

**A Narrative Biographical Summary of
Carl F. Kaestle**

**States' Impact on Federal Education Policy
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As told to Anita Hecht, Life History Services, August 2013

Carl F. Kaestle was born on March 27, 1940 and grew up in the town of Scotia, New York, across the Mohawk River from Schenectady. He descends from a family of French Catholic immigrants on his maternal side, and German-Dutch immigrants on his paternal side. His maternal grandfather was a painting contractor and his paternal grandfather, a railroad conductor.

Carl's mother, Regina Marie Perreault, grew up in a French speaking home. As a young woman, she attended Albany State Teachers College (now SUNY-Albany), where she earned a teaching degree as well as competed on the track team. She then became a high school French teacher in Amsterdam, New York.

While studying in Albany, Regina met Frank Kaestle on a blind date in New Haven, Connecticut. Frank had grown up in the small town of Paris, Tennessee, where he and his brother were homeschooled by their mother, a certified teacher. Frank attended high school in Memphis, Tennessee, and upon the encouragement of a teacher, attended Georgia Tech University where he studied engineering. From there, he went on to the Masters program at the Sheffield Scientific School Yale University.

Carl's parents were fortunate to both have secure jobs throughout the Great Depression. Regina taught high school French in Amsterdam, New York, and Frank worked as an electrical engineer for General Electric, designing electrical systems for large-scale chemical and petroleum operations. Later on, during World War II, he worked on the Manhattan project at Hanford, Washington.

The couple had three children, Carl's older brother Paul then Carl, born in 1940 and David, born in 1945. Carl attended public schools and while Scotia High School was not academically rigorous, it inspired his lifelong passion for music. Carl also cites his mother's civic engagement as another a powerful and positive influence. Regina was what Carl terms a "school board groupie," always very active in local politics and issues of education.

After graduating from high school in 1958, Carl headed to his father's alma mater, Yale University, to study pre-med. After several semesters of college chemistry, botany, and zoology however, he decided that he had little aptitude for science. Instead, he decided to pursue his interest in public education. Ironically, Yale had recently abolished its School of Education (President Whitney Griswold declared that there was no such thing as pedagogy, just subject matter). In 1962, Carl graduated from Yale with his Bachelors degree in English Literature and went on to Harvard, where he earned an M.A.T. (Master of Arts in Teaching) in 1964 on a National Defense Education loan. Because of

his interest in school administration, a teaching assistant at Harvard asked Carl if he might be interested becoming the principal of an American elementary school in Warsaw, Poland. Despite have only a year's teaching experience, Carl seized the opportunity and moved with his new wife to Europe in the fall of 1964. During his time at the American School he led the staff in adopting a non-graded form of instruction, expanding the offerings to include a kindergarten and years 7 and 8, and establishing a sister relationship with the Lexington, Massachusetts schools.

After two years in Poland, and reading numerous influential books on education, Carl decided to return to academia and study the history of education at Columbia Teachers College in 1966. From there, he moved to Harvard where he earned a PhD in the history of education in 1971, publishing his dissertation, *The Evolution of an Urban School System*, which investigated the history of New York City's school system.

Carl was then offered a joint appointment with the Department of Educational Policy Studies and the History Department at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. He moved to Madison in 1970 and remained there until 1994. This was followed by two years at the University of Chicago, and ten years at Brown University in Providence, Rhode Island. Currently, he is University Professor Emeritus at Brown in the Departments of Education, History, and Public Policy.

Carl's many engagements included being the director of the Wisconsin Center for Education research (1986-88), the president of the National Academy of Education (1993-1997), vice-chair of the National Research Council's Board on Testing and Assessment (1993-2001), a principal consultant for the PBS documentary *School* (1996-2001), and director of the Advanced Studies Fellowship Program at Brown (2001-5). With the postdoctoral fellows from that program, he authored *To Educate a Nation: Federal and National Strategies of School Reform* (2007). He is currently working on a history of the federal role in American elementary and secondary schooling from 1940 to 1980. From 2003 to 2008, Carl also served on the advisory board for SIFEPP and helped to formulate the intellectual framework, mission, and methodology for the project.

When not working in areas of education, Carl spends his time listening to and playing music, reading novels, and traveling. During his years at Yale, he participated in Glee Club and was musical director of the Whiffenpoofs. He currently is on the board of the Yale Glee Club and still meets regularly with his Whiffenpoof group of 1962. He also enjoys his two adult children and a summer home in the Berkshires.