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MARTIN L. JOHNSON

The Theater or the Schoolhouse? The Social Center, the Model Picture Show, and the Logic of Counterattractions

ABSTRACT: Prior scholarship on nontheatrical film exhibition in the 1910s has suggested that such efforts were fledgling, disorganized, and ultimately unsuccessful. In this article, I propose a different narrative, namely that Progressive-Era reformers working in school-based community centers were able to establish viable nontheatrical spaces for cinema before the First World War, despite legal, financial, and logistical challenges. Their efforts only faltered when these spaces, and the networks that supported them, were repurposed for wartime use in 1917. After the war, exhibitor organizations took a strong stance against loaning reels to community groups, and reformers redoubled their efforts to change the commercial cinema rather than supporting an alternative.

KEYWORDS: nontheatrical, reform, Progressive Era, educational film, exhibition, Boston

In April 1917, just weeks after the United States entered the First World War, social reformers gathered in Chicago for the second annual meeting of the National Community Center Association. In the 1910s, community centers, which were also called civic centers, civic clubs, school centers, or, most commonly, social centers, routinely exhibited motion pictures to educate and entertain the general public. The picture shows were a success, attracting large crowds to the centers and, because admission was often charged, bringing in much-needed revenue to pay for operations. At the meeting, representatives of the National Board of Review, a de facto censorship board that was established by New York-based reformers in 1909, and the Community Motion Picture Bureau, a leading distributor of nontheatrical films, discussed the logistics of showing movies in school buildings, where many social centers were based, and even proposed facilitating an alternative distribution infrastructure for social-center films.¹

A few months later, W. D. McGuire, the executive secretary of the National Board of Review, gave an interview to the *Moving Picture World* in which he

sharply criticized the showing of movies at social centers. He argued that reformers should “utilize the motion picture theater as the field for their operations rather than attempt to transfer the entertainment to a school building where the surroundings do not normally lend themselves to entertainment as an end in itself,” and went on to downplay the use of film for educational purposes in any instance. Instead of advocating for the showing of movies everywhere, McGuire told the *World* that “the theater, not the schoolhouse, is the place for the motion picture show.”² In fact, McGuire was one of many reformers who worked to secure the cinema’s place as a clean, *theatrical* amusement, not a counterattraction to commercial venues.

In this essay, I consider Progressive-Era debates about whether and how movies should be exhibited in nontheatrical spaces, including social centers, churches, and factories, as a critical development in the emergence of cinema as a significant social and cultural institution. Rather than seeing these two spheres of film exhibition—the theatrical and nontheatrical, the commercial and, to use a contemporary phrase, the “useful”—in isolation, or suggesting that one was merely a shadow of the other, I will argue that in the 1910s they were robust, overlapping, and competing expressions of the sociality of film.³ Although scholars such as Lee Grieveson, J. A. Lindstrom, William Uricchio, and Roberta Pearson have emphasized the outsized role Progressive reformers played in regulating and routinizing the experience of cinema, their work largely neglects the presence of movie exhibition in places other than theaters.⁴ In part, this is a function of their historiographic frame, as they are, in effect, writing narratives of the growth of commercial cinema, with an eye toward the classical era that emerges by the end of the 1910s.

And yet, as I will show, up until the First World War, reform-minded social workers, educators, church leaders, and recreation advocates had marked success in exhibiting motion pictures in nontheatrical spaces, particularly schools, settlement houses, and churches. Although fierce debates about the role and size of government occurred in what has in retrospect been called the Progressive Era (1890–1920), reformers shared a belief that social problems—from poverty and unemployment to immorality and poor hygiene—could be solved by applying newly developed tools of social analysis and control. While many of these reformers worked in large cities, on behalf of organizations such as the People’s Institute, a New York-based institution that was founded in 1897 to meet the needs of immigrants in the Lower East Side, others worked in small towns and rural areas. Although Progressive reformers faced different problems depending on where they were located and proposed different solutions depending on their profession, they exchanged and promoted their ideas in leading magazines and journals, such as *Survey*, *McClure’s*, and *The Outlook*, and

in conferences committed to addressing social ills such as poverty, poor health, and unemployment. Moving pictures were a popular subject for reformers, both because of their attraction to many of the populations reformers wished to serve and their national circulation, creating opportunities for the dissemination of films and programs that supported reformer causes.⁵ Furthermore, because the commercial movie industry had yet to achieve the power it would have by the end of the decade, reformers could imagine a noncommercial network of producers, distributors, and exhibitors that would carve out a distinct alternative to their profiteering competitors.

But adapting the cinema for Progressive ends was more difficult than it first appeared. Finding suitable pictures proved to be a challenge, and reformers also disagreed about how movies should be used in school-based social centers, particularly as the social-center movement split in the mid-1910s over the question of whether centers should be funded and managed by the state, which usually meant local departments of education, or whether they should be self-supported and self-governed, with limited oversight.⁶ On the one hand, advocates for social centers as a method of promulgating democratic ideals from above expected motion pictures to play a supporting role in these endeavors and thus sought out films that would awaken curiosity and intellect in moviegoers. Over time, these reformers, who came to distrust the capacity for social centers to fund and govern themselves, became invested in exerting influence over the content and distribution of motion pictures, which would then be seen by audiences in commercial and noncommercial theaters alike.

On the other hand, those reformers committed to self-governance, many of whom were also tasked with actually running the centers, instead saw motion pictures, like dancing, as a commercial amusement that could be profitably reformed for use in the social centers, which would help make schools—not sectarian organizations, dance halls, saloons, or movie theaters—the dominant cultural, social, and educational neighborhood institution. Because most social centers were authorized by local governments to charge admission for picture shows, movies quickly became crucial to sustaining their operations. For these social-center advocates, then, what was most useful about establishing cinemas in schools was their commercial value, not their educational content, as it permitted them to both fund the centers and, many hoped, eventually create demand for educational films.

While educational film was often discussed in education journals and the motion-picture trade press in a narrow pedagogical sense—a more effective or efficient means of presenting knowledge than the printed word or the lantern slide—reformers were instead more interested in repurposing popular film for their own objectives. By carefully selecting, editing, and assembling films and

film programs, reformers sought to cultivate an audience for an alternative, more democratic cinema than the one currently on offer. Just as social centers themselves relied on replicable models of engagement even as they celebrated individuated group identities, motion-picture advocates ran up against the challenge of meeting the demands of diverse audiences with their preassembled and ideologically determined programs. In this way, the use of motion pictures in social centers revealed the scope and scale of nontheatrical film exhibition in the United States and the inadequacy of both commercial and noncommercial distributors to service this sector.

My research focuses on the social-center movement in the Boston metropolitan area, which was the fourth-largest population center in the United States in 1910, after New York, Chicago, and Philadelphia, and considered to be a model for motion-picture regulation. The city's de facto motion-picture censor, John M. Casey, was highly regarded by the National Board of Censorship, as he required any film shown within city limits to have the board's seal of approval. The city was also home to a number of key Progressive reformers who used their stature to advocate for, or critique, the use of moving pictures in schools and recreation centers, including Mary Follett, a political theorist and social reformer; Joseph Lee, who founded the playground movement in the United States; and Warren Dunham Foster, who established the Community Motion Picture Bureau, one of the largest distributors of educational film in the 1910s.

Prior scholarship on early nontheatrical film exhibition has characterized this period as being marked by fledgling, disorganized, and ultimately unsuccessful efforts to show motion pictures in nontheatrical settings.⁷ In this article, I propose a different narrative, namely that reformers, working in settlement houses, churches, and, particularly, social centers, were able to establish viable nontheatrical spaces for cinema before the First World War, despite legal, financial, and logistical challenges.⁸ By commandeering public school buildings for night and weekend use, social-center advocates were able to work at an unprecedented speed and scale, establishing more than one hundred centers throughout the country, from Los Angeles, California, to Grand Rapids, Michigan, by mid-1914.⁹ Their efforts only faltered when these spaces, and the networks that supported them, were repurposed for wartime use in 1917. After the war, exhibitor organizations, who had long been suspicious of the free shows provided in nontheatrical spaces, took a strong stance against loaning reels to community groups. Those reformers most invested in motion pictures redoubled their efforts to change the commercial cinema rather than supporting an alternative. Meanwhile, education reformers shied away from

imagining popular or social functions for school movies and instead returned to thinking of film in pedagogic terms, not a bright screen that would get people to come to school.

PROGRESSIVE REFORM AND THE MOTION PICTURE

As Kathy Peiss, David Nasaw, and many other scholars have amply documented, life for young men and women in turn-of-the-century New York, Chicago, and many other cities was a constant whirl of attractions, from amusement parks to dance halls.¹⁰ While not all of these new entertainments were designed for vice, many Progressive reformers were nonetheless concerned that young people would be overcome by earthly pleasures and put aside their cares for home, work, and education. Rather than trying to outlaw these new leisure spaces outright, reformers instead sought to understand the appeal of what they called “commercialized recreation,” so they could be improved.¹¹ Because the content of these amusements was not so easily controlled, reformers invested in producing noncommercial and civic-minded alternative spaces for recreation. Settlement houses, for example, offered a full roster of recreational activities, from supervised dances to theatrical performances, all done with consideration for the morals of their visitors.

With concomitant concerns for the education and socialization of diverse populations, many reformers turned to schools as a potential site where these noncommercial amusements could take place. In his influential 1902 essay, “The School as Social Centre,” John Dewey proposed using public school buildings to scale up the kind of activity that was already taking place in settlement houses, including recreation. As Dewey argues in the piece, the “demand for recreation, for enjoyment just as enjoyment, is one of the strongest and most fundamental things in human nature. To pass it over is to invite it to find its expression in defective and perverted form.”¹² When the nickelodeon arrived in the middle of the first decade of the twentieth century as the latest amusement to be battled, reformers already had sites in mind for its noncommercial rival—the settlement house and, soon, the school.

During the nickelodeon boom, a number of settlement houses experimented with showing movies, the best known of which was Jane Addams’s short-lived 1907 “uplift” nickel show.¹³ That same year, the first school system, in Rochester, New York, opened two of its schools on nights and weekends as social centers, fulfilling Dewey’s ambitions as places of education and recreation.¹⁴ Led by Edward J. Ward, the Rochester school centers sought to, in Ward’s words, develop “the community interest, the neighborly spirit, the democracy that we knew before we came to the city,” an allusion to the one-room schoolhouses in rural areas that, by necessity, doubled as community gathering places (fig. 1).¹⁵

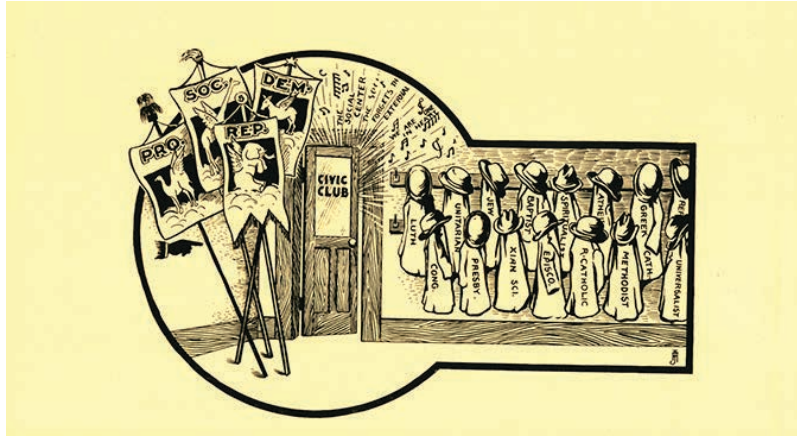


Fig. 1: Illustration showing the social center's role in breaking down partisan and religious divisions. (From Edward J. Ward, *Rochester Social Centers and Civic Clubs: The Story of the First Two Years* [Rochester, NY: League of Civic Clubs, 1909])

In order to achieve this ambitious goal, social-center managers were hired to assist in establishing civic clubs, lectures, basketball and wrestling leagues, reading rooms, and art classes, all at school. Ward's success inspired reformers in other cities to start their own school centers, even though many found it difficult to persuade elected officials, school boards, and city governments to permit, and provide funding for, the use of their school buildings at night. Nevertheless, Rochester's success was widely celebrated, and the city became the showcase for the movement.¹⁶

Not surprisingly, motion pictures soon became one of the recreations offered at social centers, though their utility became an issue of controversy. When the National Playgrounds Convention was held in Rochester in June 1910, Ward offered a free moving-picture show to visiting dignitaries and local residents at a school playground, drawing an audience of 2,500.¹⁷ One visitor, Clarence Arthur Perry of the Russell Sage Foundation, a New York-based philanthropic organization that was founded in 1907 and funded many Progressive causes, spoke highly of showing movies at school centers because he believed they sparked interest in the young. He went on to observe: "In attaching it to your splendid school system you people of Rochester are not only securing an aid of extraordinary educational efficienc[y], but you are helping to create a demand for good and wholesome films and thus exerting a purifying influence upon the whole moving picture industry."¹⁸ By arguing for school shows as a way to strengthen the demand for "good and wholesome films," Perry proposed

an alternative to the newly formed National Board of Censorship of Motion Pictures' arduous methods of controlling the cinema through persuading local censors to trim films of objectionable material, pushing city authorities to regulate theater spaces and behavior, and encouraging motion-picture companies to produce "high class" motion pictures by appealing to their good will.¹⁹ Compared to this multipronged strategy, which required cooperation from film producers, distributors, and exhibitors, supporting the development of schools as an alternative exhibition site for motion pictures that, in time, would drive demand for board-favored pictures may have seemed highly feasible.

Rochester's success with moving pictures in the schools encouraged reformers in other cities to do the same. At the National Municipal League's convention in Buffalo in November 1910, John Collier, who was the recreation director of the People's Institute and a member of the National Board of Censorship, gave a talk titled "The Public School Building as a Moving Picture Theater," in which he coupled calls for using schools for recreation with the board's interest in reforming the movies.²⁰ That same month, eight school centers opened in Chicago, with plans to show movies three nights a week. The *Film Index* commented that the "nickel theatres will feel the effects of the new departure in a sense; but as the 'centers,' are open at nights and for only three at that, it is not expected that any appreciable loss of patronage will be experienced."²¹ Meanwhile, Edward J. Ward decamped from Rochester to Madison, Wisconsin, where he took charge of the Bureau of Civic and Social Center Development at the University of Wisconsin, which helped guide the expansion of social centers—and school movies—in that state (fig. 2). In early 1911, a progressive Boston magazine noted that Milwaukee schools were also being used as movie houses, bringing "competition with a host of cheap theaters, some not over careful in their choice of films."²² By early 1911, the push for showing motion pictures in schools had become a national phenomenon, with reformers in most metropolitan centers and a scattering of small towns launching local campaigns to use their schools to show movies.

In fact, the introduction of motion pictures in school centers occurred in tandem with the growth of the social-center movement, which sought to use the cinema as a means of bringing adults into schools for recreational and educational purposes. As Luther Gulick, president of the Playground Association of America, noted in June 1910 the "moving picture is not only one of the few interests that bring the entire family together but it also serves to connect the playground, the school and the family."²³ One of the cofounders of the Social Center Association of America, Ella Boyce Kirk, traveled from Pittsburgh to New York in early 1911 to explore "the possibilities of putting the



Fig. 2: A motion-picture screening of *Life in China* at the Wood County Normal School in Grand Rapids, Wisconsin. ("Extension Service of U of Wisconsin," 3 March 1915, RG 12, box 1, folder 4, National Archives and Records Administration)

moving-picture business on a better footing morally and educationally."²⁴ In addition to starting the association for social centers, Kirk also founded the People's Recreation Company, which sought to demonstrate that "commercial recreation can be managed with a sense of social responsibility and with artistic intelligence and still earn satisfactory profits."²⁵ The company opened the 299-seat Oriole movie theater in Brooklyn in April 1911, attracting 103,000 visitors in its first six months, with plans to open a chain of educational theaters.²⁶ Kirk's organization was not as successful as she hoped. For example, Montclair, New Jersey, rejected her proposal to open a theater in town in May 1911, even though she promised that 10 percent of its profits would go to charity.²⁷

The Social Center Association of America held its first meeting in October 1911. Reformers gathered in Madison, Wisconsin, to hear dignitaries such as Woodrow Wilson, then governor of New Jersey, the newspaper editor William Allen White, and the writer Zona Gale.²⁸ One of many prominent social

reformers in attendance, John Collier spoke on the role moving pictures would play in the social-center movement, which was already splintering on the question of whether school centers should primarily be used as sites for recreation and leisure or as places for discussion of civic and political matters. Collier argued that school centers could serve as a useful bulwark against the commercialization of recreation, but after observing the failures of the evening recreation centers that did not screen motion pictures in New York, he suggested that school centers needed to compete directly with other entertainments. In his words, social centers needed to be “as gracious as the saloon, as lively and as rhythmic as the dance hall and as profound as the motion picture hall.”²⁹ Echoing Perry, Collier suggested that showing moving pictures at social centers would increase the demand for educational pictures. But Collier also proposed that moving pictures might be the key to achieving the democratic goals of social centers: “We have heard much said about the civic and public opinion side of the social center, which is indeed the crowning test of the validity of the social center, but down underneath public questions is their objective intellectual aspect, far down beneath those lie the desires and instincts and feelings of the people, and it is these desires and feelings and instincts which, if you push it far enough back, make and unmake all political issues.”³⁰ Essentially, Collier argued that the dramatic qualities of moving pictures made them “one of the profound forms of speech of the human soul,” and their comparatively low costs made them particularly useful for those who wished to engage the mass public on civic matters. By emphasizing the role of emotion in civic life, Collier claimed a place for moving pictures in the social center without challenging those who were more invested in fostering a democratic and local politics.

THE SCHOOL-CENTER MOVEMENT IN BOSTON

In Boston, efforts were already underway to use schools as social centers. In 1908, Mary Follett, a political and social theorist who is best known today for her writings on business management, became chair of the Women’s Municipal League’s Committee on Extended Use of School Buildings, and in October 1911 she opened, on an experimental basis, the East Boston High School Social Center.³¹ In the 1910s, Boston was in the midst of a social and cultural transformation. Since the end of the Civil War, the city had added approximately ten thousand individuals to its population every year, and by 1910 almost three-quarters of its population, now numbering 670,585, were either children of immigrants or immigrants themselves.³² An average of 83,678 students attended the Boston Public Schools in 1914, more than 10 percent of the city’s population.³³ In the 1914–15 school year, almost ten thousand of these students dropped out of school, and there were likely more young adults who never attended school in

the first place.³⁴ The social centers were expected to appeal to children, adults, and recent school dropouts as well as older students who would otherwise be tempted to engage in less edifying recreational activities.

In contrast to Addams's uplift nickel-show experiment, these social centers had limited competition from motion pictures. As Russell Merritt has noted, Boston's strict permitting system limited motion-picture theaters to two downtown theater districts in the first decade of the twentieth century with neighborhood theaters only becoming commonplace around 1913.³⁵ In East Boston, separated from downtown by the Boston Harbor, *Variety* reported two motion-picture houses had opened by late 1907, likely including the Scenic Temple, which featured vaudeville and moving pictures.³⁶ But movies were not incorporated in the East Boston social center, for reasons both legal and philosophical. In response to a janitor's concern, most likely over the risks of fire, at the end of 1910, the Boston school committee banned the exhibition of motion pictures in school buildings in March 1911.³⁷ Furthermore, Follett was not convinced that motion pictures would help the cause of the social centers, which she saw as essential to building democratic institutions in the city.³⁸

After the success of the inaugural season of the East Boston center, which ran through the spring of 1912, reformers sought to open centers throughout the city. In April 1912, the Massachusetts legislature passed a law permitting cities to set aside two cents per thousand dollars of property valuation in order to pay for the use of school buildings to "meet the social, civic and recreational needs" of citizens.³⁹ This relatively meager fund of thirty thousand dollars was shared among all groups in Boston that sought to use school buildings after hours—alumni clubs, parent-teacher associations, and civic groups—and thus had to be supplemented by contributions from the school system itself, philanthropists, or the local residents who attended the social centers. Even so, by reducing the amount of money needed to support center operations, the school system could devote more resources to hiring managers and paying the equipment and staff costs necessary to bring entertainments, including the movies, into the schools.

Ralph Hawley, a thirty-six-year-old school principal from Michigan, was selected to head the Boston social centers in early 1911, but he didn't officially start as director until April 1912, when the new legislation was in place.⁴⁰ One of his first acts was to introduce motion pictures to the four social centers that were in operation for the 1912–13 school year, including newly opened centers in Roxbury, Charlestown, and South Boston. Hawley appears to have done this without explicit authorization by the school committee, as the series of resolutions passed at the end of September authorizing the centers made no mention of motion pictures.⁴¹ Before the center season opened in October 1912, Hawley told

the *Christian Science Monitor*, which covered social centers more closely than other Boston newspapers, that he intended for the movies to play a critical role in winning back young people who had left school before graduation: "Their home environment precludes self development and their relation with the educational system needs to be reestablished. Many of them seem not in condition for study when evening comes, or study does not interest them. They crave recreation and amusement. The center aims to attract and interest them in things worthwhile. Instruction is combined with amusement. The motion picture attracts them."⁴² For Hawley and other social-center advocates, drawing people into the centers was seen as a necessary first step, and school-center movies proved to be an easy and reliable counterattraction to dance halls and neighborhood theaters. A few weeks later, on October 23, 1912, films were screened for the first time in a Boston school center, at the meeting of the Mothers and Home-Makers Club in the East Boston center. According to the *Monitor*, more than one hundred women and their children under age seven came to the center to see movies on the "falls and rapids of Niagara," the "'story' of the Declaration of Independence," and a film on the cocoa industry, the first of many successful screenings in school centers.⁴³

At the end of 1912, *Motography*, a Chicago-based motion-picture trade magazine, reported that Boston's mayor spent \$612.50 to bring movies to the four social centers.⁴⁴ The superintendent's report for the 1912–13 school year noted that motion pictures were shown twenty-three times in the city's four social centers, with an average attendance of 332, slightly more than the average attendance for the 140 "non-English lectures" given in the social centers.⁴⁵ Travel lectures in English were less popular and were being phased out, while the report noted that "the educational value of moving pictures is undoubted and their judicious use should be continued."⁴⁶ Even though the centers were prohibited by law from charging admission, and funds were meager, Hawley made the movies a priority.

In early 1913, Boston's mayor, John F. Fitzgerald, proposed that "motion picture outfits should be installed in schools of the different sections of the city," which would allow schools to more effectively teach geography, history, and other subjects as well as teach people the "value of mental and bodily development."⁴⁷ He also called for the creation of new school centers. In March 1913, the council passed an act that allowed the mayor to "grant permits in writing for special exhibitions of moving pictures in churches, halls or other buildings in that city which, in his opinion, are in safe conditions for such exhibitions."⁴⁸ In June 1913, regulations prohibiting film exhibition in schools were refined to permit it in schools that were "equipped by the School Committee for such purpose."⁴⁹



Fig. 3: Boston School Center. Photograph reprinted in Clarence A. Perry, *The Real Snag in Social Center Expansion* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1914). (Courtesy of the University of Chicago library)

For the 1913–14 season, two additional centers were added, one in Dorchester and the other in the West End (fig. 3). Unlike previous years, motion pictures were specifically authorized to be exhibited at the centers, and \$1,500 was reserved for educational films and lectures.⁵⁰ Despite this slow but steady expansion of moving pictures in schools, Hawley resigned his post after less than two years in the position. In a letter to the school committee, he claimed that he did not have the “united support” needed for the school centers to be a success and submitted his resignation as director in April, effective August 31, 1914.⁵¹ After his departure, school-center movies lost support in Boston, but they became more popular nationwide, particularly once reformers realized that running a picture show was a profitable enterprise.

MOTION PICTURES AS A CATALYST FOR THE SCHOOL-CENTER MOVEMENT

During Hawley’s time as director, school-center movies had become a nationwide phenomenon (fig. 4). For the 1912–13 school year, Clarence Arthur Perry reported that 330 schoolhouses in eighty-nine cities across the

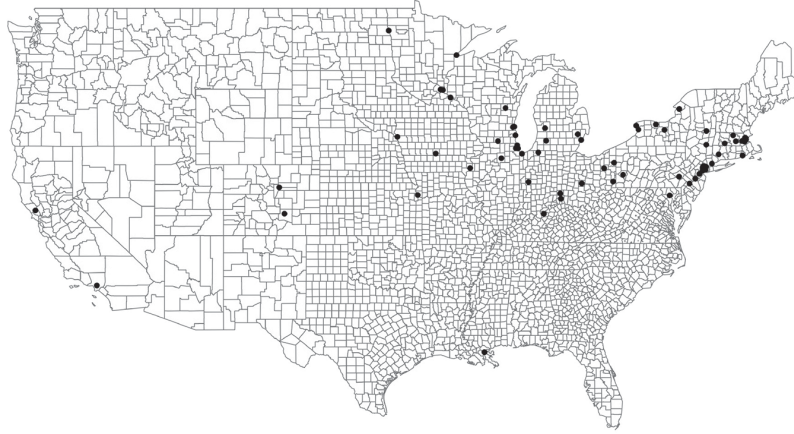


Fig. 4: Map of the social centers that reported employing paid workers at the end of the 1912–1913 school year. Clarence Arthur Perry collected the data after surveying 788 school superintendents. The seventy-one centers mapped here represent a sharp increase from the forty-four centers with paid staff for the 1911–1912 school year.

Source: Clarence Arthur Perry, *The Social Centers of 1912–1913* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1913)

country—from New Orleans, Louisiana, to Cleveland, Ohio, to Grand Forks, North Dakota—were being used as social centers.⁵² According to this same survey, sent to 788 school superintendents, motion pictures were exhibited 626 times in this one-year period (figs. 5 and 6).⁵³ This number pales beside the estimates of millions of people attending the cinema weekly in the 1910s. Nonetheless, it signifies more than a single demonstration of educational film programs, such as the model motion-picture show offered by the People's Institute on a May evening in 1909 in order to encourage exhibitors to reform their theaters.⁵⁴ Instead, as Alison Griffiths has recently observed in her book on film exhibition in prisons in the early twentieth century, “motion pictures presented unprecedented opportunities for social scientists to pry into the leisure habits of a burgeoning middle class as well as lower-class audiences,” making the medium attractive for those who wished to understand and transform how people spent their evenings.⁵⁵ As William Reese has noted in his history of public education in the United States, in the 1910s many educators were rethinking the place of schools in community life, and the “wider use of the school plant,” to use a phrase popularized by Clarence Perry, was of considerable interest to school reformers, who thought recreational and civic activities in school buildings at night and on the weekend would increase their value to the community.⁵⁶



Fig. 5: Social center movies in Mayville, Wisconsin. The films *Bees and Bee-Keeping* and *The Milk Industry* were screened. ("Extension Service of U of Wisconsin," n.d., box 1, folder 4, National Archives and Records Administration)



Fig. 6: The high school auditorium in Altoona, Wisconsin. "Extension Service of U of Wisconsin," 13 April 1915, RG 12, box 1, folder 4, National Archives and Records Administration)

In April 1912, Thomas Edison produced *Charlie's Reform*, a film focused on the school center and financed by the Russell Sage foundation. Perry, associate director of recreation for Russell Sage, wrote the screenplay, and the film was shown throughout the United States, often as part of local campaigns to start new centers.⁵⁷ Although the film itself is no longer extant, a plot summary was printed in a number of publications, including Edison's house organ *Kinetogram*, the *American Educational Review*, and *Temperance: A Monthly Journal of the Church Temperance Society*, which also printed film stills.⁵⁸

Despite its medium, *Charlie's Reform* was not about the screening of movies in social centers but rather the benefits of supervised social dancing. The thousand-foot reel told the story of Charlie, an "athletic young bookkeeper" who is courting a young woman, Helen, who lives at home with her young siblings. One day, after Helen's parents refuse to allow her to go out with him, Charlie leaves in a huff. Walking down the street, he runs into a friend, who invites him to a dance hall, the first step in a "downward career," that ends in drunkenness and unemployment.⁵⁹ Meanwhile, Helen's parents are persuaded by a neighborhood teacher that social centers are wholesome places, and she begins attending dances there with another young man. After a night of drinking, Charlie passes by the school center and spots Helen and her companion. Enraged, he enters the facility, only to find Helen dancing with a girl. Charlie confronts Helen, and the center's director and a policeman quickly intervene. Before they take him away, Helen explains Charlie's situation, and the center welcomes him. He becomes an assistant in the center's gymnasium, and after breaking his bad habits he returns to his old job. The story closes with Helen attending center events with Charlie, who has been saved from a "career of idleness and carousing" by the social center.⁶⁰

While *Charlie's Reform* seemed to be an attempt to boost the reputation of school centers, motion pictures had another advantage for reformers: their popularity and general appeal meant that they were often revenue generators. In a March 1912 address in Providence, Rhode Island, John Collier argued in favor of using schools as theaters, claiming that "there is no more reason why moving pictures or the dance or social intercourse should be the property of commerce to exploit, than there is in the case of the public libraries."⁶¹ In 1913, the subcommittee on recreation of the New York Board of Estimates and Appropriations, whose members included the National Board of Censorship's John Collier and Orrin G. Cocks, issued a memorandum calling for New York City to use its public facilities to compete directly with commercialized amusements. As reported in *The Survey*, the memorandum gave support to using schools as social centers, but argued that they needed to fund themselves through entrance fees, rentals, and club dues. While this was in part an acknowledgment of fiscal realities, as

the city was unlikely to support money-losing social activities, it was also an argument for social centers as democratic institutions. As *The Survey* put it, “local self-support is necessary before self-government can become a reality,” and motion pictures and dances were the two most obvious, and profitable, attractions that could lead to this end.⁶²

Reformers in smaller towns and cities also embraced the use of movies as a fund-raising vehicle. For example, in April 1916 Pauline Witherspoon, who organized and directed self-supporting Public School Community Centers in Louisville, Kentucky, told attendees of the first meeting of the National Community Center Association, which had previously been called the Social Center Association of America, that one of the centers she supervised was in part funded by the profits from a movie theater they ran themselves: “One community center council has rented a moving-picture theatre near the school building; this was primarily to regulate the films shown. But they have made so much money that they have gone on with it as a money-making scheme. I am hoping very much that the center which is most active in self-support will eventually be able to buy the nearest moving picture show, and run it to support the center.”⁶³ While this symbiotic relationship between a movie theater and a school center was somewhat unusual, it underscores that not all of those involved in the school-center movement linked film’s function to pedagogy alone. Rather, motion pictures could either awaken a Deweyesque appreciation for the educational possibilities to be found in any aspect of modern life, or simply be a clean amusement whose proceeds were spent on a good cause. But not all reformers were as sanguine about the entertainment and commercial possibilities of motion pictures.

BOSTON’S UNEASY RELATIONSHIP WITH SCHOOL PICTURES

While school-center movies were routinely among the more popular offerings, outpaced only by dances and the occasional performance, some reformers argued that movies did not benefit the social-center cause. In 1914, two years after Ralph Hawley introduced motion pictures to schools in Boston, his successor, Eva Whiting White, pushed to eliminate movies from school-center programming.

Unlike Hawley, the twenty-nine-year-old Eva Whiting White was a native of Massachusetts and active in reform circles. She graduated from the Boston School of Social Work in 1907 and in 1909 became the head social worker at the Elizabeth Peabody Settlement House, a position she retained until 1944. Because of her settlement work, she brought considerable experience to the new position, including a brief stint with motion pictures. In April 1912, the *Moving Picture World* reported that White was working with George Pierce Baker, a

drama professor at Harvard, to open a free moving picture show in the Peabody House.⁶⁴ The Peabody Playhouse, as it came to be known, opened in March 1913, part of its new building in the West End. A few months later, in July, the playhouse screened its first motion pictures, the first settlement house in Boston to do so, with plans to show pictures thrice weekly.⁶⁵

Despite her experience with Peabody Playhouse, White, like Follett, came to oppose the use of motion pictures in social work. Under the 1912 law that established their funding, the Boston centers were not permitted to charge admission for entertainments, so movies could not generate revenue for the centers. In her writings on the social-center movement, Follett repeatedly criticized what she called “passive recreation,” which requires only “receptivity” on behalf of the participants, as opposed to the creative activity required for club life. As she noted in April 1914: “We have moving pictures to be sure in our Centres, but either for what they can teach directly (their educational value in this respect is of course large), or if as a means of recreation, then in their legitimate place—duly subordinated to activities which require the active participation of the individual. This active participation is what gives to amusement its life-giving power.”⁶⁶

By classifying the movies as a passive, and thus undesirable, form of recreation, Follett took a stance that was seemingly at odds with those who criticized the cinema for its encouragement of unsavory behavior in and out of the theater. But Follett’s emphasis on activity was integral to her understanding of how school centers should function. Even if the centers supported vocational and civic instruction, a center could only be considered successful if it brought together heterogeneous groups from the neighborhood and encouraged them to create their own associations based on intellectual, creative, and civic interests. As she put it, the school centers aspired to “choose those forms of recreation and adopt those methods which should give social worth to the individual—free his initiative and his power of expression, create habits of social value, [and] above all strengthen and develop his sense of responsibility.”⁶⁷ The cinema fixed in place social relations that, in Follett’s view, should be organic and spontaneous formations and undermined the individual’s capacity to develop independent thought and relationships with his or her neighbors.

In her political treatise *The New State*, published in 1918 after her involvement with school centers ended, Follett argued for a concept of direct democracy in which the people themselves, not their elected officials, worked cooperatively to solve their own problems, including social and cultural matters. As she put it, “arts and civics do not meet merely by the state presenting art to its members; the civic expression of art is illustrated by locally managed festivals, by community singing, a local orchestra or dramatic club, community dancing etc.”⁶⁸

Drawing on her experience with school centers, she noted that the Mothers' Club at the Dorchester school center took it upon themselves to request permission to show "fairy-story films" on Saturday afternoons to keep their children off the streets, a demonstration of the power of self-government. As she argued: "we do not do for government, government does not do for us, we should be constantly the hands and feet, yes and the head and heart of government."⁶⁹ For Follett, the movies were valuable as tools that enabled individual and group activity, not as replacements for other forms of social organization.

White's annual reports on the social centers echoed Follett's critique of school-center movies. As she noted in her annual report for the 1914–15 year, she eliminated moving pictures from the school centers even though she acknowledged that they were popular. As she goes on to ask: "What has resulted by way of center support? Has the individualism which exists in any audience been broken down? Has the center been able to put on an entertainment so artistically superior or in content so much more valuable than the commercial house that the excellence of the performance justifies planning for a series of moving picture evenings?"⁷⁰ It is unclear whether White successfully eliminated movies from schools, or just moved them out of the domain of school centers for a brief period of time. For the 1914–15 and 1915–16 school years, the school committee budgeted one thousand dollars for "lectures and educational motion picture entertainments to be conducted in school buildings not used as school centers," which suggests an attempt to circumvent White's antipicture stance.⁷¹ For the 1915–16 season, the committee even established payments for motion-picture operators for both evening (\$3) and afternoon (\$1.50) exhibitions.

Other reformers had more measured responses to motion pictures but still saw them as frivolous when compared with other center activities. After arguing for the importance of collecting data on school-center activities in a United States Bureau of Education bulletin, Clarence Arthur Perry noted that the popularity of motion pictures created the illusion that schools that used them were more successful than those that did not. As he argued, "aggregate attendance alone could not be fairly used in comparing on the score of efficiency a school center running motion-picture shows with one devoted entirely to club work."⁷² In some cases, Perry observed motion-picture shows were a net negative, particularly for the young: "While a passive amusement, such as that afforded by the motion pictures, is a desirable recreation for an adult who has devoted the day to muscular labor, it can be too immoderately indulged in by youths and children, whose leisure might more profitably be devoted to active occupations."⁷³ Even though Perry was a strong advocate for the use of motion pictures in school centers, he evidently did not think that their educational value was strong enough to override other concerns, particularly their appeal

to young people who, in his view, should be spending their time in other ways. Although movies were a feature of many school centers, they were never the only, or even dominant, attraction, in part because center managers themselves did not want to be full-time theater operators, and the school boards and administrators who oversaw social centers sought to keep schools available for multiple uses.

SUPPLYING MOTION PICTURES TO SCHOOL

If installing moving-picture projectors in schools and settlement houses, not to mention churches, prisons, and factories, proved to be an achievable task in the early and mid-1910s, finding a regular supply of films was more difficult. Boston school centers had some success in borrowing prints directly from benevolent managers of commercial movie theaters, likely without the consent, or awareness, of distributors, but this system had obvious limitations in terms of the selection and quality of films. Of the major producers, only Edison was at all interested in supplying the nontheatrical market with films, and even these efforts ended when Ruth Gould Dolesé, an arts educator and former censor for the National Board of Censorship who headed the department that lent films to schools and other groups, died in the autumn of 1913.⁷⁴

In fact, the problem of securing films was so acute that the People's Institute in New York, which oversaw the creation of the National Board of Censorship, issued a six-page pamphlet on the matter in March 1915. As the pamphlet writer noted, many community centers were equipped with projectors, but the films they screened were either "sensational and melodramatic," "simply harmless," or industrial and travel films that were "neither exciting nor particularly instructive." Moreover, the films themselves were "scratched, spotted and apparently frayed and worn," something that could not be explained by an inattentiveness to the quality or content of center films by the managers themselves. Instead, as the pamphlet explains, the very method by which films were produced and distributed went against the aims of social centers. As the author suggested: "By a great effort the community center director may secure a proportion of distinctly educational subjects, but he will usually be unable to get the educational subject which is also a dramatic and thrilling one; such a film will be already preempted by the commercial show houses which are the privileged customers of the exchange. The inert and banal scenic films, the comics which fail to be humorous, the historical films which are not dramatic—these the community center may have for its program, provided they belong to the output of films for the past six months."⁷⁵ As a solution to this problem, the pamphlet author proposed that the People's Institute start a public film library, which would be supported by rental fees, and help community centers break

the “virtual monopoly” commercial theaters had over the distribution of motion pictures, giving noncommercial and commercial theaters alike the ability to borrow quality films for special exhibitions. Establishing film libraries was seen as the first step on the path to sponsoring independent film production operations, which would supply schools with appropriate film programs.

Although there was considerable interest among many reformers in developing a film library, the National Board of Review, previously the National Board of Censorship, was more interested in maintaining lists of recommended films rather than handling distribution, leaving the work of obtaining, storing, and transporting films in the hands of a range of state- and institution-based organizations, such as the YMCA, which started handling film as early as 1914, or the Chicago Bureau of Visual Instruction, which began operation in 1917.⁷⁶ In Boston, however, one of the most prominent nontheatrical film distribution companies in the 1910s, the Community Motion Picture Bureau, headed by Warren Dunham Foster, saw that even nontheatrical distributors needed to work at the scale and efficiency of their commercial counterparts.⁷⁷

In 1909, Foster resigned his post as an English professor at Iowa State University in order to become an editor at *Youth's Companion*, a Boston publication that was best known for first printing in 1893 the Pledge of Allegiance, written by one of its staff writers, Francis Bellamy. Although Foster was a native of the Midwest, he quickly acclimated to New England life and, in 1911, was appointed to the Homestead Commission, which assisted working-class families in securing housing in the state. Foster likely became familiar with the motion-picture needs of school centers from one of his fellow commissioners, Eva Whiting White, who was appointed alongside him.

In fact, White's disinterest in film may have led to her decision to turn over film operations to Foster. While Foster claims that he was interested in film as early as 1910, and later dates his company's founding as October 26, 1911, there is little evidence that the company was active in the distribution business before 1915.⁷⁸ In the late 1910s, Foster noted that he won the contract to show films in the Boston school centers in 1914, even though school records do not indicate his payment for these services.⁷⁹ As a magazine profile of his mother, Edith Dunham Foster, who worked as a programmer and editor for the bureau, recounted in 1920, Warren's interest in motion pictures began as the result of Edith's participation in women's clubs: “He believed that motion pictures would be a great thing to teach the poor people the principles of health, our spirit of citizenship and to open up a new world to them; so after hours he would take a reel of film under his arm and go over to East Boston and put on a free show for the Lithuanians. It hit them harder than all the sermons they had heard.”⁸⁰ In March 1914, Foster sent a letter to John Collier in which he admitted he

was just becoming interested in motion-picture distribution, and asked Collier to keep his interest in movies confidential lest his current employer learn of his plans to explore other opportunities.⁸¹ Within a year, Foster was in the film distribution business, telling the alumni magazine of his alma mater, the University of Chicago, that he “has lately been giving a good deal of his time to the management of the lecture courses and motion pictures of the Boston School Committee.”⁸² In the summer of 1915, the Community Motion Picture Bureau began supplying motion pictures to the Chautauqua Institution in upstate New York, which screened films daily.⁸³

Soon after, Foster also began providing an afternoon and evening program for the Springfield, Massachusetts, High School of Commerce. As Carlos B. Ellis, the school’s principal, noted in a 1919 letter, the motion-picture program was free in the afternoon for high-school students and charged admission in the evenings. According to Ellis, the program was a success from the start, attracting an average weekly paid attendance of 441 for the 1915–16 season, a quarter of whom were not yet in high school.⁸⁴ By September 1915, the Community Motion Picture Bureau was in full operation, with offices in Boston, New York, Chicago, and Chautauqua, New York.⁸⁵ Rather than offering individual titles for rent, the bureau offered complete programs, each containing at least a half-dozen titles. In addition to servicing churches, grade schools, and colleges and universities, the bureau also offered its programs to movie theaters, noting in a postcard that one could “stop all talk about Censorship in your town by using our carefully selected, complete, entertaining children’s programs.”⁸⁶ For the next several years, the bureau advertised widely, growing to meet what appeared to be an insatiable demand for quality film programs.

In Boston, school movies remained a subject of contention. Despite Eva Whiting White’s proclamation in 1915 that she successfully drove the movies out of the Boston centers, they quickly returned to the centers, aided in part by a law that went into effect in February 1916 that permitted centers to charge fees for lecturers, performances, and motion pictures.⁸⁷ For example, in the 1916–17 season, a visitor to the Charlestown School Center on a Saturday evening could choose between social dancing, whist parties, and a motion-picture program titled “Our Allies Yesterday and Today.” In East Boston, motion pictures were exhibited at the same time as dancing, the orchestra, and the meeting of the Arts and Crafts Club. Dorchester ran a movie show for children on Saturday afternoon, while South Boston showed its movies on Friday evenings, so all could participate in social dancing on Saturday. Roxbury, one of the more active school centers, screened educational movies on Tuesday evenings and films for children and high school students on Wednesday afternoons (fig. 7). According to records kept by Joseph Lee, chair of the National Playground Association

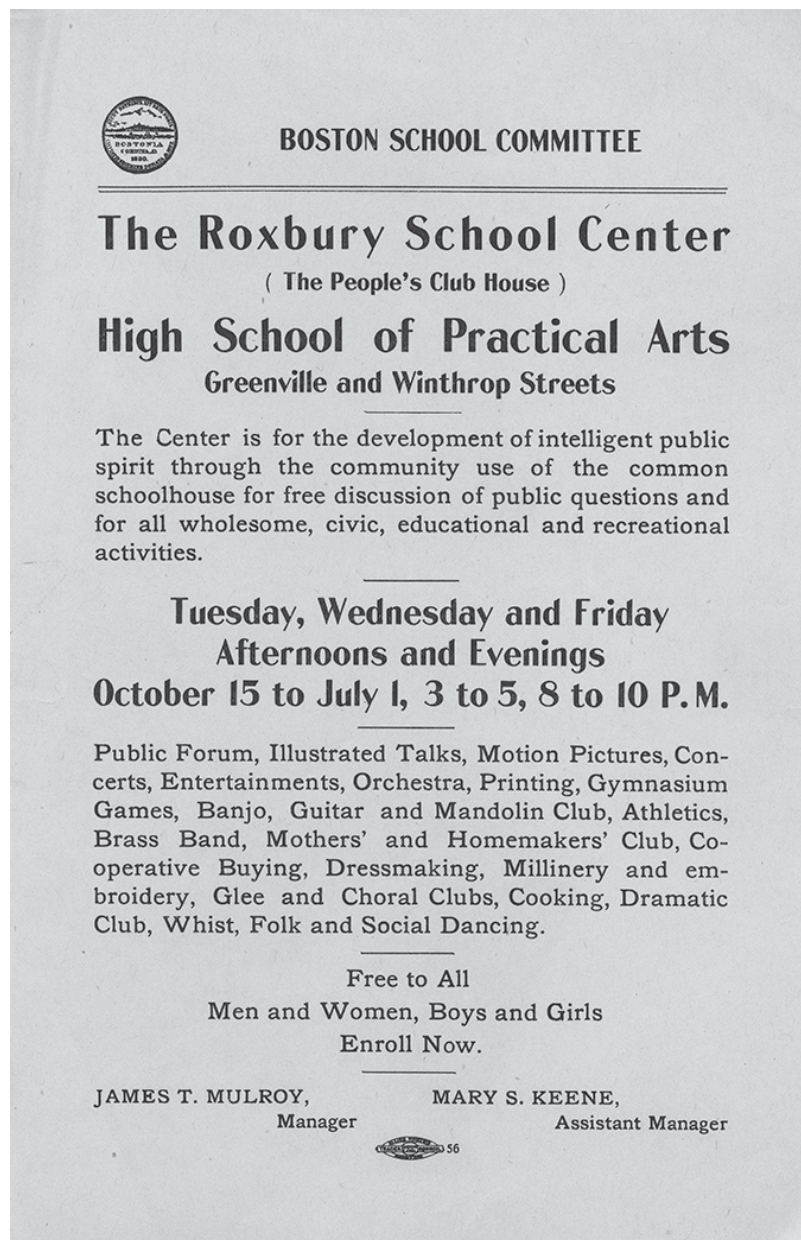


Fig. 7: Flyer advertising the Roxbury School Center, ca. 1915. (Joseph Lee Papers, Massachusetts Historical Society)

and a member of the Boston School Committee, most of the movies screened at the school centers were loaned by local theaters, with the Eagle Theater, also in Roxbury, contributing the lion's share of titles.⁸⁸

The Boston school centers almost exclusively favored movies with American themes, such as *Martyrs of the Alamo* (1915), *Guarding Old Glory* (1915), and *The Eagle's Nest* (1914), with the occasional exception of filmed versions of novels, including *Silas Marner* (1916).⁸⁹ Like social centers elsewhere, the Boston social centers sought to balance local programming with lectures, concerts, and films that were delivered by outsiders. For example, films that were based on American literature were "varied by evenings of readings from our poets and by evenings given over to discussing American music and illustrating the work of our native composers, for example, a McDowell evening and an evening of patriotic songs and plantation melodies given by the Hampton and Tuskegee students."⁹⁰ Such programs were put on in hopes that community participants would take cues from professionals in their own performances. However, as the writer of one annual report admitted, "for a time we shall have to put up with the sentimental song, the highly colored dramatic recitation."⁹¹ In this light, the movies could be seen as an attempt to professionalize the activities that went on at the centers, not encourage the advancement of democratic ideals.

WORLD WAR I AND THE DECLINE OF THE SOCIAL CENTER

In his political history of the social-center movement, Kevin Mattson argues that the US entry into the First World War in April 1917 extinguished the spirit of many social reformers, as they were asked to turn over their hard-won spaces in public schools for war preparation.⁹² Movie-theater owners and fledgling film studios supported the war, accepting measures such as a wartime tax on movie-theater admissions. The Community Motion Picture Bureau won the contract to supply soldiers stationed overseas with film programs, although they quickly learned that the fairy-tale stories and animated films used at the school centers were not as appealing to soldiers as they were to schoolchildren.⁹³ Meanwhile, many school centers slowly shied away from screening their own films. In a survey conducted during the 1919–20 school year, Perry noted that approximately one in nine cities in the United States reported having at least one school center. Led by cities in New York, Illinois, and Pennsylvania, the cities that had school centers reported an average of six in their school district, suggesting that the movement had considerable local and dispersed success but had not grown as quickly as its advocates once hoped.⁹⁴ Although Perry did not ask centers to report their usage of motion pictures at the centers, eighty-six centers, approximately 12 percent of the total, noted that they

screened movies.⁹⁵ At the 1917 meeting of National Community Center Association, Orrin Cocks, of the National Board of Review, gave a speech on the future of social-center films, asking “Can motion pictures be set free for educational use through existing trade facilities or are new facilities required?” In the speech, Cocks argues in favor of commercial cinema, suggesting that many narrative fiction films are also educational, and local groups are able to pressure the industry to make better pictures by working with exhibitors. Furthermore, Cocks argues that there is “no possibility of establishing permanent dramatic and educational libraries in the states or in one central place,” nor the possibility of sustaining educational film production, as the costs were too high, particularly for institutions that were only occasional users of film. While Cocks, as secretary of the National Committee for Better Films, supplied lists of approved pictures for publication in the community center association’s monthly newsletter, he was not persuaded that motion pictures had a future in school centers. Instead, he suggested in his speech that reformers focus on “better film programs, developing interest and knowledge in the effect of motion pictures, working in sympathetic cooperation with the exhibitors, [and] separate entertainments for children,” outlining what became the National Board of Review’s agenda for the next decade or more.⁹⁶

In January 1920, Maria Ward Lambin, director of recreation for the Greater New York office of the Community Council of National Defense, wrote David McGuire, of the National Board of Review, for more information on modifying “commercial recreations.” As she noted, she was planning to recommend that “citizen bodies, instead of running competing performances, endeavor to cooperate with local theater managers on the plan worked out so well by the Affiliated Committee for Better Films,” a reference to a contemporaneous movement to pressure theaters to show films approved by the National Board of Review.⁹⁷ That same year, exhibitors who had gathered in Cleveland for the convention of the Motion Picture Theatre Owners of America passed a resolution demanding that producers “restrict the distribution to such institutions of films of a purely religious or educational nature.”⁹⁸ Exhibitors, clearly, were not going to knowingly create their own competition.⁹⁹

In a reflection on the successes and failures of the social-center movement published in October 1921, ten years after reformers met in Madison, Wisconsin, to inaugurate the national campaign to use schools at night, Clarence Arthur Perry remarked, “if the organized, all-embracing community center has not spread, nevertheless the various lines of activity we hoped it would promote have enjoyed a tremendous expansion.”¹⁰⁰ Perry attributes the limited success of the school-center movement to two factors. First, many community institutions, including schools, churches, libraries, and civic associations, were willing

to open their doors for use by outside groups, leaving the school center just one among many gathering places. Second, in the 1910s a number of youth organizations, such as the Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts, and service organizations, such as the Kiwanis and Lions Club, were established, making school centers less vital as organizers of civic life than its advocates had presumed. While Perry noted that around three hundred community buildings had been built in prosperous small towns in the previous decade, in most major cities recreational, cultural, and educational facilities were segregated, which, in his view, wasted municipal resources.¹⁰¹

Even if the school-center movement faltered, some writers continued to see schools as the cornerstone of the long campaign to reform the movies. In 1921, Dolph Eastman, the editor of the short-lived *Educational Film* magazine, imagined a future where commercial cinema had become something like the panoramas of the nineteenth century, sound and color spectacles made for long runs at ten-thousand seat auditoriums. Meanwhile, in his vision, neighborhood movie theaters had been supplanted by theaters in schools and other civic spaces. In effect, he argued that the “school community center by selecting and screening the best pictures, by demanding from film producers and exchanges clean, wholesome, uplifting pictures with an idea, a lesson, a message, or a motive worth while [*sic*] ... will through sheer commercial necessity solve the problem of cleaner, better, and more valuable films.”¹⁰² While a robust educational film sector would soon form, its comparatively modest budgets and, at least initially, acutely tailored focus was not expansive enough to produce the kind of alternative cinema Eastman desired.

Instead, the social-center movement of the 1910s, and its reliance on motion pictures, complicates our understanding of how and why movies first appear in schools. School-center advocates were largely indifferent to the pedagogic potential of cinema. Instead, they were drawn to the medium because they saw that it represented an opportunity to bring together neighborhoods cleaved by ethnic, religious, and political divisions. Recognizing that the cinema was more than just a leisure activity for the working class, or children, or immigrants, reformers sought to relocate it to an environment where it might inculcate a democratic civic imagination. In contrast to those who aligned themselves with the Better Films movement, social-center advocates were less interested in reforming the commercial cinema than they were in cultivating a new audience that would create demand for educational film. In this way, the debates about whether pictures should be screened in social centers, and how they should be used, are part of a long-standing argument about the capacity of the cinema to not just educate people but also reform how they perceive the world and their place in it.

Notes

1. "Programs of Discussions, Luncheons, Dinners and Banquets," *Community Center* 1, no. 4 (April 7, 1917): 4. Members of the organization sometimes identified it as the National Community Center Conference. For clarity, I have used National Community Center Association to refer to the organization in this essay.
2. "The School vs. the Theater," *Motion Picture World*, September 1, 1917, 1366–67.
3. Charles Acland and Haidee Wasson, eds., *Useful Cinema* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011). See also Devin Orgeron, Marsha Orgeron, and Dan Streible, eds., *Learning with the Lights Off: Educational Film in the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).
4. See Lee Grieveson, *Policing Cinema: Movies and Censorship in Early-Twentieth-Century America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004); J. A. Lindstrom, "Almost Worse Than the Restive Measures: Chicago Reformers and the Nickelodeon," *Cinema Journal* 39, no. 1 (Fall 1999): 90–112; and William Uricchio and Roberta E. Pearson, *Reframing Culture: The Case of the Vitagraph Quality Films* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993). Uricchio and Pearson refer to activities sponsored by cultural and social institutions in New York, like the Educational Alliance and People's Institute, as "counterattractions," though their narrative more sharply separates these activities from the cinema.
5. For an international perspective on this issue that includes screen technologies before the cinema, see Ludwig Vogl-Bienek and Richard Crangle, eds., *Screen Culture and the Social Question, 1800–1914* (New Barnet: John Libbey Publishing, 2014).
6. For more on this debate, see Robert Fisher, "Community Organizing and Citizen Participation: The Efforts of the People's Institute in New York City, 1910–1920," *Social Service Review* 51, no. 3 (September 1977): 474–90.
7. See Gregory A. Waller, "Locating Early Non-Theatrical Audiences," in *Audiences*, ed. Ian Christie (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 201), 81–95. Waller focuses on the "targeted, sponsored screening" that was commonplace in the 1910s and later decades. While Waller correctly surmises that many films screened outside of movie theaters in the 1910s were "sponsored" films, often by advertisers, in an effort to reach a narrow slice of the population, the school centers discussed here sought to do more than just show the occasional film to students who attended the school.
8. While there has been considerable scholarship on Progressives and the cinema in the 1910s, the social-center movement has been neglected. One exception is Marina Dahlquist's essay on Americanization efforts and the civic theater in Pawtucket, Rhode Island, which was established in 1913. Although Reverend James Dingwell, who started the theater, shared many of the same aspirations as those in the social-center movement, he was particularly invested in the use of the cinema to teach citizenship. See Dahlquist, "Teaching Citizenship via Celluloid," in *Early Cinema and the "National,"* ed. Richard Abel, Giorgio Bertellini, and Rob King (New Barnet: John Libbey, 2008), 118–31.
9. Clarence Arthur Perry, "The Extension of Public Education: A Study in the Wider Use of School Buildings," *U.S. Bureau of Education Bulletin*, no. 28 (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1915).
10. See Kathy Peiss, *Cheap Amusements: Working Women and Leisure in Turn-of-the-Century New York* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001); and David Nasaw, *Going Out: The Rise and Fall of Public Amusements* (New York: Basic Books, 1993).
11. See Constance Balides, "Cinema under the Sign of Money: Commercialized Leisure, Economies of Abundance, and Pecuniary Madness, 1905–1915," in *American Cinema's Transitional Era: Audiences, Institutions, Practices*, ed. Charlie Keil and Shelley Stamp (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 292.

12. John Dewey, "The School as Social Centre," *Elementary School Teacher* 3, no. 2 (October 1902): 73–86. For more on Jane Addams's influence on Dewey, see Lee Benson, Ira Harkavy, and John Puckett, *Dewey's Dream: Universities and Democracies in an Age of Education Reform* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2007), 33–40.
13. Lauren Rabinovitz is one of many film historians who characterizes Addams's experiment as a "short-lived failure" that led to the reformer's embrace of "legal censorship as a means of control," and thus the turn to focusing on regulating movie production rather than theater spaces. See *For the Love of Pleasure: Women, Movies, and Culture in Turn-of-the-Century Chicago* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1998), 134–36.
14. In Boston, schools were used as evening "educational centers" as early as 1902, but their focus was educational rather than social. See Frederick W. Coburn, "Boston Common Schools as Educational Centers," *Educational Foundations* 16, no. 4 (December 1904): 280–83. The centers were suspended in 1905, when the school system stopped funding evening operations in the schools. For more on the Rochester schools, see Edward J. Ward, *Rochester Social Centers and Civic Clubs: The Story of the First Two Years* (Rochester, NY: League of Civic Clubs, 1909).
15. Ward, *Rochester Social Centers*, 12. For more on the history and mythology of the one-room schoolhouse, see Jonathan Zimmerman, *Small Wonder: The Little Red Schoolhouse in History and Memory* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2014).
16. While there were precedents for Rochester's school-center movement, such as the free, school-based lecture series led by Henry Leipziger in New York City, which started in 1891 and drew up to a million people annually by the 1910s, most reformers saw Ward's experiment in Rochester as a new development in the area of "extended use" of public buildings. For more on this lecture series and others like it, see Arthur S. Meyers, *Democracy in the Making: The Open Forum Lecture Movement* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2012), 14.
17. "Moving Pictures," *La Follette's Weekly Magazine* 2, no. 23 (June 11, 1910): 11.
18. "Pictures Made Big Hit," *Film Index*, July 2, 1910, 28.
19. One of the most prominent outcomes of this alternative approach to film regulation was the formation of the Better Films Committee, which was established in the mid-1910s to pressure film producers and theaters to offer a cinema in keeping with bourgeois values. See Jenny Horne, "The Better Films Movement and the Very Notion of It," *Feminist Media Histories* 3, no. 4 (Fall 2017): 46–68. As Horne observes, the Better Films Movement can be understood as an effort to coordinate and nationalize local efforts to control the cinema, engendering the same kinds of debates that emerged over the structure and function of social centers.
20. "New Uses for the Public School," *La Follette's Weekly Magazine*, December 31, 1910, 7–8. For more on John Collier, see Amanda Keeler, "John Collier, Thomas Edison, and the Educational Promotion of Moving Pictures," in *Beyond the Screen: Institutions, Networks, and Publics of Early Cinema*, ed. Marta Braun, Charles Keil, Rob King, Paul Moore, and Louis Pelletier (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2012), 117–25. In 1917, Collier was president of the National Community Center Association, and Mary Follett its vice president, demonstrating the close connection these two individuals had to the social-center movement. A few years later, Perry took over the organization, and its newsletter, which stopped publishing in 1922.
21. "Chicago Schools Will Show Pictures," *Film Index*, December 3, 1910, 7.
22. Livy S. Richard, "School Centers as 'Melting Pots,'" *New Boston*, April 1911, 529.
23. "The World Before Your Eyes," *Common Ground* 1, no. 3 (June 1910): 74.
24. George B. Ford, "Madison Conference on Social Centers," *The Survey*, November 18, 1911, 1229.

25. Mrs. T. G. Winter, "A Walking Brain or a Child?," *The Playground* 6, no. 4 (July 1912): 140.
26. There is conflicting information on the opening date of this theater. An item in a Brooklyn newspaper notes that it opened in late September 1911, and the *Moving Picture News* reported in its July 15, 1911, issue that the People's Recreation Company had placed an order for "294 opera chairs and a new Powers No. 6 moving picture machine" (15). See "Old Brooklyn Theaters," *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, September 28, 1911, 4. Other accounts suggest that moving pictures may have been shown in this space as early as April, and that the official opening and renaming of the theater occurred in the fall. For more, see Elsa Denison, *Helping School Children: Suggestions for Efficient Cooperation with the Public Schools* (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1912).
27. "Bars All Picture Shows," *Motography* 5, no. 5 (May 1911): 78.
28. *The Program of the First National Conference on Civic and Social Center Development, October 25–28, 1911, at Madison, Wisconsin* (Madison: University of Wisconsin, 1911).
29. John Collier, "Motion Pictures and the Social Center," *Bulletin of the University of Wisconsin*, serial no. 478, general series no. 313 (1912): 7.
30. Collier, "Motion Pictures and the Social Center," 9.
31. The Women's Municipal League raised \$5,000 to hire a director and center workers for the 1911–12 school year. See "Superintendent's Report," *Boston Public Schools: Annual Report of the School Committee, 1913* (Boston: Boston Printing Department, 1914), 116. For more on Follett's involvement in the school-center movement, see Joan C. Tonn, *Mary P. Follett: Creating Democracy, Transforming Management* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003), 204–52.
32. Susan Traverso, *Welfare Politics in Boston: 1910–1940* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2003), 8.
33. James H. Van Sickle, *Report of a Study of Certain Phases of the Public School System of Boston, Mass.* (Boston: City of Boston Printing Department, 1916), 170.
34. Van Sickle, *Report of a Study of Certain Phases*, 133.
35. Early moviegoing in New York and Chicago has been studied extensively, perhaps because both were also vibrant centers of film production. Philadelphia has been less studied. For an early examination of the nickelodeon in Boston, see Russell Merritt, "Nickelodeon Theaters, 1905–1914: Building an Audience for the Movies," in *The American Film Industry*, ed. Tino Balio (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1976), 83–102.
36. Ernest L. Waite, "Boston," *Variety*, October 26, 1907, 30.
37. *Proceedings of the School Committee of the City of Boston*, March 6, 1911, 16.
38. For more on how women sought to exert their influence on city politics before gaining the right to vote in 1920, see James J. Connolly, *An Elusive Unity: Urban Democracy and Machine Politics in Industrializing America* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2010), 115–34.
39. "Extended Use of the Public Schools, 1916–1917," 1.
40. Hawley observed Follett's work at the East Boston school center before taking over as director. See Ralph Hawley, "The Extended Use of School Buildings," *Moderator-Topics*, May 23, 1912, 755–59.
41. *Proceedings of the School Committee of the City of Boston*, September 30, 1912, 170–75.
42. "Neighborhood Work of Schoolhouses to Cover New Districts," *Christian Science Monitor*, October 2, 1912, 8.
43. "Motion Pictures Used at Meeting of Home Makers Club," *Christian Science Monitor*, October 24, 1912, 5.

44. *Motography*, December 21, 1912, 476.
45. The budget for "Public Lectures and Educational Motion Picture Entertainments" for the 1913–14 school year was \$1,500. See *Proceedings of the School Committee of the City of Boston*, June 23, 1913, 107.
46. See "Superintendent's Report," *Boston Public Schools: Annual Report of the School Committee, 1913* (Boston: Boston Printing Department, 1914), 118.
47. "Mayor Fitzgerald's Address," *Reports of Proceedings of the City Council of Boston for the Year Commencing February 3, 1913 and ending January 31, 1914*, February 3, 1913, 3.
48. *Acts and Resolves Passed by the General Court of Massachusetts in the Year 1913* (Boston: Wright & Potter Printing Co., 1913), 218.
49. *Proceedings of the School Committee of the City of Boston*, June 23, 1913, 108.
50. *Proceedings of the School Committee of the City of Boston*, June 23, 1913, 106.
51. *Proceedings of the School Committee of the City of Boston*, May 25, 1914, 87.
52. Clarence Arthur Perry, *The Social Centers of 1912–13*, No. 135 (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1912).
53. Perry, *The Social Centers of 1912–13*, 1, 4.
54. "Censors Conduct Model Picture Show," *New York Times*, May 16, 1909, 7.
55. Alison Griffiths, *Carceral Fantasies: Cinema and Prison in Early Twentieth-Century America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), 133. As Griffiths notes, while some prison authorities sought to use prison screenings as an opportunity to show reformist fare, commercial films were screened as well (146).
56. William J. Reese, *America's Public Schools: From the Common School to "No Child Left Behind,"* updated ed. (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2011), 118–48.
57. "How 'Charlie's Reform' Is Being Handled," *Edison Kinetogram*, May 15, 1912, 15.
58. "Social Centres Instead of Dance Halls," *Temperance: A Monthly Journal of the Church Temperance Society* 4, no. 9 (May 1912): 10–12.
59. "The Work of Social Center Schools," *American Educational Review* 33, no. 7 (April 1912): 351.
60. "Social Centres Instead of Dance Halls," 12.
61. John Collier, "Leisure Time, the Last Problem of Conservation," repr. *Playground* 6, no. 3 (June 1912): 104.
62. "Self Government in Public Recreation," *The Survey*, August 23, 1913, 639.
63. Pauline Witherspoon, "How the Louisville Community Centers Grew," *Community Center*, February 3, 1917, 6.
64. "Correspondence: New England," *Moving Picture World*, April 27, 1912, 348.
65. "Correspondence: New England," *Moving Picture World*, August 2, 1913, 543.
66. Mary P. Follett, "Educational-Recreation: A New Principle in Education Applied by the Boston School Committee in the Boston Evening Centres," *Women's Municipal League of Boston Bulletin*, March–April 1914, 17.
67. Follett, "Educational-Recreation," 21.
68. Mary Follett, *The New State* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1998), 237.

69. Follett, *The New State*, 238.
70. "Report on School Centers," *Documents of the School Committee of the City of Boston*, 1915 (Boston: City of Boston Printing Department, 1915), 140.
71. *Proceedings of the School Committee of the City of Boston*, September 14, 1914, 135; and *Proceedings of the School Committee of the City of Boston*, September 20, 1915, 123.
72. Clarence Arthur Perry, "Significant School Extension Records: How to Secure Them," *Bulletin* 1915, no. 41, 12–13.
73. Clarence Arthur Perry, "Significant School Extension Records," 17.
74. For more on Dolesé, who remains one of the forgotten early figures in educational film, see the feature article about her work with Edison that was published before her death. R. C. Rose, "Education by Motion Pictures: An Interview with Ruth Gould Dolesé," *Twentieth Century Magazine*, February 1912, 338–45. See also Jennifer Peterson, "'The Knowledge Which Comes in Pictures': Educational Films and Early Cinema Audiences," in *A Companion to Early Cinema*, ed. Andre Gaudreault, Nicholas Dulac, and Santiago Hidalgo (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 286–87.
75. *Motion Pictures: A Problem to Be Co-Operatively Solved*, 22 March 1915, Social Center Committee of the People's Institute, People's Institute Papers, New York Public Library.
76. See Paul Saettler, *The Evolution of American Educational Technology* (1990; repr. Greenwich, CT: Information Age Publishing, 2004), 111. For more on nontheatrical distribution in the years immediately after the end of World War I, see Richard Abel, "The 'Much Vexed Problem' of Nontheatrical Distribution in the Late 1910s," *Moving Image* 16, no. 2 (Fall 2016): 91–107.
77. While the YMCA is an important film distributor in the 1910s and, unlike the Community Motion Picture Bureau, was able to sustain operations for many decades to come, there is scant mention of their motion-picture work in the evidence I have uncovered as part of this research. This might be because the YMCA was, at least in the 1910s, primarily concerned with obtaining films for their own operations, not supplying an array of other, and competing, institutions with pictures. For more on the YMCA's early film distribution efforts, see Ronald Greene, "Y Movies: Film and the Modernization of Pastoral Power," *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* 2, no. 1 (2005): 20–36. For a contemporaneous piece on film exhibition in YMCAs and churches, see Frederick James Smith, "Bringing the Motion Picture to Church," *Photoplay* 12, no. 5 (October 1917): 47–48.
78. Warren Dunham Foster, "Community Motion Picture Bureau: A Bird's Eye View," *Community News* 1, no. 6 (February 17, 1919), National Board of Review of Motion Pictures records, Manuscripts and Archives Division, New York Public Library (hereafter cited as NBR). See company history, Community Motion Picture Bureau—Foster Clipping Scrapbooks, Motion Picture, Broadcasting, and Recorded Sound Division, Library Of Congress, for the 1910 date. The 1911 date appears in several places, including Leslie Willis Sprague, "Motion Pictures in Community Service," n.d., NBR.
79. In "Community Motion Picture Bureau," Foster also claims that he has been supplying the Boston City Schools for five years, and the Springfield, Massachusetts, school system for four years, which would correspond with starting these services in 1914 and 1915, respectively.
80. Homer Croy, "She Sells Human Interest," *Green Book Magazine*, June 1920, 45.
81. Warren Dunham Foster to John Collier, 14 March 1914, NBR.
82. "News of the Classes"—1908, *University of Chicago Magazine* 8, no. 5 (March 1915): 149.
83. "The Chautauqua," conducted by Frank Chapin Bray, *The Independent* 83, no. 3477 (July 26, 1915): 132.
84. Carlos B. Ellis to Warren Dunham Foster, 14 February 1919, NBR.

85. The company incorporated in Massachusetts on December 3, 1915.
86. Postcard [1915?], NBR.
87. 1915–16 report, 22, Joseph Lee Papers, 1845–1991, Massachusetts Historical Society, Boston.
88. “Extended Use of the Public Schools, 1916–1917,” 9–12.
89. “Extended Use of the Public Schools, 1916–1917,” 17. These movies were all shown at the South Boston center, though many were also exhibited in Roxbury.
90. “Extended Use of the Public Schools, 1915–1916,” Joseph Lee Papers, 5.
91. “Extended Use of the Public Schools, 1915–1916,” Joseph Lee Papers, 7.
92. Kevin Mattson, *Creating a Democratic Public: The Struggle for Urban Participatory Democracy during the Progressive Era* (State College: Penn State University Press, 1997).
93. Sue Collins, “Film, Cultural Policy, and World War I Training Camps: Send Your Soldier to the Show with Smileage,” *Film History* 26, no. 1 (2014): 28.
94. Clarence Arthur Perry, *School Center Gazette, 1919–1920* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1920), 3. Perry’s report defined a city as a place with a population of more than five thousand residents and sent surveys to school superintendents in all 954 cities.
95. Clarence Arthur Perry, *School Center Gazette 1919–1920*, 9.
96. Orrin Cocks, “Can Motion Pictures Be Set Free for Educational Use through Existing Trade Facilities or Are New Facilities Required?,” 20 April 1917, NBR. For more on the National Board of Review’s activities, see Jennifer Fronc, *Monitoring the Movies: The Fight over Film Censorship in Early Twentieth-Century Urban America* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2017).
97. Maria Ward Lambin to David McGuire, 20 January 1920, NBR.
98. “Therefore Be It Resolved,” *Exhibitors Herald*, June 26, 1920, 36.
99. This statement might be linked to the large numbers of temporary theatrical spaces that existed during the war, primarily for soldiers. See Sue Collins, “Film, Cultural Policy, and World War I Training Camps.”
100. Clarence Arthur Perry, *Ten Years of the Community Center Movement* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1921), 5.
101. Perry, *Ten Years of the Community Center Movement*, 9.
102. Dolph Eastman, “The Public School as the Neighborhood Movie Theater,” *Educational Film* 5, no. 6 (June 1921): 22.

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