songs written for Young, hundreds of children placing roses around her chair, processions of teachers, an orchestra, dancers, and speakers, all while Young smiled and occasionally bowed. The *Chicago Daily Tribune* reported, "These old friends ... [who] have fought for and with Mrs. Young have clung to her, stood with her, believed in her, and made others do the same through the thick and thin of the school fights to which Chicago has been heir. ... [They] had something of a right to their pride."⁶⁴ Young said, "This demonstration ... has been one of the most inspiring evenings of my life."⁶⁵ Not just a Chicago story, though, the *Journal of Education* reported, "Never, on either side of the sea, was there anything to compare with this. ... And this was in Chicago! In the city that had been so long represented as one great chaotic mass of professional discord!"⁶⁶

Around this time, the Chicago Principals Club announced that it had "launched a movement to elect Mrs. Young president of the National Educational Association."⁶⁷ Independently, other educators around the country had the same idea. A Boston teacher and suffragist wrote to a woman state superintendent to see what she thought of the idea of soliciting Young to run. "It has struck many of us that this would be a strategic time to try to elect a woman as president of the NEA, and owing to the widespread notice attracted by Mrs. Young's appointment, we have felt that it might be possible to swing the election for her." She continued, "The teaching force of the country is so largely made up of women that it certainly is only fair that we should have a woman President of this organization once, and my thought is that this is perhaps the most possible time, while the interest in Mrs. Young is still fresh and keen."⁶⁸

⁶⁴"Ella Flagg Young Is Idol at Ball," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, June 4, 1910, 3.

⁶⁵"Thousands Do Honor to Ella Flagg Young," *Chicago Record-Herald*, June 4, 1910, 5.

⁶⁶A. E. Winship, "Twenty-Five Years of Chicago," *Journal of Education* 71, no. 24 (June 16, 1910), 686. See also "Tribute to Mrs. Young," *New York Times*, June 5, 1910, 7; and "Honoring the First Woman Superintendent of Schools," *The Survey*, June 18, 1910, 474–75.

⁶⁷"Teachers to Give Thanks to Chief," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, May 29, 1910, 5.

⁶⁸Susan Fitzgerald to Helen Grenfell, n.d., Chicago Teachers' Federation Collection, box 40, folder 1910, Chicago History Museum.



Figure 3. Introduction of Ella Flagg Young as president of NEA, 1911. Author's personal collection.

Through strategic organizing, hundreds of women teachers from around the country found ways to obtain NEA memberships for the first time and then traveled to the Boston general assembly.⁶⁹ Though another woman candidate for president had emerged through a misunderstanding, some deft behind-the-scenes work by the CTF's Haley and Goggin resolved tensions—with women teachers fully supporting Young.⁷⁰ The old guard vigorously championed their own candidate, but in the end Young decisively won with 617 votes to 376 for her opponent (see [Figure 3](#)).⁷¹ The *Boston Journal* detailed the remarkable scene with “hundreds of women madly embracing each other and screaming with joy. . . . It was a distinct triumph for the women of the country, a triumph without parallel in the history of women’s organizations and they won out because they held the

⁶⁹Ida Mighell to Principals and Teachers of the Chicago Public Schools, June 9, 1910, Chicago Teachers’ Federation Collection, box 40, folder Jan.-June 1910, Chicago History Museum.

⁷⁰Margaret Haley to Grace Strachan, June 20, 1910, Chicago Teachers’ Federation Collection, box 40, folder Jan.-June 1910, Chicago History Museum; and Grace C. Strachan to NY NEA Delegates, n.d., Chicago Teachers’ Federation Collection, box 40, folder Jan.-June 1910, Chicago History Museum.

⁷¹“Plan to Defeat Mrs. Ella Young,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, July 4, 1910, 9; and “Women Win Fight; Elect Mrs. Young,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, July 8, 1910, 1.

best hand."⁷² *The Woman's Journal* explained that Young's opposition was based "solely on the ground that she was a woman," and that this "campaign has made many converts to suffrage among the women."⁷³

Backlash

Back in Chicago, teachers went to unprecedented lengths to demonstrate their wholehearted support for Young. She needed that help, particularly as several politically charged matters emerged during her fourth year as superintendent. First, newly appointed Board members sought to strip Young of her responsibility to choose the city's textbooks; they wanted to choose textbooks instead and receive kickbacks from publishers.⁷⁴ Second, as African Americans moved to Chicago early in the Great Migration, Young vigorously opposed racially segregated schools, despite some white communities agitating for them. She said, "I cannot align myself in opposition to segregation of the sexes and favor separate schools for the whites and Blacks. . . . We have mixed schools, and we are proud of them."⁷⁵ Third, she sought to implement the nation's first sex education program, but despite careful planning and strong early support, opponents launched powerful protests, effectively shutting the effort down.⁷⁶

Finally, Illinois granted women suffrage on July 1, 1913. Young said, "It is the greatest thing Illinois ever has done."⁷⁷ That day, Young rode near the front of Chicago's large "automobile parade" in celebration.⁷⁸ The famed British suffrage leader Emmeline Pankhurst said, "I am convinced that the women of Illinois, among them are numbered such world-famous women as Jane Addams and Ella Flagg Young, will worthily use their newly won liberty."⁷⁹

However, the celebratory spirit quickly ended for Young, as several Board members successfully removed some of her powers. Only a few weeks after the city's suffrage celebration, Young submitted her

⁷²"Women Teachers Scream with Joy at Victory over Men Delegates," *Boston Journal*, July 8, 1910, 1.

⁷³"Editorial Notes," *Woman's Journal* 41, no. 28 (July 9, 1910), 1.

⁷⁴"Take Away Power from Mrs. Young," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, May 23, 1913, 3.

⁷⁵"Mrs. Ella Flagg Young Opposes 'Jim Crow' Schools," *Chicago Defender*, Dec. 28, 1912, 1.

⁷⁶"Sex Talks in Classrooms," *New York Times*, June 21, 1913, 18; and "Attack Eugenics for High Schools," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, June 26, 1913, 8.

⁷⁷"Women Rejoice over the Result," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, June 12, 1913, 2.

⁷⁸"Ballot Winners to Parade Today," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, July 1, 1913, 1.

⁷⁹"Mrs. Pankhurst to American Sisters," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, Oct. 11, 1913, 1.

resignation because of this Board interference.⁸⁰ Immediately, women leaders around the city exploded with indignation at the conditions that had compelled Young to leave—they demanded that the mayor eliminate the “hostile influences” on the Board.⁸¹ John Dewey wrote his daughter about these events, confidently explaining that, “This is where woman’s suffrage in Illinois comes in handy; the women will probably force the mayor and the board to keep her and not meddle anymore.”⁸² Dewey was partially correct: the mayor did contact Young in an attempt to address her concerns. He also insisted that the Board restore her powers. She decided to return to the superintendency—for a while.⁸³

Shortly after Young’s return, however, a Board committee nonetheless removed some of Young’s powers once again. And then a coup by these same “heckling” members resulted in Young’s ouster on December 11, 1913.⁸⁴ The mayor expressed his regret at Young’s removal, but most found his response tepid.⁸⁵ One Board member pinned the blame squarely: “The One man responsible is Mayor Carter H. Harrison, and none else. ... Mrs. Young could not be used, and she retires with honor.”⁸⁶

So many Chicago women clamored to protest on Young’s behalf that a strategy meeting had to move several times to successively larger venues.⁸⁷ They ultimately planned a mass meeting at the Auditorium Theatre.⁸⁸ Feeling pressure, the mayor removed five men from the Board for actions hostile to Young, although they fought to stay on.⁸⁹ Finding this insufficient, organizers of the mass meeting

⁸⁰“Mrs. Young Quits; Women to Demand She Be Retained,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, July 25, 1913, 1.

⁸¹“Keep Mrs. Young, Mayor Will Hear,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, July 28, 1913, 3.

⁸²John Dewey to Evelyn Dewey, Aug. 4, 1913, John Dewey papers, 5/2, Center for Dewey Studies, Southern Illinois University Carbondale.

⁸³“Harrison Writes to Mrs. Young; Asks Her to Stay,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, July 29, 1913, 1; and “Backed by Board, Mrs. Young Stays as School Chief,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, July 31, 1913, 1.

⁸⁴“Mrs. Young and Her Enemies,” *Literary Digest*, Dec. 27, 1913, 1263–64; and George H. Mead, “A Heckling School Board and an Educational Stateswoman,” *Survey* 31 (Jan. 10, 1914), 443–44.

⁸⁵“Board Ousts Ella F. Young; John D. Shoop Heads Schools,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, Dec. 11, 1913, 1.

⁸⁶“School Board Members Comment on the Ousting of Mrs. Young,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, Dec. 11, 1913, 2.

⁸⁷“Women Arrange Big Mass Meeting,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, Dec. 12, 1913, 2.

⁸⁸“Clubs and Societies in Session Here Today,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, Dec. 13, 1913, 17.

⁸⁹“Mayor Ousts Five Men from School Board,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, Dec. 13, 1913, 1.

proceeded with their plans, completely filling and overflowing the Auditorium Theatre.⁹⁰ Several speakers, including Jane Addams, urged women to bring their new political power to bear on Young's behalf. Attendees approved a resolution demanding that the mayor restore Young to the superintendency.⁹¹ Others weighed in from across the country: thousands of teachers attending a Los Angeles institute passed a resolution supporting her continued service.⁹² Facing national as well as local pressure, Mayor Harrison finally reconfigured the Board sufficiently that Young was re-elected superintendent. She resumed her duties.⁹³

Young served as Chicago's superintendent for two more years, but these final years were marked by bitter battles with some Board members (see [Figure 4](#)). Regardless, she found ingenious means of carrying on. For instance, when, as she put it, "college experts who are making a specialty of testing and standardizing public schools earnestly desire to march on the schools of Chicago," threatening an expensive external evaluation, Young instead proactively summoned the assistance of all school employees in conducting a thorough self-study on their own terms, published as her 1914 *Annual Report of the Superintendent*.⁹⁴ Nonetheless, Young grew weary as ever-shifting forms of resistance dogged her efforts. She worked her last day in Chicago in December 1915.⁹⁵

Conclusion

Young died three years later during the Spanish flu pandemic, and Chicago's flags flew at half-mast in her honor. Few were permitted to attend the graveside funeral, however, because of the city's

⁹⁰"'Ousted' Men Defy Harrison; Refuse to Quit," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, Dec. 14, 1913, 1.

⁹¹Report of the Mass Meeting at the Auditorium Theatre, Chicago, Saturday morning, Dec. 13, 1913, Chicago Teachers' Federation Collection, box 42, folder Oct.-Dec. 1913, 44, Chicago History Museum.

⁹²"Mayor Appoints Three New Members to School Board," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, Dec. 18, 1913, 2.

⁹³"Mrs. Young Wins; Re-Elected Head of City Schools," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, Dec. 24, 1913, 1; and "Mrs. Young Back; Takes Desk Today as School Head," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, Dec. 27, 1913, 1.

⁹⁴Ella Flagg Young, "Survey," *Sixtieth Annual Report of the Board of Education, Chicago, 1914* (Chicago: Board of Education), 128–29. Young explained the rationale for Chicago's self-study to the city's teachers: "Should there come later a survey conducted by inspectors from the outside, we shall have our own survey with which to judge their results," 128.

⁹⁵"Her Work Done, Mrs. Young to Leave Chicago," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, Dec. 8, 1915, 17.



Figure 4. Ella Flagg Young, ca. 1917. Author's personal collection.

restrictions on public assembly during the deadly outbreak.⁹⁶ Thousands of students contributed pennies in her honor to help

⁹⁶“Special Meeting Monday, Oct. 28, 1918,” *Proceedings of the Board of Education* (Chicago: Board of Education), 11–12; and “Military Tinge at Funeral of Ella F. Young,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, Oct. 29, 1918, –16. For more about Young’s funeral, see also David E. Ruth, “Don’t Shake—Salute!” *Chicago History* 19 (Fall and Winter, 1990–91), 4–23.

poor children attend school.⁹⁷ Organized Chicago women planned a larger drive to build a “city hall for women” in Young’s name, but the effort later faltered as the pandemic and a severely weakened post-war economy sapped resources.⁹⁸ Young had asked her close friends to protect her privacy and they complied. She did not leave archives. Within a generation, Young’s efforts largely were forgotten. Some of her ideas were attributed to others, including John Dewey.⁹⁹

Young had thought that women and men eventually would share power on equal terms in schoolwork. This appeared to be the trend over the course of her life—and she herself certainly played many important roles in making it happen.

Among school workers and students, she staunchly cultivated individuality and freedom, her “hobbies.” She protested the encroaching movement toward standardization in schools. Instead, she inspired teachers to creatively modify the curriculum and bring their unique pedagogical approaches to their students. “What new ideas have you today?” was her favorite greeting with teachers, administrators, and students alike. Their responses often led to changes in the schools.¹⁰⁰ She resisted calls for centralized power, instead choosing to share power as much as possible while retaining her ultimate responsibility for the welfare of the whole. In her classrooms, students had voice in how activities unfolded. In her schools, she encouraged teachers to make important decisions together about governance, pedagogy, and curriculum—with attention devoted to arts, humanities, and creative expression. In her district, she established a teachers’ council in which large numbers of teachers systematically deliberated curriculum, governance, and policy—with meaningful implementation of results. As superintendent, she established numerous channels through which she dialogued with members of the broad Chicago schools community, motivating them to contribute ideas and to work together to realize them.

Young encouraged individuality and freedom; at the same time, she nurtured a sense of community that made them possible. At each

⁹⁷“Honor Mrs. Young,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, Jan. 15, 1919, 14; and “Children’s Pennies Aid Young Memorial,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, Jan. 16, 1919, 15.

⁹⁸“City Hall” for Women to Honor Mrs. E. F. Young,” *Chicago Tribune*, Dec. 13, 1918, 17; and Club House Specifications 1928, 61–72 East 11th Street, n.d., Chicago Woman’s Club Collection, box 50, folders 187 & 188, Chicago History Museum.

⁹⁹Jackie M. Blount, “Ella Flagg Young and the Gender Politics of *Democracy and Education*,” *Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era* 16, no. 4 (Oct. 2017), 409–23; and Jackie M. Blount, “The Mutual Intellectual Relationship of John Dewey and Ella Flagg Young: *Contributions to Education Series, 1901–1902*,” in *Philosophy and History of Education: Diverse Perspectives on Their Value and Relationship*, ed. Antoinette Errante, Jackie Blount, and Bruce A. Kimball (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2017), 27–38.

¹⁰⁰McManis, *Ella Flagg Young*, 61–62.

step in her career, she created ways for people to meet with each other to discuss work-related topics of their choice and in settings that promoted their relaxed enjoyment. Food consistently played a key role in these events. So too did lively banter, give-and-take, and making plenty of room for “free play of thought.” Teachers looked forward to these meetings, as they shared ideas, questioned orthodoxies, came to trust one another more deeply, and ultimately helped each other in creating new ideas and practices. Young spent almost her entire career in the Chicago schools. She had taught many of its teachers and administrators, worked beside them, and fought with them to improve working conditions. She knew them, and they in turn knew her. They knew they could count on her to work on their behalf and to make good on her commitments. A remarkable number of teachers and administrators did their best to reciprocate. This broad and deep sense of community across the city provided the context in which a staggering number of important reforms flourished, especially during the first four years of Young’s superintendency.

In the end, Young faced significant backlash in her work. Much of it came from individuals and groups that feared women were becoming too powerful, significantly overstepping their traditional bounds. Young, as the woman holding the greatest position of public service in the country, no doubt served as a lightning rod for such attacks. She persisted as fully as she could while knowing that if she succumbed, it would be a setback for the larger movement. Right after Illinois granted women full suffrage, Emmeline Pankhurst addressed a Chicago gathering of women activists, including Young. Regarding both Illinois suffrage and Young’s superintendency, Pankhurst said, “Your victory has been our victory.” More ominously, though, she declared, “If one set of women fail, all women fail together.”¹⁰¹

In the years since Young’s superintendency, women largely still do not hold a proportional share of school leadership positions across the country.¹⁰² So too do teachers continue to struggle against the constraints of tightly centralized power and pressure toward standardization, both of which minimize the importance of teachers’ individuality and freedom, not to mention their sense of community. Nonetheless, there was a brief moment when Chicago’s school workers felt empowered, and Young’s legacy provides us with a remarkable example of how schools might work if freedom, individuality, and community were truly honored.

¹⁰¹“Mrs. Pankhurst Says World’s Eyes Are on Chicago,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, Nov. 2, 1913, 1.

¹⁰²Blount, *Destined to Rule the Schools*, 181.