Willard B. Spalding (1904-1981)

A nationally recognized and respected educator, Willard B. Spalding held two key positions in Oregon during critical times: superintendent of Portland schools at the end of World War II and administrator at the state's newest institution of higher education, Portland State University.

Spalding was born on February 9, 1904, in Salisbury, Massachusetts, where his ancestor Edward Spalding had moved after landing in Jamestown in 1608. Willard's family moved to Boston, where his father, Charles Spalding, managed musicians (Rachmaninoff and Kreisler among them) and the personnel of the Boston Symphony Orchestra. His mother, Ellen Brown Spalding, attended Wellesley College and worked for Towle Silver Company. They had three children.

Spalding attended Wesleyan College and graduated from Boston University in 1926 with a bachelor's degree in business administration. Even before graduating, he was hired as a school principal in Princeton and married Margaret Hatch. While earning his master's in educational administration at the University of New Hampshire in 1928-1932, and his doctorate in curriculum and instruction from Harvard in 1942, he served as principal and superintendent in several school districts in Massachusetts and New Jersey.

Spalding was ready to pursue a big-city school system, and in 1944 he moved to Portland to become superintendent of Portland Public Schools. He remained in that position until 1947, serving during the difficult war and after-war years. Money was tight, and he had to contend with leaves of absence by teachers in military and Red Cross service and who, at the end of the war, wanted their jobs back. Some substitutes could not pass the National Teachers Examination and he recommended that the district temporarily waive that requirement.

His belief that school administration was the responsibility of the total citizenry was popular with the school board, and in 1947 they voted to extend his contract. "We agree, without exception, that Dr. Spalding has brought to the District a fresh viewpoint and vigorous leadership." They praised his "sound judgment and high scholastic standards." Even though he accepted the new contract "with gratitude," he resigned in the summer of 1947 to become dean of the College of Education at the University of Illinois (1947-1952).

His tenure as dean was highly successful, but when the Oregon State System of Education offered him a professorial position, he joined the faculty at Portland State College. He became chair of the Division of Education at the college in 1955, as well as acting dean of the faculty. His importance in the development of the young institution cannot be overstated. As chair of the Curriculum Committee and head of Education, he laid the foundation for liberal arts and education courses. In 1958, Spalding was chair of the search committee to select the Portland State president, Branford P. Millar.

Spalding, many would say, was the most forward-looking of the early administrators in the emerging institution. In June 1962, he wrote Dean John Swarthout: "We must begin to act like what we will become, a great university guided by our sense of purpose and perceptions."

Having established the internal structure of the university, Spalding left in 1963 to become director of the California Coordinating Council for Higher Education until 1971. During his long career, he was the author and editor of more than a dozen books and numerous articles, and he served as visiting professor at Stanford and Harvard. Willard Spalding applied to return to Portland State as dean of education in 1971 at age 67 but was not hired. He died in Charlottesville, Virginia, in May 1981.

Written by Ulrich H. Hardt

Further Reading:

Dodds, Gordon B. *The College that Would Not Die: The First Fifty Years of Portland State University, 1946-1996.* Portland: Oregon Historical Society, 2000.

Spalding, Willard B. *The Superintendency of Public Schools—An Anxious Profession.*Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1954.

Spalding, Willard B., and John M. Smart. “Concepts of System and Higher Education.” *The Education Forum* 34:2 (Jan. 1970), 167-175.

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