

Review of Delaware Education

Delaware Schools have passed through five distinct periods of organization, the first occupying that time during the early colonization and settlement and lasting until the early 19th Cen-

tury, when the State assumed increasing responsibility for organization and financial support of education in Delaware.

Independent Private or Church Schools

Prior to 1817, there was no State or local financial support for any education in the colonial or early statehood period. Education, then, depended on the action of the church, of the community, or of the individual; in fact, reading, writing, and arithmetic were taught more in the home than in any public group situation.

Historical records show that the Dutch sent a teacher to New Castle (New Amstel) in 1657 or 1658. The Swedes taught their children in the home and engaged a schoolmaster in 1699. Other records indicate that the Friends provided in 1682 that school buildings should be erected for the education of the young. This pattern of education in the home or in a small group taught by a schoolmaster in some donated or rented building or a church continued during most of the 18th Century. The itinerant schoolmaster, compensated by weekly fees, often of produce, or by subscription payments, was a common educational personality during this time.

The earliest indication of State interest in education occurred on February 9, 1796, when the General Assembly created a school fund, the source of which was to be marriage and tavern license fees (2 *Del. L.* 105). One year later, on January 24,

1797, legislation was enacted which provided that these school funds were to be invested in several banks of Delaware and the nation (2 *Del. L.* 133). The idea seems to have been that the interest on these invested funds was to provide financial support for an educational system; however, no withdrawal for school purposes was authorized for twenty years.

Shortly after the passage of the act creating the school fund, several communities established subscription schools, and the General Assembly gave its stamp of approval by incorporation of the schools, which enabled the school trustees to own and manage property and to collect by legal means delinquent subscription pledges. A few of these early incorporated schools are noted in the separate school district organizational development outlines.

Other private schools of this era, usually supported by subscriptions, were Female Harmony Society, incorporated January 28, 1817 (5 *Del. L.* 123); Brandywine Manufacturers Sunday School, incorporated January 29, 1817 (5 *Del. L.* 131); and St. James School (Millcreek Hundred), incorporated January 20, 1808 (4 *Del. L.* 52).

Early School Organization

In February, 1817, legislation was passed to authorize the expenditure of the proceeds of the school fund, which had been established twenty years earlier, to begin schools in each hundred for poor children (5 *Del. L.* 146). These schools, as was to be expected, became known as pauper schools and were not very popular since, of course, a family admitted poverty when its children attended such an organized school. The law further provided that appointed representatives in each hundred should lay out these schools. The records show

that at that time there were nine hundreds in New Castle County: Appoquinimink, Brandywine, Christiana, Mill Creek, White Clay Creek, New Castle, Red Lion, Pencader, and St. Georges; five in Kent County: Duck Creek, Little Creek, St. Jones, Murderkill, and Mispillion; and nine in Sussex County: Cedar Creek, Broadkill, Baltimore, Lewes and Rehoboth, Indian River, Dagsborough, Broad Creek, Little Creek, and Northwest Fork.

In February, 1821, recognizing that the poor schools were not popular and not well attended, the General Assembly passed further legislation to authorize a subsidy to those schools which were started for the education of children on Sunday (6 *Del. L.* 45) These schools were called "Sunday Schools"

but there was indication that they were directly or indirectly controlled or administered by churches. In 1829, nineteen such Sunday Schools were in existence and received a total of almost \$225 in subsidies.

Independent School Districts

In 1829, the first real effort to establish a state education system occurred when the General Assembly passed what has commonly been called the "Free School Act" (7 *Del. L.* 99). As is often the case, the first effort of such legislation is imperfect, and amendments to improve the school organizational system were passed in 1830, 1832, 1833, and 1835.

cational system illustrated democracy in its purer sense. He said that "the people had the whole power over the subject of common schools for their districts".

By this new legislation, school districts were established and commissioners appointed by the Levy Court in each county. Districts were numbered and governed by three commissioners with one to be known as a clerk. Usually a district consisted of about 35 pupils and one building. It can be said that a school was a school district. Legislation in 1863 provided that, when a district was divided into two districts, 35 pupils must remain in the old district and 35 pupils must be in the new district (12 *Del. L.* 296). By 1833, 133 districts had been established with described boundaries: 61 in New Castle County, 36 in Kent County, and 36 in Sussex County (Powell). An examination of legislation from 1829 through the next 70 years shows that there were numerous statutes enacted dividing, consolidating, and forming new districts. It seemed that when a district had enough pupils for two schools, two districts were established rather than building a second school within the same district. Similarly, when the number of pupils decreased so that a school could not be justified, a union or merger of two districts was formed for the one school. Authorization for such union was granted by the General Assembly on February 6, 1833 (8 *Del. L.* 249). An unusual type of organization was in effect in this period resulting in the incorporation of school districts which seemed to give them the semblance of independence. By 1886, Scharf, in his Delaware history, notes that there were 423 school districts in the State with 100 in New Castle County, 131 in Kent County, and 192 in Sussex County. Willard Hall, a prominent and enthusiastic supporter of free public education, noted that the Delaware edu-

During this period from 1829 to approximately 1900, there was not much standardization in the forms of school districts except for the defining of boundaries by the commissioners in each county. When the General Assembly created or incorporated school districts, the names given to those responsible for the administration of schools were commissioners or board members or trustees. The number of these commissioners, board members, or trustees authorized for the various school districts ranged from four to thirteen. There did not seem to be any standard for the name or the number of the local governing body.

In 1875, legislation was enacted which provided greater State administrative control without changing local school district organization. A State superintendency was established, and James H. Groves became the first person to occupy that office. A State Board of Education of four persons was created. Certification for teachers became a part of the law.

The desire for better education seemed to be in evidence because there were many laws passed which consolidated school districts. However, at the same time, other school districts were divided so that reduction in the number of school districts was not very great; in fact, by 1919, the end of this period, there was a drop of just 28 districts to 395. With regard to organization in this 90-year period, an interesting fact is that on May 12, 1898, legislation was passed which reasserted that all existing school districts were to be continued—be they single, united, consolidated — or incorporated with the administration of the districts remaining as in existence on that date (21 *Del. L.* 67).

Early School Consolidation

After the Free School Act of 1829 had been in existence for almost 90 years, discussion arose in many areas of the State concerning the necessity for making further improvements in education. On April 18, 1917, a committee of five persons was appointed to survey white and colored schools and report findings and recommendations to the Governor and the General Assembly in 1919 (29 *Del. L.* 186). On April 14, 1919, the second major school code was enacted, if we can consider the Free School Act of 1829 as being the first major school code (30 *Del. L.* 157).

One of the things this 1919 law did was to put some standardization into the organization of school districts. Two classes

of school districts were authorized. The larger and more responsible incorporated districts of the prior era were named "special school districts." There were thirteen of these: Alexis I. duPont, Newark, New Castle, and Wilmington in New Castle County; Caesar Rodney, Dover, and Harrington in Kent County; Georgetown, Laurel, Lewes, and Seaford in Sussex County; Smyrna in New Castle and Kent Counties; and Milford in Kent and Sussex Counties. A revision of the law on June 24, 1920, named Claymont as a "special school district" (31 *Del. L.* 48). These special school districts were endowed with the authority to own and administer buildings, grounds, and equipment; to conduct all grades; to provide free textbooks and supplies; to elect a superintendent and a principal;

to demand certification of teachers; and to levy taxes with the vote of the people. All other school districts were established as "school attendance" districts and these were to be directly controlled by the State Board of Education through the Department of Public Instruction. However, two years after being so designated, the name of these attendance districts was legislated as a school district. Over the years, these dis-

tricts became known as State Board Units. Again, the initial legislative effort was not completely satisfactory and in the following two years revisions were made. Some of those revisions separated Wilmington from the State school system and gave it great autonomy; provided for subsidization of consolidation; and reaffirmed the forms of special school districts and the numbering of other school districts.

Latest Reorganization

On July 1, 1969, a completely new school code went into effect in Delaware (56 *Del. L.* 292). Special and State Board school districts were discontinued and compulsory consolidation of all school districts into twenty-three reorganized school districts was legislated. In addition the three county vocational-technical school districts were named as reorganized districts.

State Board control in many respects was continued, but all reorganized school districts were given much greater autonomy than had been the case. Wilmington, by this new school code, became an integral part of the State school system and was under the control of the State Board of Education in the same manner as were all other school districts.

Colored School Districts

The first effort by the State on behalf of colored children was probably some time in the late 19th century. The organization of the Negro schools was haphazard and uncertain, and the system of Negro education was determined by the interest in schools and the civic courage of local citizens and officials in the various areas of Negro population in the State.

local scene to direct the day-by-day operation of each of the schools. Here, again, a school building usually encompassed a school district. In the period between 1919 and 1965, the greatest progress in Negro education in Delaware was of a physical nature: the construction of school buildings from funds granted by the Delaware School Auxiliary Association supported almost wholly by the duPont family. Three county Negro high schools were also constructed in this particular time-span.

In the 1878 annual report of the State Superintendent, the statement is made that the colored population supported their schools with assistance by a tax and contributions. On March 22, 1881, the General Assembly enacted a law proposing an annual appropriation for the support of colored schools and authorized \$2,400 for the first year (16 *Del. L.* 362).

With the milestone decision of the Supreme Court in 1954, integration of blacks and whites in the schools of Delaware slowly became a reality, although the real impetus occurred during and after 1965. Since that time the Negro schools have been absorbed into the educational system of the State and there is no longer the dual school system of a few years ago.

At the time of the adoption of the school code in 1919, there were seventy-three Negro school districts in Delaware; twenty-one in New Castle County, twenty-three in Kent, and twenty-nine in Sussex. Those school districts located within the boundaries of special districts were administered by the special districts, but the schools for Negroes remained segregated. All other Negro school districts were under the direct control of the State Board of Education with a board of trustees on the

The transition of Negro schools from independent school districts to absorption into the white school districts is noted under the reports of each of the school districts in this publication.

County Secondary Schools for Negroes

Before the early 1950's, secondary education for blacks was neglected, and a complete high school education was almost impossible and gained only by determination and favorable circumstances. When the black minority did succeed in having secondary courses available, emphasis was on home economics for girls and vocational agriculture for boys.

The ninth year of schooling was instituted in the following districts during the year listed, according to the Department of Public Instruction directories:

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|--------------------------|-----------|
| Laurel Special | 1921 - 22 |
| Seaford Special | 1922 - 23 |
| Harrington Special | 1926 - 27 |
| Lewes Special | 1926 - 27 |
| Bridgeville 220 | 1933 - 34 |

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|--------------------------|-----------|
| Dover Special | 1933 - 34 |
| Middletown 120 | 1934 - 35 |
| Slaughter Neck 193 | 1934 - 35 |
| Frankford 206 | 1934 - 35 |
| Milford Special | 1935 - 36 |
| Georgetown Special | 1937 - 38 |
| Smyrna Special | 1938 - 39 |

The tenth year was added in these districts:

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|-----------------------|-----------|
| Seaford Special | 1925 - 26 |
| Laurel Special | 1926 - 27 |
| Lewes Special | 1931 - 32 |

The eleventh year was added to the Negro schools in the Seaford Special School District in 1926 - 27 and in the Laurel Special School District in 1928 - 29.

In the middle 1940's, Newport 106 (Absalom Jones) began offering one or two vocational courses. During this same period Delaware State College conducted free high school classes for those electing to attend there.

By the end of World War II there was increasing demand from the black population and many whites for expanded secondary educational opportunities. The State Board of Education on February 16, 1946, approved the construction of a vocational school for colored boys and girls, using financial assistance from the Fletcher Brown bequest. A Kent County secondary facility was authorized on December 20, 1946, but it was not until February 17, 1950, that a decision was made to plan a New Castle County comprehensive high school. As a result of these resolutions, below is the chronology of the three county comprehensive high schools for black boys and girls:

WILLIAM C. JASON Comprehensive High School District 192 was opened in Sussex County for the 1951 - 52 school year and ceased operation at the close of the 1966 - 67 year. The building was converted for the use of the Delaware Technical and Community College.

WILLIAM W. M. HENRY Comprehensive High School District 133 began operation for Kent County in the 1952 - 53 school year and closed after the 1965 - 66 term. The building was transferred to the Dover Special School District and became the William Henry Middle School.

LOUIS L. REDDING Comprehensive High School for New Castle County was administered by Middletown District 120 and began in the 1953 - 54 school term and operated until the close of the 1965 - 66 year. The building was transferred to Middletown 60 and is now the Redding Middle School in the Appoquinimink School District.