

# Elementary and Secondary Education in Iowa, 1890-1900: A Time of Awakening

## *Part II*

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*In his essay, Keach Johnson emphasizes that the impulse to modernize Iowa's school system—indeed the nation's school system—grew out of the rapid industrialization and urbanization that was beginning to transform American society in the latter part of the nineteenth century. Part I (published in the fall 1979 issue of The Annals) focuses on the conditions prevailing in rural and town schools in the 1890s, the organization of Iowa's public school system, the qualifications, duties, and responsibilities of school officials at the state and local level. Mr. Johnson discusses the need of the public schools to broaden their programs in order to make equal educational opportunity a reality for the children of all social classes in Iowa, and the plight of the country schools which suffered from isolation, insufficient organization and management, inadequate support, and poor teaching.—Ed.*

**T**HE POOR QUALITY of rural education in Iowa in the 1890s was particularly troublesome because the education of most children began and ended in the country schools. However, the problems of the country schools, although more urgent than those of the city schools, were more or less common to all Iowa

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schools. Country schools suffered more from inexperienced and poorly prepared teachers than from any other single cause, but well-qualified teachers were in short supply throughout Iowa. "Of all questions relating to the improvement of our schools that of the training of teachers is the most important," Superintendent R. C. Barrett of Mitchell County told the Iowa State Teachers' Association in his presidential address in 1895. "The greatest peril which threatens our schools today is the presence of the incompetent teacher," Superintendent Henry Sabin warned in 1896. "The teacher problem is the great problem of the public school," Homer H. Seerley, the president of the Iowa State Normal School, declared in 1898. "All other difficult problems fade into insignificance when compared with it."<sup>1</sup>

The three educators knew whereof they spoke. The majority of Iowa teachers in the 1890s were poorly prepared to teach, lacking education, experience, and professional training. Of the 28,934 applicants for teachers' certificates examined by the county superintendents in 1889, 3,944 had no experience in teaching and 4,043 had taught less than one year. Of the 28,301 teachers employed in Iowa in 1893, 1,526 had graduated from institutions of higher learning and 5,587 had attended such institutions without graduating, but 21,188 had not progressed further than grade school or high school plus a few weeks of training in the county institutes. In 1896, the Iowa State Teachers' Association called on the General Assembly to establish a system of training schools for elementary teachers in order to meet the needs of the 15,000 "inexperienced and poorly qualified young persons who will find their way into the rural and village schools of the state within the next two years."<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>*Proceedings of the Iowa State Teachers' Association* (hereafter cited as *Proceedings, IaSTA*), Forty-first Annual Session, December 31, 1895-January 2, 1896, (Des Moines: F. R. Conaway, 1896): 30, 65; *Proceedings, IaSTA*, Forty-fourth Annual Session, December 27-29, 1898, (Des Moines: F. R. Conaway, 1898): 29.

<sup>2</sup>*Biennial Report of the Iowa State Superintendent of Public Instruction* (hereafter cited as *Biennial Report, IaSPI*), 1888-1889, Twenty-third Iowa General Assembly Documents, 2 (Des Moines, 1889): 11; *Biennial Report, IaSPI*, 1892-1893, Twenty-fifth Iowa General Assembly Documents, 2 (Des Moines, 1894): 8, 73, 74-75; *Proceedings, IaSTA*, December 31, 1895-January 2, 1896, 5-6, 30-31, 65, 107, 112.

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Among the numerous factors contributing to the shortage of qualified teachers in Iowa, four were particularly important: (1) the rapid turnover of teachers; (2) loose standards of certification which permitted and even encouraged the licensing of incompetent and unfit persons; (3) the failure of the state to provide adequate facilities for the preparation of teachers; and (4) low "wages."

Teaching had not yet become a profession in Iowa. It was not highly esteemed by the public or the majority of teachers. Some Iowa teachers were dedicated professionals who regarded teaching as a high calling and devoted their lives to it. But the majority looked upon teaching as a temporary occupation, as a means of making a living until they could do something better which generally meant more money for the men and marriage for the women. This resulted in a ceaseless ebb and flow of teachers. Several thousand quit teaching school each year; the average grade school teacher taught no longer than three or four years.<sup>3</sup>

Such wholesale turnover not only necessitated the annual employment of large numbers of inexperienced teachers, but it also created a serious imbalance in the number of men and women teachers. Since men were far more mobile than women, teaching came to be mainly a feminine occupation. The feminization of teaching in Iowa began with the enlistment of many male teachers in the army during the Civil War and accelerated during the post-war years as the state's rapid growth opened up new economic opportunities for men. The masculine contingent of Iowa's teaching force declined to thirty-seven percent in 1865, thirty-one percent in 1885, and fourteen percent in 1905 when the state's 29,619 public school teachers included 3,598 men and 26,021 women.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>3</sup> *Biennial Report, IaSPI, 1892-1893*, 47; *Proceedings, IaSTA*, Thirty-sixth Annual Meeting, December 30, 1890-January 2, 1891, (n.p., n.d.): 146; *Proceedings, IaSTA*, Fortieth Annual Session, December 26-28, 1894, (Des Moines: F. R. Conaway, 1895): 29, 61, 63.

<sup>4</sup> Clarence Ray Aurner, *History of Education in Iowa*, 5 vols. (Iowa City: State Historical Society of Iowa, 1914-1920), 1 (1914): 303-304, 305-307, 325; *Biennial Report, IaSPI, 1888-1889*, 8, 14; *Biennial Report, IaSPI, 1892-1893*, 8; *Biennial Report of the Iowa Department of Public Instruction* (hereafter

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The examination and certification of teachers was largely the prerogative of the county superintendents. The State Board of Examiners, which had been created by the State Board of Education in 1861 and reorganized by the General Assembly in 1882, issued a limited number of state certificates and life diplomas which entitled their recipients to teach in any school in Iowa without further qualification. However, the efforts of the board to establish truly professional standards of certification were too ambitious for the time. To earn state certification, candidates must have had successful teaching experience (three years for the state certificate and ten years for the life diploma), pass examinations in a broad range of academic and professional subjects, write an essay in United States history for the state certificate, and present an "original thesis" of 3,000 to 5,000 words for the life diploma. Few Iowa teachers were able or willing to meet these requirements. As of September 30, 1889, the State Board of Examiners had issued only 210 state certificates and 82 life diplomas.<sup>5</sup>

The county system of certification, the source of the vast majority of teachers' certificates, was an essential and useful step in the evolution of a uniform state system of certification. Limited though its powers were, county certification was the beginning of control by a central authority. The county system substituted at least a modicum of order and system for the original anarchy of local selection. It imposed necessary restraints upon local school boards who had been accustomed to hire any teacher they wanted to.<sup>6</sup> However, there were inherent weaknesses in county certification that seriously impaired its value.

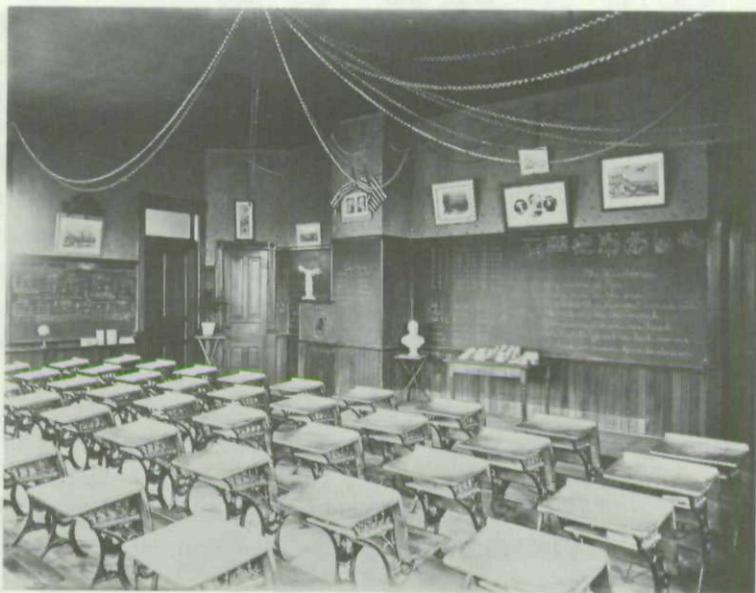
The weaknesses were due, in part, to defects in state law governing the issuance of county certificates. The law specified the subjects that were to be included in the monthly examinations of teachers but otherwise gave county superintendents a free

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cited as *Biennial Report, IaDPI, 1904-1905*), Thirty-first Iowa General Assembly Documents, vol. 5, pt. 1 (Des Moines, 1906): 14-15.

<sup>5</sup> Aurner, 2: 132-143; *Biennial Report IaSPI, 1888-1889*, 33-43; *Proceedings, IaSTA*, December 27-29, 1898, 85-89.

<sup>6</sup> Aurner, 1: 281-296, 297, 298; Jay J. Sherman, "History of the Office of County Superintendent of Schools in Iowa," *Iowa Journal of History and Politics*, 21 (January 1923): 12-14, 20-21.



*An elementary school room in the Red Oak School, circa 1895-1905.*

hand in preparing and evaluating the examinations. This resulted inevitably in widespread variation of certification standards. Critics complained that Iowa had, in effect, ninety-nine standards, a different one for each county in the state. A candidate for certification who was rejected in one county might gain ready acceptance in the next county. A first-grade certificate in one county might be no better than a second- or third-grade certificate in adjoining counties. Recognizing the variable quality of the certificates, the law limited them to the county in which they were issued: they had no validity anywhere else in the state.<sup>7</sup>

If the law was too loose in some respects, it was too rigid in others. Only teachers with state certificates and life diplomas

<sup>7</sup> Aurner, 1: 299-303, 304-305, 311-312, 314-316; *Biennial Report, IaSPI*, 1888-1889, 57-58; *Biennial Report, IaSPI*, 1892-1893, 45-51; *Proceedings, IaSTA*, December 31, 1895-January 2, 1896, 37, 39; *Biennial Report, IaDPI*, 1904-1905, vol. 5, pt. 1, pp. 23-25.

were exempt from the rule that all public school teachers must be examined and certified by the county superintendents. The law made no allowance for advanced education and training, nor did it see any need to provide different kinds of examinations and certificates for different levels of teaching. Graduates of colleges, universities, and normal schools no less than eighth graders, veterans as well as novices, city superintendents and kindergarten teachers all answered the same questions on the same subjects and received the same kinds of certificates. And they must repeat the process each year, for certificates were good only for one year and could be renewed only by examination.<sup>8</sup>

County certification also suffered from the weaknesses, both institutional and personal, of the county superintendents. The law enjoined the superintendents to certify only persons of good character who knew how to teach as well as what to teach. However, it was by no means unusual for county superintendents to certify unworthy persons for personal or political reasons or from sheer carelessness. Even at best, county certification was one dimensional; superintendents felt obliged to license anyone who demonstrated enough knowledge of subject-matter to earn a passing score on the examination. "Rarely is a certificate withheld for lack of ability to instruct and govern, or because of bad character or questionable habits, provided the markings on the examination would entitle [the candidate] to one," Superintendent John Knoepfler reported in 1893. A study of county certification led the Educational Council of the Iowa State Teachers' Association to conclude in 1894 that the system provided "no adequate safeguards" against the certification of persons "having neither the intellectual qualifications, the moral fitness, nor the practical common sense essential in an instructor of youth."<sup>9</sup>

<sup>8</sup>*Biennial Report, IaSPI, 1888-1889, 57, 61; Biennial Report, IaSPI, 1892-1893, 48; Proceedings, IaSTA, December 26-28, 1894, 63; Proceedings, IaSTA, December 31, 1895-January 2, 1896, 16, 39, 43-44, 66; Proceedings, IaSTA, Forty-third Annual Session, December 28-30, 1897, (Des Moines: F. R. Conaway, 1898): 126-128.*

<sup>9</sup>*Biennial Report IaSPI, 1892-1893, 45; Proceedings, IaSTA, December 30, 1890-January 2, 1891, 72; Proceedings, IaSTA, December 27-29, 1893, 15-16;*

THE ULTIMATE weakness of county certification lay with the public rather than the superintendents: in the willingness of Iowans to put up with mediocre teaching. "It is a well-known fact, not flattering to be sure, that a first grade certificate in Iowa is about equal in grade to the second-class certificate in Illinois, Wisconsin, Indiana, Minnesota, and other sister states," Superintendent Frank B. Cooper of Des Moines West said to the Iowa State Teachers' Association in his presidential address in 1893. "The simple fact is, we have not demanded scholarship, professional preparation, or special fitness on the part of our teachers," declared Superintendent A. B. Warner of Harlan. If such demands were made, Warner was confident that able and ambitious young people would respond to the challenge. "But we require only a modicum of scholarship, no special reading whatever, and ask no questions about general culture and capacity." The requirement that candidates be examined on the theory and practice of teaching was little more than a formality. "It is always understood that one answer is just about as good as another in the subject of didactics," Warner commented. "Who ever heard of the rejection of a candidate for a certificate because he failed in this subject?"<sup>10</sup>

It was fitting that Iowans did not demand much preparation of their teachers, for they offered teachers few opportunities for advanced education and training. The only publicly-supported teacher-training institution in Iowa was the state normal school in Cedar Falls which had been established in 1876 to provide "special instruction and training" for the common school teachers of the state. The State University of Iowa in Iowa City maintained "a chair of pedagogy," but the preparation of teachers was not yet a primary concern or function of the university or of the Iowa State College of Agriculture and Mechanic Arts in Ames.<sup>11</sup>

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*Proceedings, IaSTA*, December 26-28, 1894, 98-99; *Biennial Report, IaDPI*, 1905, pt. 1, 24-26.

<sup>10</sup> *Proceedings, IaSTA*, Thirty-ninth Annual Session, December 27-29, 1893, (Des Moines: G. H. Ragsdale, 1894): 15, 27.

<sup>11</sup> *Biennial Report, IaSPI*, 1888-1889, 61; *Proceedings, IaSTA*, December 27-29, 1893, 8; *Proceedings, IaSTA*, December 26-28, 1894, 96.



*Iowa State Normal School, Cedar Falls,  
circa 1899.*

The slowness of Iowans in realizing that the preparation of public school teachers was a public responsibility placed a disproportionate share of the responsibility on the state's private schools. Of the 1,526 Iowa teachers who held degrees from institutions of higher learning in 1893, 277 had graduated from the state normal school, seventy-one from the state university, sixty from the state college of agriculture and mechanic arts, 719 from private normal or denominational schools in Iowa, and 399 from institutions of higher learning outside of Iowa. Of the 5,587 Iowa teachers who had attended institutions of higher learning without graduating, 917 had gone to the state normal school, 114 to the state university, 224 to the state college of agriculture and mechanic arts, 3,247 to private normal or denominational schools in Iowa, and 1,085 to institutions of higher learning in other states.<sup>12</sup>

The state superintendents of Iowa in their biennial reports and the state teachers' association in its annual meetings regularly urged the General Assembly to appropriate more money to support the state normal school, to establish additional normal schools, to place the pedagogical department of the state uni-

<sup>12</sup>*Biennial Report, IaSPI, 1892-1893, 74-75.*

versity "on an equal footing" with the university's other departments, and to subsidize the organization of teacher-training programs in selected high schools and approved private academies and colleges. The educators noted that "more progressive" states supported from three to fourteen normal schools. Among Iowa's neighbors, Illinois maintained three normal schools, Minnesota three, Missouri four, and Wisconsin five. Minnesota and Wisconsin spent as much money on each of their several normal schools as Iowa spent on one school.<sup>13</sup>

It could only "be a subject for wonder," the Iowa State Teachers' Association resolved in 1893, that a state as prosperous as Iowa with more than 500,000 children needing the services of some 20,000 teachers spent only \$25,000 annually to support the state normal school. The state had been even more parsimonious in dealing with capital expenditures, providing only \$30,000 for the construction of one new building during the seventeen years of the normal school's existence. Such grudging support strained the limited resources of the normal school to the uttermost. The school was "filled from cellar to garret," classes were overcrowded and unwieldy, the library was inadequate, laboratories were "indifferently furnished," and the faculty was understaffed and overworked.<sup>14</sup>

**E**DUCATORS warned that Iowa could not rely on private schools to meet the state's urgent need for trained common school teachers. The private normal schools were not closely identified with the common schools, their instructors were "often cheap, immature, and incompetent," and their work was "often superficial." The private colleges and universities were not professional schools, were hampered by limited facilities and resources, were too expensive for the vast majority of teachers,

<sup>13</sup>*Biennial Report, IaSPI, 1888-1889, 61-62; Biennial Report, IaSPI, 1892-1893, 72-73; Proceedings, IaSTA, December 27-29, 1893, 5-6, 8, 14; Proceedings, IaSTA, December 26-28, 1894, 7-8, 61-66, 96-97; Proceedings, IaSTA, December 31, 1895-January 2, 1896, 5-6, 19-20, 31-32, 68, 107, 112; also see Hugh S. Buffum, "Federal and State Aid to Education in Iowa," *Iowa Journal of History and Politics*, vol. 5, no. 3 (July 1907): 311, 319-321.*

<sup>14</sup>*Proceedings, IaSTA, December 27-29, 1893, 8-9, 14, 25-26; Proceedings, IaSTA, December 31, 1895-January 2, 1896, 68.*

and in some cases were essentially preparatory schools instead of colleges. Of the 6,440 students enrolled in Iowa's collegiate institutions in 1893, 1,568 were enrolled in preparatory departments which were larger than the collegiate departments in some colleges. The College and University Department of the Iowa State Teachers' Association reported in 1893 that only half of the eighteen institutions in Iowa "claiming to do collegiate work" could qualify for membership in the department which required three full years of work above the grammar-school level for admission to the freshman class and four additional years of collegiate work for the baccalaureate degree. The other nine schools were well equipped to do preparatory work, but their faculties were "plainly inadequate" to provide good collegiate instruction.<sup>15</sup>

The county institutes provided the only special training available to most Iowa teachers, including virtually all rural teachers. The institutes were the oldest of the state's teacher-training institutions, originating in the early 1850s when teachers began to form local associations to improve their teaching. The institutes gained state recognition and support in the general school law of 1858 which authorized the state superintendent to spend \$1,000 annually to encourage the organization of county institutes. The rapid growth of the institutes led the General Assembly in 1874 to require all counties to hold annual normal institutes. However, the legislature made no attempt to interfere with the local character of the institutes. The state would contribute fifty dollars to each county to support the institutes, but they were to be organized and managed by the county superintendents as before and were to be financed mostly by the fees which teachers paid for their certificates and for registration at the institutes (one dollar in each case).<sup>16</sup>

The original purpose of the institutes was professional rather than academic. Assuming that teachers possessed sufficient

<sup>15</sup> *Biennial Report, IaSPI, 1892-1893*, 34-35; *Proceedings, IaSTA*, December 27-29, 1893, 53-54, 55-62; *Proceedings, IaSTA*, December 26-28, 1894, 96.

<sup>16</sup> Aurner, 2: 151-172; Buffum, "Federal and State Aid to Education in Iowa," *Iowa Journal of History and Politics*, vol. 5, no. 2 (April 1907), 188-192; *Proceedings, IaSTA*, December 27-29, 1893, 20-21; *Proceedings, IaSTA*, December 26-28, 1894, 96; *Proceedings, IaSTA*, December 28-30, 1897, 14.

knowledge of the subjects they taught, the institutes were designed to provide short courses in the theory and practice of teaching in the common schools: to help teachers gain a better understanding of what to teach and how to do it most effectively. However, this approach was much too professional for the great majority of Iowa teachers whose first need was to gain an adequate knowledge of the subjects they were required to teach. Most teachers, in fact, regarded the institutes as a means of learning enough subject-matter to pass the certification examination. The institutes were forced, therefore, to strike an uneasy balance between the methods and principles of teaching and subject-matter.<sup>17</sup>

In trying to teach both content and methods, the normal institutes stretched themselves too thin and fell between the two stools. Superintendent John Knoepfler thought that the great weakness of the institutes was their attempt "to cover so much ground." Superintendent Henry Sabin noted that teachers' grasp of subject-matter could not be "perceptibly enlarged" in annual institute sessions of two or three weeks each. Too often the institutes were little more than cramming sessions to prepare teachers to pass the certification examinations; in such cases, the influence of the institutes "did not extend a day beyond the writing of the last examination paper," Sabin commented.<sup>18</sup>

Elaborating the views of Knoepfler and Sabin, Superintendent J. H. Garber of Pella pointed out that the state normal school required from thirty-six to fifty weeks of work in English composition, word analysis, government, vocal music, and drawing before the school considered its students well enough prepared to do even "ordinary" teaching. It was, therefore, unreasonable, Garber declared, "for a county institute in three or four [annual] sessions of two or three weeks each, to attempt the same and in addition, physical geography, algebra, natural philosophy, and astronomy, as many now essay to do." The results of such a hurried potpourri of instruction could only be

<sup>17</sup> Aurner, 2: 172-186; *Biennial Report, IaSPI*, 1888-1889, 63-68; *Biennial Report, IaSPI*, 1892-1893, 65-71; *Proceedings, IaSTA*, December 30, 1890-January 2, 1891, 144-145; *Proceedings, IaSTA*, December 31, 1895-January 2, 1896, 65.

<sup>18</sup> *Biennial Report, IaSPI*, 1888-1889, 63-64; *Biennial Report, IaSPI*, 1892-1893, 66.

superficial. "Little, if any of the work is actually assimilated," Garber concluded. "At best it is light, fleeting, and evanescent."<sup>19</sup>

The faults of the normal institutes notwithstanding, even their harshest critics agreed that they were indispensable. Henry Sabin observed in 1889 that the normal institute had exercised "a very marked influence upon our schools, since its inception in its present form in 1874." The normal institutes met in some degree the basic needs of thousands of teachers (some 18,000 a year in the 1890s) who would have received no training otherwise. The achievements of the institutes become even more impressive when it is remembered that they received little public support. In 1893, for example, the expenses of the ninety-nine institutes for instruction, lectures, and "incidentals" totalled \$53,258. To meet these costs, teachers paid \$30,289 in examination fees and \$19,207 in registration fees, whereas the state contributed only \$4,950, fifty dollars to each of the ninety-nine counties. Such niggardly encouragement contrasted sharply with the General Assembly's generosity in subsidizing agricultural projects (\$100 annually for each county agricultural fair and \$75 annually for each county farmers' institute), but the legislature's preference for agriculture over education simply reflected Iowa's priorities at the time.<sup>20</sup>

Many Iowa teachers could ill afford the expense of attending the normal institutes. Although available figures on teachers' "wages" are spotty, they indicate pretty clearly that most Iowa teachers made no more than a living at best. Superintendent John Knoepfler reported in 1893 that the average monthly salaries of men and women teachers in Iowa were \$39 and \$31 respectively and that their average annual salaries based on an average school year of eight months were \$298 and \$243 respectively. Knoepfler did not report the average annual expenses of Iowa teachers, but he presented some significant samples of

<sup>19</sup> *Proceedings, IaSTA*, December 27-29, 1893, 21-22.

<sup>20</sup> *Biennial Report, IaSPI*, 1888-1889, 12, 63; *Biennial Report, IaSPI*, 1892-1893, 11, 65; *Proceedings, IaSTA*, December 30, 1890-January 2, 1891, 145-146; *Proceedings, IaSTA*, December 27-29, 1893, 20-21; *Proceedings, IaSTA*, December 31, 1895-January 2, 1896, 38-39; *Biennial Report, IaDPI*, 1904-1905, pt. 1, 26-27.

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their outlays. The average annual expenses of 324 men teachers and 469 women teachers in rural schools were \$205 and \$198; the average annual expenses of 280 men teachers and 443 women teachers in city and town schools were \$316 and \$309; and the average annual income and outgo of sixty teachers in the ten ward schools of the East Des Moines district were \$366 and \$367.<sup>21</sup>

In commenting on the above figures, Knoepfler said that he had included only the basic costs of living and teaching in compiling teachers' expenses: attendance at teachers' meetings and normal institutes, the purchase of books, journals and stationery, and expenditures for food and clothing. He had excluded medical expenses, contributions to churches and charitable organizations, and the cost of janitor service during the winter months which many women teachers in rural schools had to pay out of their own pockets. Even so, he was forced to conclude that the real income of teachers in the country schools was less than that of unskilled rural laborers and that the earnings of teachers in cities and towns were "nowhere" commensurate with the salaries paid for equal ability and training in other occupations. Public school teaching, in fact, was not self-supporting; "hundreds" of Iowa teachers were able to make a living only because their families furnished much of their board and room at little or no cost. Salaries in many counties were so low that county superintendents could supply enough teachers only by lowering their standards and certifying inferior candidates whom they would otherwise reject.<sup>22</sup>

Most Iowa educators agreed that teachers were underpaid and that this was the principal reason why so few well-qualified persons were willing to make a career of teaching. However, some school officials believed that teachers were paid as much or more than they were worth. They argued that teachers, particularly those in the rural districts, were paid the going rate for inexperienced and unskilled labor which was all that most of them deserved.

<sup>21</sup> *Biennial Report, IaSPI, 1888-1889, 8, 14, 171-172; Biennial Report, IaSPI, 1892-1893, 8, 54, 55-56, 59-60, 62-64; Proceedings, IaSTA, December 31, 1895-January 2, 1896, 23, 39.*

<sup>22</sup> *Biennial Report, IaSPI, 1892-1893, 53, 55, 56-58, 59-60, 62-64; see also Aurner, 1: 326-329.*

Superintendent L. B. Parshall of Jackson County, for example, believed that the salaries of rural teachers were commensurate with the quality of their teaching. "For we do not believe that the teaching is much, if any, better than the wages," Parshall observed. "There are here and there cases where the country school teacher gives grand service for small pay, but it is the exception, not the rule."<sup>23</sup>

Concurring in Parshall's judgment, Superintendent H. A. Simons of Fremont County thought that every "candid" county superintendent would admit that about fifty percent of the country school teachers received more pay than they earned, that twenty-five percent received about what they earned, and that the remaining twenty-five percent received much less than they earned. "The common sense business man will tell you, and tell you truly," Simons continued, "that the average country teacher is paid all that he is worth to the district, that he gets at least as much as the average farm hand, mechanic, domestic, clerk, milliner, dressmaker, of the same age and experience; that he works no harder, and that the expense of preparation has been little if any greater." Noting that "this class of teachers" was so plentiful that there was no need for country schools to pay higher salaries, Simons declared that the crux of the salary problem was how to persuade the public to demand better teaching and to pay higher taxes in order to get it.<sup>24</sup>

All leading educators in Iowa recognized the need to awaken the public to the necessity of paying higher salaries in order to get better teachers. They also agreed that the first step in this direction was to convince Iowans of the urgent need to consolidate and streamline the state's cumbersome and unwieldy district system of school organization. State superintendents had protested for years that the multiplication of independent rural districts and district township subdistricts, many of them too small and too weak to support even passable schools, was expensive, inefficient, and wasteful. However, the superintendents' protests were unavailing; by 1889 Iowa had been divided

<sup>23</sup> *Proceedings, IaSTA*, December 31, 1895-January 2, 1896, 137-138; Aurner, 1: 329-330.

<sup>24</sup> *Proceedings, IaSTA*, December 26-28, 1894, 140-142.

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and subdivided into 1,188 district townships, 3,451 independent districts, and 8,768 subdistricts.<sup>25</sup>

The multiplication of school officers had proceeded apace, creating a host of directors, subdirectors, secretaries, and treasurers. In fact, Iowa had as many school officers as teachers. Henry Sabin estimated in 1889 that over 25,000 people were engaged in managing Iowa's schools. The school districts of the state could pay their bills only through the combined efforts of 13,950 school officials: 4,650 secretaries to prepare orders for payment, the same number of school board presidents to authorize payment by their signatures, and an equal number of treasurers to make payment.<sup>26</sup>

Mismanagement was endemic to the small independent rural school district which, in the words of Superintendent Ole O. Roe of Story County, was generally "a little neighborhood affair" instead of a public institution. School officers of the district were accountable to no one but their neighbors who were generally only too willing to let the officers run the school as they pleased. This made for carelessness and laxity which was particularly evident in the mismanagement of school funds.<sup>27</sup>

Iowa law directed the district treasurers to keep separate accounts of three funds: the schoolhouse fund which included expenditures for the purchase of schoolhouse sites, the construction of buildings, the cost of libraries and apparatus, and the payment of bonded indebtedness; the contingent fund which covered various operating costs such as fuel, insurance, schoolhouse repairs, rent, and the payment of secretaries, treasurers, and janitors; and the teachers' fund which dealt exclusively with teachers' salaries. The treasurers were to report annually to the county superintendents the amount of money carried over from the previous year, receipts and expenditures for the current year, and the amount of money on hand in each of the three funds. The county superintendents were to summarize the statistics in their annual reports to the state superin-

<sup>25</sup> Aurner, 1: 264-275; *Biennial Report, IaSPI*, 1888-1889, 8, 102, 157-160, 161-163; *Proceedings, IaSTA*, December 31, 1895-January 2, 1896, 32; *Biennial Report, IaDPI*, 1904-1905, pt. 1, 20-23.

<sup>26</sup> *Biennial Report, IaSPI*, 1888-1889, 102-104.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 171-172.

tendent who was to incorporate the figures into his biennial reports to the governor and legislature.<sup>28</sup>

The reporting system was inefficient and wasteful, partly because of the sheer volume of the reports (Iowa counties averaged over forty-six school districts per county) and partly because of the carelessness and incompetence of the district treasurers. County superintendents had no control over the treasurers who were appointed by the district school boards. All too often, the decisive consideration governing the board's selection was the rivalry of local banks eager to handle the district's funds. District treasurers, therefore, were more likely to be appointed because of their bank connections than their accounting expertise.<sup>29</sup>

Some district treasurers did not submit reports to the county superintendents. The reports of other treasurers were full of discrepancies and errors. Their accounts showed that they had paid out more money than they had taken in or that the amount of money which they had on hand at the beginning of the current year did not correspond to the amount they had on hand at the end of the preceding year. Some treasurers failed to keep separate accounts of the three funds, forcing the county superintendents to make some sort of separation in order to comply with the law. The necessity of such guess-work led Superintendent John Knoepfler to complain that the accuracy of the statistics reported by the county superintendents was "largely vitiated" by the slipshod practices of the district treasurers.<sup>30</sup>

State superintendents regularly complained of the delays and inaccuracies of the reporting system, but they recognized that fiscal irresponsibility and mismanagement were inevitable in the small rural districts. State Superintendent Alonzo Abernethy observed in 1874:

Efficiency can never be secured in the management of the schools and school funds where districts are so small as to im-

<sup>28</sup> *Biennial Report, IaSPI, 1888-1889, 9-10, 104; Biennial Report, IaSPI, 1892-1893, 129.*

<sup>29</sup> *Biennial Report, IaSPI, 1888-1889, 104; Proceedings, IaSTA, December 26-28, 1894, 68.*

<sup>30</sup> *Biennial Report, IaSPI, 1888-1889, 104-105; Biennial Report, IaSPI, 1892-1893, 131-132.*

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pose but slight responsibility upon district officers, nor can the state ever know from any reports or statistics that can be obtained from such officers, what portions of the funds are judiciously expended.<sup>31</sup>

The district townships with their numerous subdistricts were no more efficient than the small independent districts. The district townships were, in effect, loose confederations of subdistricts in which power rested in the parts rather than the whole. The township board, which consisted of the subdirectors elected by the subdistricts, determined how much each subdistrict could spend, but otherwise left the management of the schools to the subdirectors who employed the teachers and fixed their monthly salaries. If a township board authorized a subdirector to pay a teacher thirty dollars a month for six months, the minimum school year permitted by law, the subdirector might decide to sacrifice quality to quantity by hiring a teacher for nine months at twenty dollars a month.<sup>32</sup>

Critics complained that the district township system vested too much power in the hands of the subdirectors. The system made the subdirector "a little autocrat" who controlled the subdistrict "as arbitrarily and nearly as disjointedly" as though it were independent, complained Superintendent J. H. Landes of Van Buren County. "The selection of teachers is decided by his peculiar whims, and he rarely rejects an application on grounds of nepotism," Landes growled. Henry Sabin voiced a similar complaint in recommending that the appointment of teachers be transferred from the subdirectors to the township board. "It is very often the case that the subdirector in selecting a teacher is induced by wrong motives, or fails through want of judgment," Sabin observed.<sup>33</sup>

**T**HE ULTIMATE weakness of the district system was the inequality of the districts, particularly the independent rural districts, which varied widely in their ability to support schools. The im-

<sup>31</sup> *Biennial Report, IaDPI, 1904-1905, pt. 1, 20-22.*

<sup>32</sup> *Biennial Report, IaSPI, 1888-1889, 158-160.*

<sup>33</sup> *Biennial Report, IaSPI, 1888-1889, 55-56, 158-159; Biennial Report, IaSPI, 1892-1893, 112-113; Proceedings, IaSTA, December 31, 1895-January 2, 1896, 32, 38.*

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balance originated in the traditional practice of partitioning congressional townships, which comprised thirty-six square miles divided into thirty-six sections, into nine independent school districts of four sections each. The four-section districts accorded with the desires and needs of pioneer settlement, but they made no allowances for differences in natural resources and taxable wealth. The inevitable result of such arbitrary organization was inequality, particularly for districts lying along divides and rivers where much of the land was rough, sandy, and swampy.<sup>34</sup>

The original inequality of the districts was exacerbated by subsequent economic growth and the coming of the railroads which paid taxes for school purposes only to the districts which they crossed. As a result, districts enjoying the advantages of fertile soil, superior location, and railroad taxes were able to maintain good schools with low or moderate tax levies, whereas districts lacking these advantages could not operate good schools even with high tax rates. In Marion County, for example, prosperous districts were able to support good schools with "first-class" teachers for eight to ten months a year with a levy of two to three mills, but poor districts could only employ inferior teachers for six months a year with a levy of fifteen to twenty mills.<sup>35</sup>

The failure of Iowa's district system to provide equal educational opportunity for the state's children was nowhere more evident than in secondary education which was largely confined to cities and towns. Most rural youths could obtain a secondary education only if their parents were able to pay tuition to send them to a high school outside of their home district. During the school year, 1903-1904, for example, the parents of 9,888 country children paid \$114,000 in tuition to send their children to city and town schools, 3,932 to grade schools and 5,956 to high schools. In 1905, the number of young Iowans living in districts maintaining high schools of two or more years comprised only

<sup>34</sup> *Proceedings, IaSTA*, December 31, 1895-January 2, 1896, 139-140; *Biennial Report, IaDPI*, 1904-1905, pt. 1, 20-21.

<sup>35</sup> *Biennial Report, IaSPI*, 1888-1889, 161-163; *Proceedings, IaSTA*, December 27-29, 1893, 77-78.

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forty percent of the state's public school pupils.<sup>36</sup>

Secondary education in Iowa was in an even greater state of confusion and uncertainty in 1889 than elementary education. A number of cities and towns in the state established high schools during and after the Civil War but, as Superintendent J. S. Shoup of LeMars observed in 1895, the high school had not yet "attained to that degree of maturity which is necessary to give it fixed and definite limits." "What is a high school?" asked Superintendent W. A. Merrill of Stuart. "To the average villager 'high school' has a vague significance as the name of some kind of an ornamental appendage of that school system of which he is so proud—and so ignorant."<sup>37</sup>

Educators no less than the public were uncertain about the content, level, and duration of secondary education. Noting that the laws of Iowa did not define a high school, John Knoepfler asked in 1893 if it were not time for the legislature "to say that such and such studies, pursued a specified minimum length of time constitute a true high school?" A committee of the Iowa State Teachers' Association reported in 1896 that high schools were so diverse in the amount, character, and quality of their work that they defied classification. Pointing to the growing number of high school graduates and the increasing influence of the high schools, the committee stressed the need for a common course of secondary studies to enable students and the public, as well as colleges and universities, to measure the worth of high school diplomas. As it was, all high school diplomas had the same standing, whether issued by large city high schools manned by a full complement of teachers and equipped with laboratories and libraries or by the highest department of a four-room village school with one teacher.<sup>38</sup>

<sup>36</sup> *Biennial Report, IaDPI, 1904-1905*, pt. 2, 119; *Aurner*, 3: 270-271. Of the 39,000 students enrolled in Iowa high schools in 1905, 32,000 lived in the districts supporting high schools of two or more years, while 7,000 were tuition students from districts with no high school or a high school that operated less than two years.

<sup>37</sup> *Proceedings, IaSTA, December 31, 1895-January 2, 1896*, 56-57, 118; see also *Aurner*, vol. 3, pt. 5, chs. 11-18 for an overall discussion of the origin and growth of public high schools in Iowa.

<sup>38</sup> *Biennial Report, IaSPI, 1892-1893*, 25; *Proceedings, IaSTA, December 31,*

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Some Iowans were not yet prepared to recognize the high school as a legitimate part of the public school system. They charged that the high school had been "engrafted" on the public school system; that the organic school law of 1858 allowing towns of not less than 1,000 people to organize independent districts made no provision for the establishment of high schools. School officials argued, however, that the organization of high schools reflected the growing public demand for higher education and was justified by the spirit if not the letter of the law of 1858 which envisaged a comprehensive system of public schools embracing common schools, high schools, and the state university. "The high school is the crowning glory of our system of free schools," State Superintendent Oran Faville declared in 1866. "They [the high schools] are the outgrowth of the spirit of republicanism which would give to every child of the state not only the rudiments of an education, but that culture which will fit him for the higher walks of life." High schools were "the colleges of the common people," John Knoepfler avowed in 1893.<sup>39</sup>

The controversy over the legitimacy of the high school subsided as it grew in public favor. The high school had become one of Iowa's "most cherished institutions," Professor M. F. Arey of the state normal school declared in 1897. "There was a time when many feared for its continued existence, but that day has passed and now it has a well-assured future." The rapid increase in the number of high schools corroborated Arey's judgment. Whereas Henry Sabin estimated in 1889 that there were about 120 high schools in Iowa, State Superintendent John F. Riggs reported in 1905 that "not less" than 600 city, town, and village schools in the state were "doing work of high school grade." Of these, 354 offered four years of secondary studies, while 174 had three-year programs.<sup>40</sup>

The establishment of the high school as an integral part of Iowa's public school system raised troublesome questions about the meaning and purpose of secondary education. Educators be-

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1895-January 2, 1896, 9-10, 67.

<sup>39</sup>*Biennial Report, IaSPI, 1888-1889, 69-70; Biennial Report, IaSPI, 1892-1893, 25; Proceedings, IaSTA, December 31, 1895-January 2, 1896, 27.*

<sup>40</sup>*Biennial Report, IaSPI, 1888-1889, 70; Proceedings, IaSTA, December 28-30, 1897, 137; Biennial Report, IaDPI, 1904-1905, pt. 1, 18.*

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gan to realize that they must revise high school programs to meet popular aspirations and needs if high schools were indeed to be "the colleges of the common people."

The curricula of most Iowa high schools at the time were influenced more by college and university admissions requirements than by the expectations and interests of the masses. The common courses of secondary studies proposed by curriculum reformers in the 1880s and 1890s were largely academic and were designed not only to introduce order and meaning into high school programs but also to enable high school graduates to satisfy college and university entrance requirements. In 1888, for example, the Educational Council of the Iowa State Teachers' Association recommended a curriculum for four-year high schools that included Latin composition and grammar, four books of Caesar's Commentaries, four of Cicero's orations, and six books of Vergil's Aeneid; a year of Greek for students planning to study the classics in college; literature and rhetoric; various courses in mathematics, such as algebra, geometry, and trigonometry; a variety of courses in the sciences, including botany, elementary chemistry, elementary physics, physiology, physical geography, and zoology; and a miscellany of studies ranging from civics, general history, and political economy to bookkeeping, commercial arithmetic, and drawing. Completion of such a program, the Educational Council believed, would qualify high school graduates to enter college "on trial, or on probation, without further evidence of preparation."<sup>41</sup>

The academic orientation of high schools evoked a mounting chorus of protest. Critics complained that the high schools spent a disproportionate amount of time on classical studies in order to meet college and university admissions standards; that some high schools were little more than preparatory departments for colleges and universities. Preparing students for college was indeed an important function of the high schools, but

<sup>41</sup>*Biennial Report, IaSPI, 1888-1889, 70-71.* In 1896, a committee of the Iowa State Teachers' Association, which had been appointed to deal with the unification of high school programs, proposed common courses of secondary studies that were similar in content to the above recommendation of the Educational Council. *Proceedings, IaSTA, December 31, 1895-January 2, 1896, 9-14.*

their first responsibility was to the many rather than the few. The great majority of high school students were preparing not for college but to earn a living. High schools must step into the void resulting from the decline of the apprenticeship system, the traditional means of training skilled workmen. High schools must heed the growing public demand "for schools of shorthand, typewriting, bookkeeping, business, journalism, dress-making, domestic economy, agriculture, and teaching." High schools, in short, must recognize their obligation to provide the sons and daughters of farmers and laborers with the manual skills and technical knowledge which they needed to meet the demands of modern industrial society.<sup>42</sup>

Of all the problems confronting Iowa's public schools at the turn of the century, none was more serious but less understood than the health problem. Henry Sabin reported in 1889 that the public had not yet awakened to the discomfort and distress which children suffered from inadequate heating, lighting, sanitation, and ventilation. The indefatigable Sabin then provided the following classic description of the effect of such harsh and unsanitary surroundings on the health of school children:

Physicians are accustomed to charge many of the diseases incident to childhood and youth to school life. In many cases their diagnosis is correct. But, if they would carefully inspect the environments of the schools, they would often find the causes of weak eyes, of distorted spines, of unstrung nerves, of aching heads, of unnatural languor, of weakness and debility, in the impure water the children drink; in the vitiated air which they breathe; in the forced and constrained positions necessitated by ill-fitting seats; in the steep stairs which they wearily climb three or four times a day; in the light, deficient in quantity, and admitted often in the faces of the pupils, or reflected from neighboring buildings; in the method of warming, which heats the head while the feet are freezing—they would find in some or all of these the sources of ill-health, much oftener than in the

<sup>42</sup> *Biennial Report, IaSPI, 1888-1889, 72; Biennial Report, IaSPI, 1892-1893, 25; Proceedings, IaSTA, December 26-28, 1894, 39-40; Proceedings, IaSTA, December 31, 1895-January 2, 1896, 27-29, 35-36; Proceedings, IaSTA, December 27-29, 1898, 28, 70-71.* The above quotation is from the presidential address of Superintendent R. C. Barrett of Mitchell County to the Iowa State Teachers' Association in 1895.



*Iowa's first consolidated school was this township graded school at Buffalo Center, founded in 1897. The horse-drawn hacks were used for transporting the children to and from school.*

amount of hard study required of the scholars.

If they would go still further and trace the connection between the school-house well and the water-closet which stands not far removed; if they would reflect that the floors of many school-rooms are washed not oftener than once a year; that the desks, which may have been occupied by children coming from families in which some member is sick with a contagious disease, are seldom if ever cleansed; that the walls are never treated to a thorough coat of whitewash; if they would look at the heaps of rubbish and litter which accumulate under the stairs and in dark corners of the building; if they would place themselves in a position to catch some of the vile odors which come from cellars and basements, and in the country school from under the building, but which find their way up through crack and crevice to mingle with the air which children and teacher breathe,—they would no longer wonder at the mysterious outbreaks of diphtheria and scarlet fever among the children of the neighborhood.<sup>43</sup>

<sup>43</sup> *Biennial Report, IaSPI, 1888-1889, 110-111.*

Two things at least should be done to protect the health of school children, Sabin continued. (1) Teachers must be held to a "strict accountability" for the condition of their classrooms. They must realize that their responsibility for the health of their children was not limited to teaching physiology but included as well the maintenance of clean surroundings. Teacher-training programs ought to emphasize the importance of sound physical health: to demonstrate that a healthy body was as important as a healthy mind. (2) All schools ought to be inspected at least once a year "by some competent authority" to ensure that buildings, equipment, and grounds were properly cleaned, heated, lighted, and ventilated.<sup>44</sup>

SABIN's report probably did more to awaken Iowans to the importance of physical education than to improve school buildings; State Superintendent Richard C. Barrett reported in 1903 that Iowa had more than 1,000 schoolhouses that were unfit to serve "as dwelling places for children." Meanwhile, however, Iowans were coming to believe that the schools must deal with the individual needs of their children, both physical and mental. "Possibly there has been more advancement in the humane treatment of school children in the past decade than in any other direction of educational progress," President Homer H. Seerley of the state normal school said to the Iowa State Teachers' Association in 1898.

The savage spirit of physical punishment has given way to a more rational treatment of the individual, and has also induced a careful study of the child's mental and physical characteristics to such an extent that methods of management and instruction have been revolutionized and an era of love and sympathy for childhood has come which promises great things for the future American citizen.<sup>45</sup>

The 1890s were a time of soul-searching for Iowa educators. Out of the ferment of debate and discussion emerged a consensus that was to shape the future growth of the state's school system. The schools must identify with the democratic, scientific,

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 111-112; *Proceedings, IaSTA*, December 26-28, 1894, 64-65.

<sup>45</sup> *Proceedings, IaSTA*, December 27-29, 1898, 29-30; *Biennial Report, IaDPI, 1902-1903*, Thirtieth Iowa General Assembly Documents, vol. 4 (Des Moines, 1904): 81.

and technological forces of modern society. They must reach out to all segments of the population. To educate the whole people, the schools must work with other social agencies, such as the home, the church, and the workshop, to educate the whole child: "the head, the heart, and the hand," to use a recurring phrase of the time.

Educators must also work with parents and other patrons of public education to obtain the legislative reforms that were necessary to modernize the schools. These included the consolidation of school districts, public transportation of children from outlying areas to central graded schools, compulsory school attendance, higher state taxes and appropriations to support the common schools in order to equalize the educational opportunities of children and the burdens of taxpayers, state aid to high schools meeting state requirements, and centralization of the examination and licensing of teachers in the hands of the State Board of Examiners in order to raise and unify certification standards throughout the state. Educators should also encourage local school boards to establish domestic science and manual training as integral parts of their curricula.<sup>46</sup>

The forces of educational reform in Iowa were not yet well enough organized to constitute a movement. But the seeds of educational reform had been sown and needed only proper nurture to germinate and bear fruit.

<sup>46</sup>The legislative needs of the schools are widely discussed in the literature of the time but see especially the reports of the Iowa State Department of Public Instruction in 1903, 1905, and 1906.

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