

Compulsory Education in Iowa, 1872-1919

CARROLL ENGELHARDT

PUBLIC SCHOOLS in the United States were founded on the premise that they were necessary for training future citizens of the Republic. If the schools succeeded in their assigned civic task, then the Republic would be stable, orderly, and prosperous; if the schools failed, the result would be instability, disorder, and poverty. Because of the civic importance Americans attached to public education, compulsion early became an issue. The initial question was whether all citizens should be compelled to pay taxes for the support of schools. Then it was whether all children, as future American citizens, should be compelled to attend.

The trend toward compulsory education first became clear in 1852, when Massachusetts, the first state to create a public school system, passed the first general compulsory attendance law in the United States. As European immigration changed the composition of American society, compulsion quickly became one of the most important ethno-cultural issues that shaped politics in the late nineteenth century. Social conflicts between ethnic group subcultures were institutionalized in the two major political parties: Republicans favored using limited state authority in the form of school legislation to promote civic responsibility and cultural homogeneity; Democrats, advocating cultural tolerance and parental rights, resisted such increases of state power. Despite opposition by Democrats, Republican governors and legislators successfully passed compulsory attendance laws in most northern states during the three decades after the Civil War. So it is surprising that Iowa, a solidly Republican state, re-

For assistance in preparation of this article, the author wishes to thank Verlyn Anderson and the Concordia Library, David Danbom, and the editors of *The Annals of Iowa*.

Compulsory Education

sisted the trend until 1902, when it became the thirty-third state—and the last one outside the former Confederacy—to adopt compulsory school legislation.¹

Why was compulsory education delayed in Iowa? Why did it finally pass? What impact did it have on the state's schools? The history of the movement for compulsory education in Iowa helps to answer these questions. The story begins in 1872, when bills were first introduced in the General Assembly, and culminates in 1902, when a coalition comprised of professional educators, the Iowa Federation of Women's Clubs, and organized labor successfully lobbied for the state's first compulsory attendance law. At that time compulsory education was proposed in conjunction with several progressive educational reforms—consolidation, state certification, expanded state supervision, curriculum revision—intended to make public schools more efficient instruments for training American citizens. Once passed, compulsory education advanced curricular change and increased state supervision in Iowa as it did in other states.

AS EARLY AS THE 1860s some Iowa educators advocated compulsory education. Their case for compulsion was a logical extension of the argument for the necessity of public education in a republic. If the future prosperity and stability of republican society required that all citizens pay taxes for the support of public schools, then the same argument justified compelling all children to attend.² Already in 1872 Henry Sabin, Republican superintendent of schools in Clinton, a growing industrial river city of 5,100 people, worried about "too many boys loitering on the street who ought to be in school." Sabin believed that the

1. Ballard C. Campbell, *Representative Democracy: Public Policy and Midwestern Legislatures in the Late Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge, 1980), 116; Richard Jensen, *The Winning of the Midwest: Social and Political Conflict, 1888–1896* (Chicago, 1971), 123–40, 219–21; Lawrence A. Cremin, *American Education: The National Experience, 1783–1876* (New York, 1982), 156–57; David Tyack and Elisabeth Hansot, *Managers of Virtue: Public School Leadership in America, 1820–1980* (New York, 1982), 80–81, 102–3; Forest C. Ensign, "Compulsory School Attendance and Child Labor Legislation in Iowa to 1910," n.d., typed manuscript, University of Iowa Libraries, Iowa City, 1–2.

2. See, for example, *Report of the Secretary of the Board of Education, in Iowa Legislative Documents, 1864*, 5–6 (hereafter cited as *Ia Leg Doc*); Iowa Department of Public Instruction (hereafter cited as *Ia DPI*), *Report, in Ia Leg Doc, 1868*, 1: 66, 90.

growing number of these "young criminals" and future paupers posed a threat to the well-being of the Republic. To solve the problem, Sabin recommended that the state give school officers the power to compel attendance. Throughout the 1870s Sabin insisted that the time had come for Iowa to pass a state compulsory attendance law.³

Other Republicans agreed. In 1872 Republicans introduced bills in both the House and Senate. The Senate bill passed but the House bill died when reported unfavorably by the Committee on Schools. Bills were again introduced without success in 1874 and 1876. Then in 1878 and 1880 bills passed the Republican House, were recommended for passage by the Senate Committee on Schools, but did not come to a vote in the Senate. Despite the support of Republican governors Cyrus C. Carpenter, who first advocated compulsory attendance in 1876, John H. Gear (1878-1882), and William Larrabee (1886-1890), and the introduction of compulsory education bills in every assembly from 1880 to 1890, no legislation was enacted.⁴

Why the delay? Part of the answer lies in Iowa's rural character. Without great urban and industrial development Iowa escaped the heavy influx and concentration of poor European immigrants who came to neighboring Chicago and Milwaukee, creating urban tensions and providing a case for the passage of compulsory attendance laws in Illinois and Wisconsin in 1889. The tradition of democratic localism in education remained very strong in rural Iowa. Farmers, who controlled neighborhood school boards, jealously guarded their schools from any kind of state intrusion, including state-imposed attendance requirements.⁵ This tradition of democratic control also remained strong in Iowa cities; E. H. Thayer, Clinton newspaperman and Democratic representative, stating his reasons for opposing compulsory education, wrote in 1876, "I believe such a law is anti-American, anti-Republican, anti-Democratic. . . . It may do in a Monarchy where all is force and

3. *Clinton Age*, 16 August 1872; 7 August 1874; 2 November 1877.

4. Ensign, "Compulsory School Attendance and Child Labor Legislation in Iowa," 16-21, 30-31; Clarence R. Aurner, *History of Education in Iowa*, 5 vols. (Iowa City, 1914-1920), 1: 96, 107, 112, 114, 146, 335, 2: 165-66; IaDPI, *Report*, in *Ia Leg Doc*, 1874, 1: 20.

5. Richard Jensen and Mark Friedberger, *Education and Social Structure: An Historical Study of Iowa, 1870-1930* (Chicago, 1976), 7.1, 7.18.

Compulsory Education

compulsory, but in a free society . . . it is unjust, wrong and . . . unconstitutional." Thayer retired from the legislature after a single term, but he continued his editorial opposition to compulsory education on the grounds that "compulsion cannot and ought not to succeed in a republic."⁶

Sensitive to these arguments for republican liberty and lacking a strong social reason to demand a compulsory attendance law, state superintendents of public instruction in Iowa were reluctant for a long time to support compulsory education even though the Iowa State Teachers' Association (ISTA) endorsed a bill in 1878. Their reluctance indicates that professional educators, a logical group to support such legislation, were divided. Throughout the 1870s, when the issue was beginning to be discussed in the General Assembly, Republican state superintendents A. S. Kissell, Alonzo Abernathy, and C. W. von Coelln hesitated to give their full support. Kissell suggested in 1872 that continued improvement in the quality of the public schools would result in increased voluntary attendance, which was preferable "to the doubtful experiment in compulsion." Abernathy called for better statistics on the attendance of six- to fourteen-year-olds to determine if there was need for a law. And C. W. von Coelln, in his 1878 and 1880 reports, argued that compulsory attendance would bring an undesirable element into the schools who would contaminate other children. Fears of compulsion were also evident in J. W. Akers's report in 1884. "To render such a law effectual," he said, "it would be necessary to strengthen it with efficient police regulations, which, however reasonable and necessary, would be very distasteful to our people." Akers correctly assessed the attitude of many Iowans. A majority of legislators from both parties opposed the provision in an 1886 bill that made violations misdemeanors, and rejected the section of an 1888 measure that empowered police to act as truant officers.⁷

By the late 1880s, however, there were signs of a growing consensus among professional educators in favor of compulsory education. School journals, the ISTA, and state superintendents joined in actively campaigning for a compulsory attendance law.

6. *Clinton Age*, 25 February 1876, 18 January 1878, 30 January 1880.

7. IaDPI, *Report*, 1872, 64; *ibid.*, 1874, 20; *ibid.*, 1878, 45; *ibid.*, 1882, 34; *ibid.*, 1884, 34; *Clinton Age*, 18 January 1878; Campbell, *Representative Democracy*, 116.

Speaking to the ISTA in his presidential address in 1884, Oskaloosa Superintendent Homer H. Seerley recommended compulsory education. Writing in the *Iowa Normal Monthly* in 1886 and 1889, Seerley, recently appointed president of Iowa State Normal School, again urged legislation to deal with the growing class of urban nonattenders and to help suppress "this ignorant criminal tendency that breeds lawlessness, worthlessness and moral depravity." Perhaps encouraged by Seerley's leadership, the ISTA in 1886 formed a committee to study the issue. Acting on the committee's recommendation at its 1887 meeting, the association instructed the state superintendent to request the General Assembly to require statistics on nonattendance. Meanwhile, responding to a direct request from the Twenty-first General Assembly (1886), Superintendent J. W. Akers's 1888 report dealt more extensively with the question. Akers urged legislation to address the higher rates of nonattendance among urban dwellers and the foreign-born. Always sensitive to fears about the growth of state power, Akers reassured potential opponents that truant officers established by law would be mostly missionaries, persuading people of the benefits of attending public schools, and that proximate support of the law would be sufficient to secure its benefits.⁸

Akers's successor as state superintendent, Henry Sabin of Clinton, a long-standing supporter of compulsory attendance, took office in January 1888. He quickly appointed a Committee on Compulsory Education to prepare a report for the ISTA. His own first report, prepared in September 1889, responded to the Twenty-second General Assembly's request for statistics on nonattendance. Sabin discovered that in cities with population over one thousand 13,077 children, aged eight to sixteen, were not attending school. Alarmed that "we have thousands of children growing up in ignorance, which is a prolific source of crime," Sabin urged passage of compulsory education and child labor laws. Praising the Wisconsin Bennett Law for requiring the common branches to be taught in English, Sabin argued that

8. H. H. Seerley, "Compulsory Education," *Iowa Normal Monthly* 9 (Feb. 1886), 257-61 (hereafter cited as *IaNM*); "Compulsory Education," *IaNM* 13 (Sept. 1889), 57-59; *Proceedings of the Iowa State Teachers' Association*, 1886, 24 (hereafter cited as *ISTA, Proceedings*); *ibid.*, 1887, 20; *IaDPI, Report*, in *Ia Leg Doc*, 1888, 54, 62.

Compulsory Education

learning English was "essential to . . . success in life" of foreigners' "children who are to be American citizens."⁹

Sabin's efforts first produced results at the ISTA's 1889 convention. The committee he had appointed reported a bill modeled on the Michigan law of 1871. The ISTA bill required children between the ages of eight and fourteen to attend public schools that taught the common branches in English; minimum attendance was sixteen weeks, at least eight consecutively. Pupils attending private schools would fulfill the requirements of the law "provided . . . they show to the satisfaction of the board where they reside, by an annual examination if so required, equal proficiency and equal progress with the average pupil of like age in the public schools of their district."¹⁰

In 1890 the Iowa General Assembly received a large number of petitions for compulsory education legislation. A farmers' meeting in Des Moines also resolved in favor of compulsory attendance. Due to these lobbying efforts and those of the ISTA and the state superintendent, five compulsory education bills were introduced in the legislature. Yet all failed. A major reason for failure was that compulsory attendance was not the most important ethno-cultural issue in Iowa politics at that time. During the 1880s Republicans, supported by rural, native-born, and Protestant constituencies, intensified their campaign to enforce prohibition. Democrats, representing urban, foreign-born, and Catholic constituencies, opposed prohibition. The efforts of Republican prohibitionists threatened to alienate the GOP's German and Scandinavian Lutheran supporters. Already vulnerable on prohibition, Republican difficulties were compounded when Governor William Larrabee declared war on the railroads by calling for stronger government regulation. The railroad and prohibition issues divided the GOP and led to the election in 1889 of a Democratic governor and sixty-five Democratic legislators.¹¹

9. IaDPI, *Report*, in *Ia Leg Doc*, 1890, 58, 99–101; Sabin to J. Wernli, 26 January 1888, *Official Correspondence of the State Superintendent of Public Instruction*, State Historical Society of Iowa, Des Moines.

10. ISTA, *Proceedings*, 1889–90, 7–8; Ensign, "Compulsory School Attendance and Child Labor Legislation in Iowa," 25.

11. *Elkader Register*, 30 January and 27 March 1890; Ballard Crooker Campbell, "Political Parties, Cultural Groups and Contested Issues: Voting in

The Democratic election victory prevented passage of a compulsory attendance law in 1890. First, an even division of the House of Representatives produced a five-week-long deadlock that delayed permanent organization until February 19. Because nineteenth-century legislative sessions were traditionally short, the organizational delay meant that many bills would be killed in committee. That was the fate of compulsory attendance. When the House School Committee finally agreed on a bill at the end of March, there was insufficient time to secure passage before the April 15 adjournment date. Second, Democratic strength in the House meant there would be considerable opposition to the measure. Iowa Democrats reflected the views of their Catholic constituents. Both viewed compulsory education as a violation of parental right, established by divine and natural law, to educate their children in schools of their choice.¹² Given the political situation in 1890 it is not surprising that compulsory attendance failed to pass.

The fate of the Bennett Compulsory Education Law in Wisconsin and the Edwards Law in Illinois is instructive for understanding the neglect of similar legislation in Iowa during the remainder of the 1890s. Although the Bennett Law passed without fuss in 1889, it became a political issue the next year due to the protests of German religious bodies interested in maintaining parochial schools. In 1890 German Lutherans deserted the Republicans and joined German Catholics in the Democratic party, enabling the Democrats to sweep the state and repeal the controversial features of the Bennett Law. The legislators dropped the objectionable requirement that pupils must attend a public or private school in the district of residence which taught the common branches in English. In Illinois a similar political revolt led to revision of the Edwards Compulsory Education Law. As could be surmised from their support for the ISTA

the Illinois, Iowa and Wisconsin House of Representatives, 1886-1895" (Ph.D. diss., University of Wisconsin, 1970), 44, 56, 59, 62-63; Ensign, "Compulsory School Attendance and Child Labor Legislation in Iowa," 25; Leland L. Sage, *William Boyd Allison: A Study in Practical Politics* (Iowa City, 1956), 184, 187, 211, 240-41; Jensen, *Winning of the Midwest*, 98-115.

12. *Elkader Register*, 27 February, 6 March and 3 April 1890; Campbell, "Political Parties, Cultural Groups and Contested Issues," 79-80, 245; *Iowa Catholic Messenger*, 22 March and 5 April 1890.

Compulsory Education

Bill which contained similar provisions, many Iowa educators were not sympathetic to these campaigns for repeal. In an 1890 editorial the *Iowa Normal Monthly* defended the Bennett Law on the grounds that "the right of the State is clearly to insist that all its subjects shall be educated in the language of this country" and therefore "the hostility of the Catholic and Lutheran clergy is wholly inexcusable and indefensible."¹³ Although this editorialist did not learn a political lesson, many Republican politicians did. Already burned by their support of prohibition, Iowa Republican legislators became more cautious in legislating ethno-cultural issues. The fights over the Bennett and Edwards laws reinforced their caution and discouraged them from passing any new compulsory legislation that would needlessly antagonize religious and ethnic groups.

AFTER THE FUROR over the Bennett and Edwards laws subsided, professional educators renewed their campaign for compulsory education in the late 1890s. Henry Sabin again recommended passage in his reports of 1896 and 1898. Sabin's successor, Richard C. Barrett, carried on the campaign. Noting that 30 to 40 percent of those enrolled failed to attend school regularly, Barrett insisted that corrective action was required because "the moral growth and material prosperity of our people are daily threatened by the failure of so large a number to avail themselves of the advantages offered by the free school system." Considering the issue extremely important, Barrett, in both his 1900 and 1902 reports, recommended that the state adopt a compulsory attendance law requiring attendance at "some public or private school where the common school branches are taught in the English language for certain fixed periods each year, between certain ages."¹⁴

In their annual addresses to the ISTA, Sabin and Barrett joined association presidents in advocating passage of a compul-

13. Louise Phelps Kellogg, "The Bennett Law in Wisconsin," *Wisconsin Magazine of History* 2 (1918-1919), 6-7, 24; Thomas C. Hunt, "The Bennett Law of 1890: Focus of Conflict Between Church and State in Education," *Journal of Church and State* 23 (Winter 1981), 70, 91; "The Bennett Law," *IaNM* 14 (August 1890), 4-5.

14. *IaDPI, Report*, 1896, 169-70; *ibid.*, 1898, 22; ISTA, *Proceedings*, 1897, 63-64; *IaDPI, Report*, 1900, 17, 19, 52-53, 63-64; *ibid.*, 1902, 19.

sory measure. Encouraged by this leadership, in 1899 the recently formed legislative committee of the ISTA reported to the convention that it would work for the passage of compulsory attendance and child labor legislation. To accomplish this, the ISTA urged "the union of all educational and industrial forces of the state." These demands by the ISTA were echoed in Iowa school journals of the time.¹⁵

This educational lobbying effort was crowned with success in 1902 when the General Assembly, after thirty years of discussion, finally enacted a compulsory education law. After so many previous failures, why was a law passed successfully in 1902? Part of the answer lies in the fact that 1902 marked a watershed in Iowa politics. In that year Albert Baird Cummins, leader of progressive Republicans and advocate of the "progressive ideas of this generation," became governor. Both the rise of progressivism and the growth of support for compulsory attendance were rooted in the changing character of Iowa's population. After 1880 the state's urban population increased more rapidly than the number of rural residents, although there were no metropolitan centers and none in prospect. From 1880 to 1900 Iowa's total population increased from 1,624,615 to 2,231,853, an increase of 37 percent. But during this period Des Moines, the largest city, grew from 22,408 to 63,139, a 282 percent increase. In the same period urban population in all Iowa cities over 8,000 grew from 152,578 to 374,725, a 246 percent increase. This growth in the number of urban residents was reflected in Iowa's occupational structure. Agricultural occupations, which composed 57.5 percent of the total in 1880, declined to 47.1 percent in 1900. Although the number of farmers increased by 15.2 percent during the 1880s, from 213,624 (1880) to 246,064 (1890), it declined during the 1890s to 236,681 (1900), a decrease of 3.8 percent. At the same time the number employed in manufacturing increased from 69,509 (1880) to 124,803 (1900), a 79.5 percent increase.¹⁶

15. ISTA, *Proceedings*, 1899, 7-8; *ibid.*, 1901, 11, 18, 45; B. P. Holst, "As to Some Reforms," *IaNM* 23 (Jan. 1900), 241; "Compulsory Education," *IaNM* 23 (Feb. 1900), 322-23; "Opinions of Iowa Educators: Compulsory Education," *IaNM* 23 (March 1900), 365-67; H. E. Krantz, "Compulsory Education," *Midland Schools* 14 (January 1900), 152-53.

16. On the political shift, see Sage, *William Boyd Allison*, 284-85. For

Compulsory Education

These changing population patterns affected the support for compulsory education in the state. By 1900 the ISTA was not alone in its efforts to secure a law. The educators had been joined by the Federation of Women's Clubs, which drew its members from Iowa's growing towns and cities, and the Iowa organization of the American Federation of Labor, which was expanding with the growth of manufacturing. Organized in 1893, the Iowa Federation of Women's Clubs by 1901 claimed 9,200 members belonging to 233 clubs in 125 towns. The state organization, at its 1898 meeting, resolved that the federation ought to work for the passage of a compulsory education law. By 1899 a standing Education Committee had been constituted to work for passage. At the 1900 convention local clubs were urged to organize programs on educational needs, to form educational committees, and to work for passage of a compulsory law. In addition, the federation announced its support for kindergartens, manual training and domestic science, improved civic and patriotic education, and longer terms for rural schools.¹⁷ Organized labor provided additional support for educational reform. By 1900 the state had 396 trade union locals with 26,068 members. At its Seventh Annual Convention (1899) the Iowa State Federation of Labor, largest of the labor organizations, resolved to support child labor and compulsory education legislation. It commended the action taken by the Federation of Women's Clubs and offered its cooperation in securing a compulsory act. The Labor Federation also joined the Women's Clubs in supporting manual training in the schools. The workers viewed manual training as a form of practical education that would help pupils select particular occupations.¹⁸

These political activities of the Women's Clubs and Labor Federation were part of the emerging progressive movement in

changing population patterns, see U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, *Special Reports: Occupations of the Twelfth Census*, lxxiii, lxxxviii-lxxxix; idem, *Eleventh Census, 1890: Population*, Part 1, lxviii; idem, *Twelfth Census, 1900: Population*, Part 1, lxxv.

17. Iowa Federation of Women's Clubs, *Year Book, 1899-1900*, 20-21 (hereafter cited as IaFWC); *ibid.*, 1900-1901, 23-24; *ibid.*, 1901-1902, 17-19, 26, 96.

18. *Proceedings of the Iowa State Federation of Labor, 1899*, 11-12, 21 (hereafter cited as IaFL, *Proceedings*); *ibid.*, 1900, 26.

Iowa which in 1901 elected Cummins governor. Iowa progressives were generally native-born residents of cities and towns. Like progressives elsewhere their belief in rational order was reflected in their proposals for stronger state regulation of business, the end of corrupt business and political practices, and the improved efficiency of city government. Their desire to rationalize institutions extended to education, where they favored consolidated schools, increased powers of the state superintendent of public instruction, and compulsory attendance. Speaking to the General Assembly in his 1902 inaugural address, Cummins called "for a full and comprehensive review" of the public school system by the legislature. He instructed the legislators to consider carefully State Superintendent Barrett's address to the ISTA (December 30, 1901) and his report to the governor, both of which strongly supported a compulsory education law. Due to progressive influence in the 1902 General Assembly, "educational legislation assumed an importance unknown in recent years," according to political observers at the time.¹⁹

Despite growing support from progressive forces in the state, the Compulsory Education Bill faced a tough fight in the 1902 General Assembly. Writing in a personal letter dated February 18, when the General Assembly was already into its session, R. C. Barrett reported, "Our Catholic friends are already beginning to file petitions and send letters against the compulsory attendance bill." To counter the Catholic influence, Barrett said, "we shall need to bring every pressure to bear upon the general assembly to secure passage of even so mild a measure."²⁰ Barrett had reason for concern. Catholics had joined with Lutherans to conduct a well-organized campaign to defeat compulsory education in the 1900 General Assembly. Catholics viewed compulsory legislation as a tyrannical invasion of parental right, and the opening wedge of state regulation of parochial schools. To prevent passage Catholics held meetings, wrote let-

19. William L. Bowers, "The Fruits of Iowa Progressivism, 1900-1915," *Iowa Journal of History* 57 (January 1959), 37, 52-53; Nancy R. Derr, "Iowans during World War I: A Study of Change Under Stress" (Ph.D. diss., George Washington University, 1979), 34-36; Albert Baird Cummins, *Inaugural Address, 1902*, 20; *Elkader Register*, 28 March 1902.

20. R. C. Barrett to A. W. Stuart, 18 February 1902, Personal Correspondence of the State Superintendent of Public Instruction.

Compulsory Education

ters, and sent petitions. When the General Assembly indefinitely postponed the pending bill, the Catholic press claimed credit for the victory.²¹

When George W. Dunham, a representative from Manchester, introduced a compulsory attendance bill in 1902, Catholics again organized in opposition. The Catholic press attempted to repeat their successful tactics of 1900. Once more, Catholic laity and clergy held meetings, wrote letters, and circulated petitions. Yet their efforts failed to block passage.²² Dunham's political skill was a major reason for their failure. Prior to the introduction of his bill Dunham submitted it to prominent Catholics and Lutherans who conducted parochial schools. The four Lutheran synods in Iowa and Missouri approved the measure after a minor revision. Archbishop John J. Keane, Dubuque, responded with a letter suggesting two minor changes. Keane's letter became an important factor in securing passage. Although Keane did not endorse the principle of compulsion, it was widely reported that he had approved the measure. With Lutheran and apparent Catholic approval, the Dunham Bill passed the House and Senate with large majorities.²³

The mildness of Dunham's bill was critical to its success. As the *Iowa Normal Monthly* pointed out while the bill was still pending, "Since it provides that a child may attend either a public, private or parochial school where the common branches are taught, it is believed that those who have heretofore opposed compulsory attendance laws will not seriously object to this measure." Dunham confirmed the *Monthly's* analysis in a letter written in 1906: "House file 170 . . . was in some respects a compromise measure," because "we felt that we were proposing all that would be favorably received and that it was better to pass a mild law than to fail in putting the principle upon the books." Dunham made several concessions to eliminate any possible grounds for Lutheran, Catholic, or Democratic opposition. Teaching the common branches in English was not required. Private and parochial

21. *Catholic Tribune*, 25 January, 15 February, and 22 March 1900; *Iowa Catholic Messenger*, 27 January, 3 March, and 27 March 1900.

22. *Catholic Tribune*, 20 February 1902; *Iowa Catholic Messenger*, 15 and 22 February 1902.

23. *Catholic Tribune*, 27 February and 24 April 1902; *Iowa Catholic Messenger*, 12 April 1902; *Elkader Register*, 27 February 1902.

schools were protected from state supervision although their principals were required to provide annual attendance reports to the secretary of each school corporation. Parental and neighborhood rights were protected by limiting the compulsory period to twelve weeks each year and leaving the appointment of truant officers to the discretion of local boards.²⁴

THE ISTA, the Women's Clubs, and the State Federation of Labor were pleased with the enactment of compulsory education and credited the legislative victory to their coordinated lobbying efforts. State Superintendent R. C. Barrett spoke for all three groups when he said that compulsory education is "the most important single statutory enactment by the 29th General Assembly" because "it is largely from the truants that comes [sic] the violators of the law, the disturbers of public peace, criminals and paupers." The civic implications of compulsory education were stated even more explicitly by Story County Superintendent F. E. Hanson in an address to the ISTA: "Right schooling will develop an intelligent citizenship. Intelligent citizenship means less poverty, decrease in crime, and better government." Because compulsory education enabled the common schools to train *all* children in responsible citizenship, it was a good law.²⁵

It was one thing to pass even a watered-down law, however, and another to secure compliance. An article reporting on Dubuque which appeared in the *Iowa Normal Monthly* in 1904 indicates some of the difficulties. Blaming noncompliance partly on foreign parents "who resent the city's interference in the management and government of their children" and partly on employers who hired children who ought to be in school, the article concluded that amendments to the law were necessary. This demand for changes in the law was echoed in meetings of the ISTA, the Women's Clubs, and the Federation of Labor. The desired changes included extending the time of attendance at

24. "Pending School Legislation," *IaNM* 25 (March 1902), 419; Dunham to F. C. Ensign, 7 December 1906, quoted in Ensign, "Compulsory School Attendance and Child Labor Legislation in Iowa," 42; Iowa Department of Public Instruction, *School Laws of Iowa*, 78-80 (hereafter cited as IaDPI, *School Laws*); R. C. Barrett to John Burmeister, 12 April 1902, Personal Correspondence of the State Superintendent of Public Instruction.

25. ISTA, *Proceedings*, 1902-1903, 9, 47-48, 97-99; IaFWC, *Year Book*, 1902-1903, 23; IaFL, *Proceedings*, 1900, 31; *ibid.*, 1903, 27, 29.

Compulsory Education

school, establishing a set time for the beginning of the required attendance period, extending the age limit, and enacting a child labor law.²⁶

Due to the efforts of the Women's Clubs, the Iowa Labor Federation, the ISTA, and the state superintendent of public instruction, the General Assembly within the next decade amended the compulsory education law on three different occasions and enacted a child labor law. In 1904 the Iowa legislature strengthened the compulsory law somewhat but not to the extent advocated: sixteen weeks became the minimum period of attendance; the first day of September was made the starting date for the required period unless the local board established an alternative date no later than the first Monday in December; and the appointment of truant officers was made mandatory in cities with a population of twenty thousand or more. In 1909 the minimum period of attendance was increased to twenty-four weeks with the provision that the school boards in cities over twenty thousand might compel attendance for the entire school year. In 1913 the age limit was changed to sixteen unless the pupil "is over the age of 14 and is regularly employed or has educational qualifications equal to that of pupils who have completed the 8th grade."²⁷

In 1906 the Thirty-first General Assembly showed its progressive spirit by passing a child labor law. Educators, labor spokespersons, and Women's Club leaders had long recognized that without such legislation a compulsory attendance act would be of little value. Debated heatedly in the assembly, the bill passed after much compromise. The Iowa child labor law basically prohibited employment of children under fourteen by businesses and industries having more than eight employees,

26. "Truancy in Dubuque," *IaNM* 27 (June-July 1904), 545-47; *IaFWC, Year Book*, 1903-1904, 41-42; *ibid.*, 1904-1905, 24-25; *IaFL, Proceedings*, 1903, 27, 29, 40, 91-92; *ibid.*, 1904, 29; *ISTA, Proceedings*, 1903, 8, 135-37; *ibid.*, 1905, 7; J. J. McConnell, "Truant Law Needs Amendment," *IaNM* 26 (May 1903), 503-4; O. E. French, "The Compulsory School Law Applied," *IaNM* 27 (Nov. 1903), 198-99; "Editorial: Proposed Legislation," *Midland Schools* 18 (December 1903), 134; "Child Labor," *Midland Schools* 19 (Nov. 1904), 90; *IaDPI, Report*, 1904, 84.

27. *IaDPI, School Laws*, 1904, 103; *ibid.*, 1909, 180; *ibid.*, 1913, 22; *IaFWC, Year Book*, 1905-1906, 114-15; *ibid.*, 1906-1907, 38; *IaFL, Proceedings*, 1904, 44-45; *ibid.*, 1906, 23.

and established a ten-hour day for children under sixteen employed by those firms. Strong advocates of child labor legislation were disappointed by the weaknesses of the bill. Proofs of age were not required, which meant that the law would be difficult to enforce. And without meeting any test of their educational qualifications children under fourteen could be employed freely.²⁸ To some extent the 1913 amendment to the compulsory education act was intended to correct this weakness by setting the age limit at sixteen or completion of the eighth grade.

THE CHILD LABOR and amended Compulsory Education laws were part of a trend toward increasing state intrusion in the lives of individual citizens which was an important part of progressive reform in Iowa. This trend can be seen in the activities of the Better Iowa Schools Commission. In 1913, when the General Assembly enacted many of the commission's recommendations for improving Iowa schools, reformers were able to secure the final revision in the compulsory attendance law. Formed in 1911, and financed by the ISTA, the Better Iowa Schools Commission was charged with studying current legislation and educational problems and submitting legislative recommendations for improving the public schools. The commission's membership included representatives from farming, business, and professional life in order to have the support of these groups for the completed legislative program. That strategy worked, for the commission's recommendations, approved by the ISTA, were well received by the Thirty-fifth General Assembly, which enacted thirteen of the eighteen measures submitted in 1913. Important legislation that furthered the centralization of Iowa schools and increased state control of the system included the forming of a Department of Public Instruction with three inspectors for rural, graded, and secondary schools; the granting of state aid for consolidated schools; the required teaching of agriculture, domestic science, and manual training; and mandating twelve weeks of normal training for all teachers.²⁹

28. IaDPI, *School Laws, 1906*, 71-73; Ensign, "Compulsory Attendance and Child Labor Legislation in Iowa," 43, 48-49.

29. IaDPI, *Report, 1914*, 14-15, 88, 93-97; Aurner, *History of Education in Iowa*, 1: 149-50, 2: 352-54.

Compulsory Education

As part of the progressive trend toward enhanced state control, compulsory education had a significant impact on public schools in the areas of record-keeping, attendance, vocational education, and citizenship training. Almost immediately upon enactment the state superintendent began collecting information on enforcement and attendance. The initial information received indicated rather spotty enforcement and support of the new law. Of the 98 out of 99 county superintendents responding to the state superintendent's inquiry of 1906, 4 reported that the law was not enforced and 41 said that it was only partly enforced. In the same year 77 out of 291 town and city superintendents responding to the state superintendent asserted that the law was unnecessary in their localities and 85 found that children who were compelled to attend tended to drop out at the end of the compulsory period. This tendency aroused the fear that the limited compulsory period was setting a standard of attendance for certain classes of children.³⁰

Despite spotty enforcement during its early years, the new law did produce increased attendance. Graded school officials reported in 1906 that during its first four years the law had brought 3,710 children into the schools, including 1,959 for the 1905-6 school year. The fact that over one-half of this increase came in the most recent year might indicate growing compliance with the law. A similar pattern was evident in rural school attendance, except that the proportionate increase for the most recent year was not so large. The total number brought into the rural schools from 1902 to 1906 was 3,466, with 1,243 children added to the rolls during 1905-6. After 1906 there were no further special surveys to determine compliance, but statistics were regularly collected on nonattendance and average daily attendance, and these figures point toward growing acceptance of compulsory attendance. For example, the percentage of nonattenders from the total number of the age group required to attend by law declined from 2.4 percent (1903-4) to 1.6 percent (1916-17) to 0.9 percent (1924-25). By 1932 the number of nonattenders was no longer reported in the school statistics prepared by the Department of Public Instruction. During the same period the per-

30. IaDPI, *Report*, 1904, LII, LVI; *ibid.*, in *Ia Leg Doc*, 1907, 1: 26-27; Ensign, "Compulsory Attendance and Child Labor Legislation in Iowa," 43, 48-49.

centage for average daily attendance of those enrolled increased from 71.2 percent (1903-4) to 73.0 percent (1918-19) to 86.1 percent (1930-31).³¹

The Iowa compulsory education law brought several hundred children into the schools who would not have attended otherwise. The presence of these pupils had an impact on the school curriculum. From the beginning many advocates of compulsory education, including the Iowa Federation of Labor and the Women's Clubs, had linked their call for compulsion with the demand for a more practical education. As F. R. Conaway, a school director from Des Moines, stated in an address delivered in 1903 to the ISTA, "having compelled the child to attend school we should provide for its wants, make the work agreeable, that it prefers to remain." Conaway therefore recommended that manual training, domestic science, and agriculture be extended to the lower grades. He thought "such work would attract boys and girls who find the everyday humdrum of school life insufficient to satisfy their ambition to have something doing." Educators also promised important civic benefits from industrial training; it would prevent idleness, immorality, and crime by creating more intelligent workers who would be able to find useful employment immediately upon graduation. Responding to these arguments, Iowans expanded industrial education in the schools. In 1902, when Iowa enacted compulsory education, only twelve schools were giving special instruction in manual training and home economics; by 1913 the number had increased to 150. In that year the Iowa General Assembly passed a bill requiring that manual training, domestic science, and agriculture be taught in all consolidated schools. In the same year the Iowa course of study recommended manual training, domestic science, and agriculture as subjects for all rural schools. In order to graduate from eighth grade, students were expected to demonstrate "skill in the simpler forms of industrial occupations on the farm and in the home, and a knowledge of home economy." Students were also expected to have a good knowledge of

31. IaDPI, *Report*, in *Ia Leg Doc*, 1907, 1: 26-27; Ensign, "Compulsory Attendance and Child Labor Legislation in Iowa," 43, 48-49. Percentages were compiled from school statistics reported in IaDPI, *Report*, 1904, 60; *ibid.*, 1918, 75, 84; *ibid.*, 1926, 17; *ibid.*, 1932, 79, 100-110.

Compulsory Education

the basic principles of agriculture.³² Thus compulsory education contributed to the diversification of the school curriculum to meet the needs of a more heterogeneous population brought into the schools by the law.

Professional educators made a final attempt in 1918 to revise the compulsory education law. The ISTA in that year adopted a resolution for revision which State Superintendent A. M. Deyoe recommended to the General Assembly. The change, proposed on the grounds of fostering improved civic education, called for an amendment "so that each child between the ages of 6 and 16 shall attend the public school, or a school inspected and approved by the Department of Public Instruction, 24 consecutive weeks each year." This move made explicit the civic purposes that educators had always tied to their demands for compulsory education, and it also reflected the concern of the Department of Public Instruction that "the private, denominational and parochial schools have no state supervision and control." Although the General Assembly did not pass this recommended revision, in 1919, encouraged by the surge of wartime patriotism stimulated by United States participation in World War I, it did pass important civic legislation. One law required the teaching of citizenship in every grade of every public and private school. Another mandated English as the language of instruction for secular subjects and prohibited the teaching of foreign languages below ninth grade.³³

Thus, in this final episode, compulsion, centralized control, and citizenship were combined once again as they had been so often in the movement for compulsory education in Iowa. Compulsion and centralized control were proposed and opposed in 1919 for reasons similar to those advanced in the late nineteenth century. Proponents appealed to civic necessity and opponents to individual rights. Catholics, for example, still viewed the English language requirement and enhanced state supervision as

32. ISTA, *Proceedings*, 1903, 171; *ibid.*, 1905, 116; IaFL, *Proceedings*, 1911, 55; IaFWC, *Year Book*, 1902-1903, 23; *ibid.*, 1905-1906, 25; Frank Johnson, "Manual Training in Iowa" (Master's thesis, University of Iowa, 1925), 8, 14-17; Iowa Department of Public Instruction, *Course of Study and Manual of Methods for the Elementary Schools of Iowa*, 1913, 66, 106, 146-47, 300.

33. IaDPI, *Report*, 1918, 29; *ibid.*, 1920, 9.

threats to independent parochial schools and as unnecessary infringements on parental rights.³⁴ Yet much had changed since the 1890s. State power, increased through progressive reforms, now required what had been previously denied: compulsory attendance, teaching the common branches in English, and specific training in American citizenship. Religious and ethnic groups like German Catholics might complain, but they also complied with these state-imposed standards in education.

34. *Catholic Tribune*, 6, 13, and 27 March 1919.

Copyright of Annals of Iowa is the property of State of Iowa, by & through the State Historical Society of Iowa and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.