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In this issue Minnesota historian Annette Atkins looks at the development of the state's public education system, from its origins in founding documents to the evolving missions of twenty-first-century schools.

LEARNING IN THE LAND OF LAKES

Minnesota's Education History

Annette Atkins

The founders of the United States— anxious about the fragile republican experiment they'd embarked on—knew that the nation needed an educated citizenry. They did not know, however, how to get there. The American decision to educate its citizens at public expense was an idea as radical as the revolution itself. The story of public education in Minnesota, then, tells about the aspiration, invention, and development of a great national idea into a statewide practice and about women's key role in carrying out that great idea.

Local school districts have historically funded and operated schools, within increasing state laws and standards. Parochial schools, privately funded and operated, have grown up alongside public ones. The definition of "citizenry" has steadily widened, and the definition of education has similarly expanded and changed. The role of the federal government has gradually increased. Teachers, parents, citizens, politicians, reformers, and unions have all contributed to changes that have lengthened Minnesota's school year from 90 to 174 days and expanded the definition of "educable." Public alternatives—magnet and charter schools, for example—have emerged to respond to public education deficiencies. Inequalities plague the public school system nonetheless. Especially troubling are racial disparities in achievement.

Even before the Constitution's ratification, the 1787 and 1789 Northwest Ordinances declared: "being necessary to good government and the happiness of mankind, schools and the means of education shall forever be encouraged." They allocated public lands for school support. Beyond these basics,

the federal government gave education to the states to invent and develop. Like the federal ordinances, the 1849 Minnesota Territorial School Code and the 1857 state constitution declared public schools necessary for "good government" and for "the stability of a republican government."

State law established a "general and uniform system of public schools." It also banned state support of schools that taught any "particular Christian or other religious sect." It offered (limited) funding from public lands, general tax funds, and proceeds from liquor-license fees and criminal fines. Legislators gave to county/township commissioners authority to establish school districts, hire and fire teachers, set the school calendar, and hold meetings of the school board. They also put funding responsibility on the local governments.

The state kept—and has increased—supervisory responsibility through oversight officers and groups: the Superintendent of Public Instruction (appointed in 1858), the High School Board (created in 1878), the Public School Commission (1914), the Department of Education (1919), the Board of Teaching (1973), and the Professional Educator Licensing and Standards Board (2017). The 1858 statutes governing state schools ran to about four pages. The 1953 statutes weighed in at 152 pages, and in 1996 at nearly 500. The 2018 statutes took up more still.

Schools reflect the values, interests, fears, and hopes of the communities that create and sustain them. Therefore, as communities—and the larger society—change, so do their schools. Early communities asked schools to create good citizens. Later they asked schools



A desk used in School District 43 in Watonwan between 1889 and 1919 (MNHS COLLECTIONS)

to prepare children for an industrializing society, for a more technological one, and, more recently, for a more diverse one. Schools are asked to socialize students, to teach sex and driver's and vocational ed, to show how to resist drugs, and to demonstrate how to duck and cover to avoid shooters. Duluth's Denfield High School defines its job as making students "leaders for life." Stewartville schools aspire "to develop the full potential of all learners." The St. Cloud schools want to help students "to be successful in today's and tomorrow's society." Each school writes its own statement.

Both state and federal governments ask—and fund—schools to be agents of social change. The state offered special funding to desegregate (St. Paul in 1869), to lengthen the school year (1885, 1898), to consolidate (1911, 1947), to educate students with special needs (1915, 1957, etc.), to encourage gifted and talented children (2006), and to reach preschoolers (2017).

To read the rest of the article, visit <https://www.mnopedia.org/learning-land-lakes-minnesota-s-education-history>



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