

PROGRESS IN MUNICIPAL CIVIL SERVICE: A REVIEW OF RECENT REPORTS

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IN ITS earliest phase the movement for civil service reform related exclusively to the manner of appointing and discharging public employes. Moreover, its purposes were restrictive, rather than constructive. It sought to reduce the abuses of political patronage by eliminating, as far as possible, political influences in appointments and removals. In its later phases the movement has become both more positive and more comprehensive. It seeks not only to prevent partisan appointments to administrative positions, but also to establish means for recruiting and selecting the most intelligent and best qualified eligibles for these positions, and for promoting those incumbents most deserving and fit to be promoted. Furthermore, its activity extends beyond the sphere of selecting, promoting and removing officials and employes. It is now concerned with the whole question of the effective organization of administrative positions, the institution of improvements and economies in administrative methods, and the development of the usefulness and loyalty of the holders of administrative positions.

Reports of civil service agencies during the past year and a half reveal generally progress in all the lines just indicated. Neither all the reports issued, nor all the important aspects of municipal civil service upon which they throw light can be reviewed in this article. Many municipal commissions do not issue annual printed reports; among the reports published, many merely record the civil service laws and regulations, with the addition in some cases of summary notes on judicial decisions or changes in the rules, or of uninterpretative records of the year's activities. From among the more enlightening reports of municipal civil service commissions and other bodies, the limits of this article make necessary a narrow selection of questions upon which to place emphasis.¹ Progress in

¹ The annual reports to which more frequent reference is made in this article are the following: Thirty-second annual report of the municipal civil service commission of New York City for 1915; Report and review of civil service operation in the city of Oakland from organization of the civil service board on September 5, 1911, to June 30, 1915; Thirty-second annual report of the civil service commission of Massachusetts, from October 1, 1914, to September 30, 1915; Second annual report of Los Angeles county civil service commission and bureau of efficiency, for the year ending June 30, 1915; Third annual report of the civil service commission of the city of Minneapolis for 1915; Second annual report of the bureau of civil service of the city of St. Paul for 1915. Other city reports worthy of consultation are those of Denver,

broader lines has been perhaps most noteworthy in the following fields of civil service work: the scope and methods of examination; the recording of merit and competency of incumbents of positions in the classified service; programs for revision and standardization of administrative organization, activities, and awards.

EXAMINATIONS

The reports generally reveal the increasing breadth, flexibility, and practicality of the tests applied by the commissions. The examination is no longer necessarily and primarily a written test of memory and accumulated knowledge. It is a specially devised inquiry to find, through whatever means are particularly available for the position to be filled, the applicant best fitted to perform the duties of that position. And its object is not solely, and in many cases not mainly, to discover whether the applicants possess designated points of information and training; it may rather be to find out, on the one hand, their actual practical skill, and, on the other hand, their basic personal, mental and moral dispositions. Under this flexible form the examination becomes increasingly adaptable for a wider and higher range of positions. Recent reports show specifically progress in the methods of preparing examinations generally, in the methods of testing practical skill, and in the methods of appraising past experience and general personal qualifications by means of the sworn experience sheet and the oral examination and interview.

Before preparing an examination, more thorough knowledge of the duties of the position to be filled is now obtained by the commissioners, in order that the examiners may concentrate their questions and tests upon those which are of direct value in ascertaining actual fitness for the position. This preliminary preparation appears to be carried out with particular thoroughness and care in New York City and Oakland. Advice is obtained from heads of departments and other supervisory officers concerned and from outside persons prominent in related vocations. In preparing examinations the examiners are supplied with the printed materials necessary; and the co-operation of experts is secured. The New York City commission has established a special library for exam-

Pittsburgh, Milwaukee, Houston, Tex., Portland, Ore., Los Angeles City, Philadelphia and Cincinnati, and the annual report of the civil service board and superintendent of employment of the West Chicago park commissioners, for the year 1915. Publications of other civil service agencies containing discussions of problems of the city services are as follows: Proceedings of the eighth meeting of the national assembly of civil service commissions, Los Angeles, June, 1915; Proceedings of the annual meeting of the National Civil Service Reform League, Philadelphia, December, 1915; Report of the committee on co-operation among commissions on examination standards, presented at the ninth annual meeting of the national assembly, Ottawa, Canada, June, 1916. Publications on standardization of public employments and other special reports are mentioned at appropriate places in the body of the article.

iners, containing codes, bulletins, departmental reports and other such publications. Similar material from other cities collected by the Municipal Reference Library is also open to the examiners. The commission has likewise instituted, for use in making examinations, a system of exchange of questions, reports and suggestions with other commissions.

The co-operation of experts in the preparation of examinations presents several problems to the commissions. If resort is had to experts within the service, there is chance for suspicion of prejudice and favoritism, and some likelihood that the examination will be too narrowly technical or practical. If the aid of outsiders is sought, this aid is obtained sometimes only under difficulties. Outsiders who, in first instances, gratuitously or for low compensation, give their time and effort from motives of pride or public spirit, come, in connection with subsequent requests for help, to regard the task as irksome; and the commissions ordinarily do not have at their disposal funds with which to offer adequate compensation for such work. Furthermore, it is frequently difficult to find even among recognized experts in a certain field men who possess the peculiar ability to frame questions which are clear and correctly pointed for the purpose in hand. Despite these obstacles, several reports make special mention of the generosity with which outsiders—business and professional men—give their time for low or no remuneration, and of the satisfactory results thus obtained in the framing and conduct of examinations and the grading of papers.²

Practical tests are coming more and more to take the form of trying out the applicants in the actual work which they will be called upon to do if appointed. The New York City commission pursued this method successfully during the past year in examinations for inspector of weights and measures, inspector of blasting, inspector of fire-alarm boxes, swimming instructor, play-ground attendant, psychologist, electrician, stationary engineer, and engineer of steamer. The candidates for inspector of blasting were taken to the bottom of a fifty-foot excavation for the new subway and were there tested as to their familiarity with the character of rocks, use of tools, handling of explosives, firing of blasts, electrical wiring, etc. Candidates for swimming instructor were examined, under the supervision of two well-known swimming experts, in one of the public baths, and were there required to demonstrate their ability in swimming strokes, diving, life saving, and teaching others to swim. The commission makes frequent use of the various city plants and educational institutions in these practical tests.³ Among the recommendations of the Massachusetts commission in their latest reports is that "legislation be enacted which shall enable the commission to establish an experi-

² See especially reports of the commissions of Minneapolis, New York City, Los Angeles county, Cincinnati and Massachusetts.

³ See also the reports of the Oakland and St. Paul commissions.

mental yard or station in one or more cities of the commonwealth for the purpose of giving practical tests to applicants for the different positions in the classified service."

The more progressive commissions are making extensive use of the sworn experience sheet in order to ascertain and evaluate the candidate's actual experience in work of the kind to be performed in the position for which he has applied. Increasing relative weight is in many cases given to experience. In examination for a certain class of the police service by the Massachusetts commission, training and experience now counts 32 per cent, whereas it formerly counted but 20 per cent; the experience weight for Boston firemen has risen from 20 per cent to 40 per cent. The experience sheets are often mailed to applicants some days in advance of the examination in order that they may be filled out with due caution against incompleteness or exaggeration. In order that the experience statements may constitute reliable evidence of an applicant's suitability for a position, some means for verifying the statements is necessary. The New York City commission entrusts this work to its bureau of character investigation, which not only has the function of checking up statements as to past experience, but also conducts a detailed investigation into the past records and moral qualifications of persons applying for positions in all branches of the competitive service. The commission regards the work of this bureau as an indispensable protection against fraud and as an effective assurance that men of integrity and good calibre are being recruited for the service.

Oral tests for various positions are being used in two forms: the oral examination—"question and answer given orally, taken down stenographically and transcribed for filing with the candidate's papers," and the oral interview—a more informal exchange of questions and answers for the purpose of forming an opinion as to the candidate's general personal qualifications, such as bearing and manners, tact, judgment, courage, ability to express ideas clearly and effectively. The oral examination appears to be especially fitted for tests for positions involving work of the skilled trades, where highly qualified candidates may be peculiarly inexpert in the means of written expression of their knowledge. The oral interview is coming to be regarded as an indispensable test for positions requiring the qualities mentioned above. On the other hand, it is regarded as being attended with the danger of favoritism, or the suspicion of such by outsiders, because of the fact that the identity of candidates cannot be concealed as in the written examination; this difficulty applies in less degree to the oral examination. Moreover, it is sometimes felt that the oral interview as ordinarily conducted can lead only to a very tentative and more or less impressionistic opinion of a candidate's fitness. These objections can be almost completely avoided, however, as shown by the satisfactory experience of several commissions. To co-

operate with the staff examiners, great care is taken to secure men of recognized professional standing and of general repute in the community; a stenographic record of the interview is taken; the report of the interview indicates the facts upon which the conclusion was reached; and outside persons having a recognized interest in the proceedings may be allowed to attend the interview.

The foregoing sketch of the scope and variety of examining methods illustrates the ever broadening adaptability of the competitive test as a scientific and practical method for recruiting applicants and selecting from among them those most suitable for administrative positions, high and low. There are relatively few of such positions which do not admit of being filled by this method now since the tests may comprise some or all of the following means of discovering fitness: physical examination, practical trials in acts actually to be performed, written intellectual examination, statement of experience and training, special thesis, oral examination and interview. The New York City commission reports that during the year 1915 it succeeded "in establishing eligible lists for such important administrative positions as superintendent of the municipal lodging house, superintendent of the employment agency, director of the bureau of food inspections, department of health, director of the bureau of social investigations, department of public charities, secretary on recreation for the committee on social welfare, assistant director of the bureau of standards and superintendent of the New York City childrens' hospitals and schools, Randall's Island."

The examination for the last mentioned position, a position demanding very high and specialized ability, training and character, appears to have been devised and executed with exceptional wisdom and success. The examination was developed with the co-operation of Dr. W. E. Fernald, superintendent of the Massachusetts state institute for feeble minded, at Waverly, and was thrown open to the entire country. The experience requirement included the possession of a medical degree, experience in the management of child-caring institutions, and other features, which had to be described in a detailed account; this test eliminated eighteen of the thirty-four original candidates. The remaining sixteen were required to prepare a thesis covering a discussion of all points of the pathology and treatment of feeble-mindedness in children and a formulation of detailed plans for the construction and administration of an institution for feeble-minded; this was a non-assembled test, the candidates being allowed ten days for preparing their theses. Six candidates being eliminated by this test, the remaining ten were separately given oral tests in the office of the commission; the object of this test was to check up the actual knowledge and experience of the candidates and to obtain judgment of their personal qualifications. The result of this test was the

establishment of a final eligible list of seven names.⁴ At the time of writing the commission is engaged in conducting competitive tests along similar lines for the position of director of central purchasing.

SERVICE RECORDS

Efficiency, or service, markings, are shown by the reports to have several objects. They are of definite value to civil service commissions in establishing promotion lists; they assist departmental heads in the administration of their departments; they supply concrete evidence in requests by departmental heads for increases in salaries or for additional employes; they provide data for the work of standardizing titles, duties and salaries; they stimulate employes to greater diligence and alertness; they facilitate the elimination of unworthy employes from the service. The New York City commission proposes to derive further benefit from such records by assigning some of its examiners to efficiency record work; they expect that this will supply the examiners with valuable information and suggestions to use in the preparation of examinations.

A difficult problem of efficiency marking is that of the proper selection and rating of the different factors to be considered. It is recognized that the relative values of given factors vary with different groups of employes; and certain factors applicable in one group may not be applicable at all in another group. In Oakland the general factors considered are ability, quantity of work, reliability, attendance, and discipline. The weights for the first three factors "vary with the duties and responsibility of the position. To illustrate, the weights for a battallion chief, fire department, are 6-1-3; for a senior clerk, 3-4-3; for a common laborer, 1-8-1. . . . The basis of marking is 80 points for the satisfactory employe, with due weight given to every point above or below. Markings below 70 are cause for discharge from the service, and the rules require the Board to file charges if the employe is not discharged. Attendance and discipline markings are mandatory and according to fixed rules, and are deducted from the positive markings in making the final markings. The departments file with the Board the net monthly markings, with explanation of cause for markings above 85 or below 75, and these are entered on the efficiency record of the employe after approval by the board. The executive is made careful in his marking and the employe is protected by the right of appeal to the board." In St. Paul efficiency is graded under the five factors of ability, industry, reliability, attendance, and discipline; the marking is done by letters, standing, respectively, for such qualifying

⁴ Appointment was made of Dr. W. B. Cornell, of Maryland, who stood third on the list. He is a man of broad scholarship and successful experience in clinical and administrative work in institutions for feeble-minded. It is a practice in New York City to select the highest name on a list of eligibles. In this instance the persons standing higher declined final appointment.

adjectives as "excellent," "good," "fair," etc.; the letters are then translated by the civil service bureau to a percentage basis.

The New York City commission, in December, 1915, issued a bulletin setting forth a proposed new system of service records for municipal employes. The proposals are the outcome of conferences between the New York bureau of municipal research and the civil service commission, the bulletin being based on a comprehensive report submitted by the bureau to the commission. It outlines a "standard code of regulations to govern preparation of service records." These regulations define the factors and sub-factors to be used in preparation of ratings, the classification of employments and percentages to be given to the various factors in each class, the method for preparing ratings by the employes and by heads of bureaus and divisions and for review of ratings by departmental personnel boards and by the commission, and the relative weights to be given to written examination, service record and seniority record in establishing promotion lists. These weights are .5, .35, and .15, respectively. The plan of service records outlined in the bulletin is being applied as an experiment in the health department, law department, department of bridges, park department (Bronx), and civil service commission; and it has been submitted to heads of departments generally and employes for criticism and suggestion.

During the year 1915 the New York City commission has secured the adoption of an improved system for rewarding meritorious service in the uniformed force of the police and fire departments. Formerly service awards were based largely upon chance acts of bravery, and the demerits based almost exclusively upon infractions of departmental regulations. This unfairly limited and misleading method has now been superseded by a system of awards which comprises a recognition of less spectacular acts involving conscientious and efficient performance of daily duties.

ADMINISTRATIVE REORGANIZATION AND STANDARDIZATION

Some commissions have interested themselves actively in the work of reconstructing administrative organization and methods, with such objects as the following: simplification and centralization in the organization of administrative departments; elimination of unnecessary positions; installation of means of greater economy and expertness in operation; remedying of particular deficiencies in equipment and methods; extension or limitation of municipal activities. The accomplishments in this line by the Oakland civil service board, since its establishment in 1911, will sufficiently illustrate this phase of the work of the commissions. Through its efficiency division which was organized in November, 1913, it has secured many changes, including the following: a combination of the positions of superintendent of streets and city engineer and a thorough reorganization of the street department with a net elimination of

nine positions carrying each a salary of \$100 or more per month, and the installation of cost account records in the department; a reorganization of the health, harbor, building construction, park, and electrical departments; the establishment of a central municipal garage supplanting the former separate and unchecked departmental care of the various city machines; the establishment of a central purchasing department; a survey of the fire department, with many recommendations as to improvements in equipment, methods, and organization, some of which recommendations have been adopted by the department; the installation of the efficiency marking system; and the establishment of a comprehensive system of uniform accounting and control of budget appropriations.

The movement for reclassifying the municipal civil service arises from the growing recognition of the waste and injustice inherent in the following conditions prevailing in the service: the wide variance in compensation received by different employes performing the same or similar duties in the same or different offices, with excessive overpayment or underpayment in many positions, resulting from the irregular ways in which salaries are fixed—often by political influences; the confusion, friction and injustice resulting from the multiplicity and misleading character of titles of positions, with widely varying titles often attached to positions carrying the same or similar duties; the inequitable method of promotion and salary advancement. Programs for standardization have sought, through comprehensive surveys of the local service and studies of salary and service data from private establishments and the governments of other cities, to work out new and detailed classifications and definitions in such way as to introduce system, clarity and equity into the civil service, particularly in such matters as the following: the specification of qualifications, titles and duties; the advertising and conduct of examinations; the adjustment of compensation to service values; the fixing of lines of promotion and salary-increases.

Revision and standardization have been accomplished, extensively or narrowly, in Chicago (beginning in 1910), Portland, Ore., Houston, Tex., Oakland, Los Angeles County and City, and St. Paul. Studies of standardization are under way in New York City, Pittsburgh, Milwaukee, Philadelphia, and Minneapolis, as well as in the state services of New York, Ohio, Wisconsin and Massachusetts. In most of the cities emphasis has been upon standardization of salaries; but this in all cases has required some revision of titles and redefinition of duties and qualifications. The work in cities has generally been undertaken by, or under the direction of, the local civil service commission; this, for example, has been true in Chicago, Oakland, Los Angeles County, St. Paul and Minneapolis.

The exhaustive investigations of standardization in New York City, Pittsburgh and New York State have been in charge of agencies independent of the civil service commissions. In New York City the work has

been in the hands of the bureau of standards, which is the working staff of the committee on salaries and grades of the board of estimate and apportionment. The investigations and reports of the bureau of standards have been made largely by the staff of the bureau of municipal research. In Pittsburgh the work has been done by a specially created committee on standardization working under the supervision of the mayor and the city finance department; for this investigation the city council employed the New York bureau of municipal research. For the New York State service the investigation has been made by the committee on civil service of the state senate. This committee was first created at the opening of the 1915 session of the legislature for the purpose of studying employment conditions with special reference to reclassification and standardization. As a result of the preliminary report of this committee, in April, 1915, describing existing conditions of the state service, the senate provided for the continuance and extension of the investigation with the view to securing constructive and comprehensive recommendations. For this latter inquiry the committee employed an examining staff of accountants, engineers, and other men working under the immediate supervision of A. W. Proctor of the New York bureau of municipal research, and received general assistance from the bureau in all phases of the work.

The most valuable recent reports on the subject of standardization are the following: "Standardization of Public Employments"—the November, 1915, issue of *Municipal Research*, the monthly publication of the New York bureau of municipal research; "Comparative Salary Data," a pamphlet issued by the Philadelphia bureau in March, 1916; "Report of the [N. Y.] Senate committee on civil Service in relation to the standardization of the public employments of the state," printed in a bound volume of over a thousand pages; "Standard Specifications for Public Service"—the report prepared by the bureau of standards for the board of estimate and apportionment of New York City and embodying the proposed reclassification of the city service, issued in June of this year in a printed volume of nearly a thousand pages.

The four publications just mentioned contain materials indispensable for any study of the essential points of the nature and progress of the standardization movement. In this connection reference should also be made to the article by W. C. Beyer of the Philadelphia bureau of municipal research, on "Standardization of Salaries in American Cities," appearing in the April number of the NATIONAL MUNICIPAL REVIEW, vol. v, pp. 266-72, and to the recommendations on classification in the "Report of Committee on co-operation among commissions on examination standards."

Though the study of standardization in New York City was made by the bureau of standards, independently of the civil service commission,

the latter body has given close attention to the subject during the past year and, after a critical examination of the proposals of the bureau, has approved its main conclusions, recommending changes only in minor details. Agreement between the bureau and commission has been reached in the matter of these minor differences; and the commission has promoted the adoption of the proposed classification by the board of estimate and apportionment for the budget of 1917. The commission advocates the transfer to itself of many of the functions of the bureau of standards. As the body through which appointing officers receive most of their employes, and which is consequently required to conduct tests of varying types according to the varying needs of the service, the commission regards itself as the body primarily concerned in having exact information as to the duties of employes and departments, and primarily interested in the proper classification of the service and the proper specification of duties and titles. It recommends that the city charter be so amended as to provide "that when the board of estimate and apportionment recommends the establishment of positions to the board of aldermen it shall accompany such recommendations with a certificate that the titles proposed have been approved by the civil service commission, and that the board of aldermen shall be prohibited from changing the title of any position unless the civil service commission shall have previously consented thereto."

MISCELLANEOUS POINTS

The limits of this article preclude any satisfactory indication of the many other points of progress revealed in recent reports of civil service bodies. There seems to be a marked improvement in the handling of provisional appointments, methods having been devised to reduce greatly abuses by appointing authorities in this matter.⁵ More intelligent and economical methods for advertising examinations, for recruiting and eliminating applicants, and for distributing information concerning the scope and methods of examination have been adopted in some places.⁶ The New York City commission has formulated and published new physical standards in groupings which they regard as adapted to the various classes of positions in such way as to afford more practical guidance to medical examiners and to save time and expense to the govern-

⁵ See especially reports of the commissions of New York City, pp. 24-5, Los Angeles county, pp. 9-10, and the annual report of the civil service board and superintendent of employment of the West Chicago park commissioners. Cf. report of committee on co-operation, p. 23.

⁶ See reports of the commissions of New York City, pp. 5-7, 23-4, St. Paul, p. 8, and Massachusetts, pp. 10-12. See also the "Manual of Information to Applicants concerning Examinations and Eligible Lists," issued by the Massachusetts commission, and the illustrated pamphlet of the Philadelphia commission, issued October, 1915, under the title "Practical Examinations of the Civil Service Commission."

ment and to the prospective applicants by excluding at the outset those physically unfit to perform the duties of the places they might seek, and also those who by reason of some physical defect would be likely to become subsequently, through lowered efficiency, a handicap to the service. Useful suggestions on the registration and examination of laborers appear in the reports of the Minneapolis and St. Paul commissions and in the recommendations of the committee on co-operation. The question of the value and means of co-operation among civil service commissions is discussed by F. E. Doty, chief examiner of the Los Angeles County commission, in the proceedings of the eighth meeting of the national assembly.

Several reports show gratifying extensions of the merit principle through transfers of positions from the exempt to the competitive class. Accounts of progress and retrogression in civil service reform appear in the report of the council of the National Civil Service Reform League published in the proceedings of the annual meeting of the league, Philadelphia, December, 1915, and appear also in the monthly issues of *Good Government*, the official journal of the League. A review of the adverse phase of civil service development would require particular and extended consideration of the upheavals in Chicago, Cleveland and Philadelphia, resulting from the disrupting interferences by Mayors Thompson, Davis and Smith,⁷ and also of the controversy in 1914 and 1915 between the New York State and New York City commissions.⁸ A possible point of progress may be achieved in the proposed new charter for Los Angeles, which contains a provision setting aside annually for the expenses of the civil service commission a definite share of the city's revenue. Civil service reformers in that city hope that with this additional and independent revenue the commission will be enabled particularly to do two things which the uncertainty and insufficiency of funds have hitherto prevented it from doing: the keeping of efficiency ratings of all employes, and the conduct of examinations on more thoroughly practical lines.

In conclusion emphasis should again be placed upon the manner in which the records of recent civil service achievements afford refutation of fallacious notions, growing out of ignorance or prejudice, that the purposes of civil service workers are impracticable or that their methods are academic. At the same time, the review of the records prompts a question of caution concerning the extent to which civil service commissions may wisely constitute themselves bureaus of general administrative efficiency, concerning themselves in detail with such matters as the scope of municipal functions, the methods of administrative organization and

⁷ See NATIONAL MUNICIPAL REVIEW, vol. v, pp. 316-9.

⁸ See the article in the January issue of the NATIONAL MUNICIPAL REVIEW, vol. v pp. 47-55, by Nelson S. Spencer, on "New York City's Civil Service," and also the Thirty-third Report of the State Civil Service Commission of New York, 1916.

action and the size of administrative personnel. There is no place in this article to suggest the limits to which the necessary advances into this field by civil service agencies properly go. Criticism has been made that certain commissions, advanced and thorough in the work of standardization or reconstruction, for example, have allowed the character of their examining work to depreciate. We can here make only the obvious comment that no broadening of activities by the commissions should be allowed to produce the slightest neglect of their primary and fundamental function—namely, the *administration of regulations promoting efficiency and honesty in administration through the intelligent and non-partisan selection, advancement and retirement of appointive public employes.*