

# Henry Sabin (1829–1918)

## “The Aristocracy of Character” and Educational Leadership in Iowa

CARROLL ENGELHARDT

BORN INTO A FARM FAMILY near Pomfret, Connecticut on October 23, 1829, Henry Sabin was educated in the common schools, Woodstock Academy, and Amherst College, where he earned a B.A. with honors in 1852. A teacher and principal in Connecticut, New Jersey, and Illinois before coming to Iowa in August 1871, Sabin quickly established himself in the state as an important educational leader. He served as Clinton superintendent of schools (1871–1887), president of the Iowa State Teachers' Association (1878), state superintendent of public instruction (1888–1891, 1894–1897), and chairman of the renowned National Education Association Committee of Twelve on Rural Schools (1896–1897).<sup>1</sup>

Once called the “Horace Mann of the West,” Sabin has been inexplicably neglected by historians of American education and of Iowa. This is unfortunate, since detailed biographical study demonstrates that Sabin represents a type of educational leader common in nineteenth-century America. Historians David Tyack and Elizabeth Hansot have called these leaders “managers of virtue” because they stressed character training and administrative values in their attempts to build an educational system. In the light of two types and periods of educational leadership Tyack and Hansot have identified, “the aristocracy of character” (1820–1890) and “the administrative progressives” (1890–

For assistance in preparation of this article, the author wishes to thank Verlyn Anderson, the Concordia Library, the Concordia Summer Research Program, David Danbom, and Betty Myers.

1. Iowa Department of Public Instruction, *School Report*, 1918, 6–7 (hereafter cited as *IaDPI, Report*); *Proceedings of the Iowa State Teachers' Association*, 1918, 36, 68–72 (hereafter cited as *ISTA, Proceedings*); B. F. Gue, *Biographies and Portraits of the Progressive Men of Iowa* (Des Moines, 1899), 440–41.

1954), Sabin appears as a transitional figure who shared most characteristics of the first type and a few of the second.<sup>2</sup>

"The aristocracy of character," like Sabin, was Protestant, Anglo-Saxon, and geographically mobile. Faced with the challenge of constructing an educational system in a rural nation, Sabin and other "aristocrats of character" shared and disseminated a common school ideology composed of three intertwined sets of social beliefs: republicanism, Protestantism, and capitalism. A successful common school system, "managers of virtue" like Sabin believed, would train a virtuous citizenry, create a prosperous economy, make the United States a Christian nation, and ensure the success of the republican experiment. Armed with the gospel of the common school ideology, "the aristocracy of character" used the techniques of religious revivalism to raise popular consciousness and attract support for constructing a common school system. Sabin also possessed some characteristics of "the administrative progressives." Like them, he made education his lifelong profession and pioneered rational administrative procedures to increase efficiency of the schools. But Sabin did not share their passion for science and problem-solving by experts.<sup>3</sup>

Henry Sabin's long career in Iowa education reveals much about the values that "the aristocracy of character" wanted the common schools to inculcate as well as the techniques they employed in building an educational system. Sabin was essentially a revivalist for education. He traveled throughout the state preaching the common school ideology to generate local support for schools and for a more centralized state administration. Much of his urban-inspired vision for the development of the state's rural schools was ahead of its time; but Sabin articulated an agenda for centralized administration, higher standards of teacher certification, compulsory education, citizenship training, and rural school improvement that subsequent state educa-

2. E. L. Sabin to C. R. Aurner, 13 February 1928, C. R. Aurner's Letters Concerning a Projected Life of Henry Sabin, Special Collections, University of Iowa Libraries, Iowa City; David Tyack and Elisabeth Hansot, *Managers of Virtue: Public School Leadership in America, 1820-1980* (New York, 1982), 5-6, 45-49, 94, 106-7.

3. Tyack and Hansot, *Managers of Virtue*, 45-49, 94, 106-7. See also Carl F. Kaestle, *Pillars of the Republic: Common Schools and American Society, 1780-1860* (New York, 1983), ch. 5; and Lawrence A. Cremin, *American Education: The National Experience, 1783-1876* (New York, 1982), 2, 5, 17, 57, 66-67, 148, 395.

tional leaders eventually enacted in the twentieth century. Yet, even though his successors carried out many of the reforms he advocated, Sabin expressed concern about the new generation. His anxiety reflects a vague awareness that he stood at the juncture of two types of educational leadership. At the end of Sabin's career "the aristocracy of character" was passing from the scene. They were succeeded by "the administrative progressives," a new generation of "managers of virtue."

WHEN SABIN ARRIVED in August 1871, Clinton, incorporated in 1859, already had a population of 5,100. It is possible that Horace Williams, a railroad capitalist engaged in building what later became the Chicago & North Western Railroad and in developing Clinton, influenced Sabin to settle in a city founded by railroad promoters. Blessed with excellent east-west rail connections and its location on the Mississippi River, Clinton became a growing center for the lumber industry and the marketing of cattle and grain. Recognized in the 1880s as the largest lumber-producing city in the world, Clinton also boasted the Union Iron Works and sash, canning, spring bed, and bottling factories. The sawmills and related industries created seventeen millionaires by the end of the nineteenth century and attracted a large number of German and Irish immigrants.<sup>4</sup>

The third man in as many terms to hold the position, Sabin faced an uncertain situation as the new superintendent of schools. Despite the rapid turnover among his predecessors, Sabin survived as superintendent for seventeen years. One factor in his remarkable longevity is that he and his wife, Esther, quickly became involved in community activities. Henry served as vestryman of St. John's Episcopal Church, and Esther worked in the Episcopal Industrial Society and the American Educational Aid Association. In addition, Henry was a lodge member and officer and was active in the Clinton County Bible Society.<sup>5</sup>

A second reason for Sabin's long service in Clinton is that his administrative skill as "a manager of virtue" attracted public sup-

4. E. LePrevost to C. R. Aurner, 2 April 1928, Aurner's Letters; *Clinton Age*, 2 July 1880; Leland L. Sage, *A History of Iowa* (Ames, 1974), 98-99, 113, 190; Federal Writers' Project, *Iowa: A Guide to the Hawkeye State* (New York, 1938), 199-200.

5. *Clinton Age*, 21 April 1876, 4 July 1879, 16 January 1880, 10 July 1885.

port. Remembered in later years as a man who lived with such great regularity that he would complain and fuss if meals were not ready right on the minute, Sabin administered Clinton schools with similar precision. He quickly took charge. Within weeks of his appointment he recommended that the school board engage a high school teacher and build a good high school. Throughout the first year he scheduled bimonthly teacher meetings for instruction and consultation. Although Sabin thought most "teachers have shown a commendable zeal in their work," he suggested that "an occasional visit from members of the Board . . . would perhaps stimulate a few of them to greater exertions." In addition, Sabin encouraged broad support of the schools by inviting parents and the public to attend examinations at the end of each term and by publishing school reports and other school news in local newspapers. Sabin always looked for ways to demonstrate that free schools were worth the tax dollars invested. During his first year, Sabin also modified the school rules and course of study. Under the new rules Sabin required each teacher to provide him with a program of daily exercises, which was not to be changed without the superintendent's consent. The course of study was revised so that the first years of school gave students, in Sabin's words, "the highest degree of personal cultivation and the greatest amount of practical knowledge possible under the circumstances."<sup>6</sup>

Apparently, Sabin's efforts in systematic administration were crowned with success. A local newspaper called him "the best organizer, as well as the most systematic one our schools have ever had." Newspaper accounts made frequent reference to the schools "running with their usual systematic harmony" and reported that "everything in and about them is moving along like clock-work." Such praise was no small achievement for a man who was remembered as having a "blunt," "abrupt," "nervous and irritable" personality, although this gruff exterior was assumed to hide a "tender and kind heart." Perhaps because he "always had a twinkle in his eye" for school children, neither they nor teachers found Sabin's seeming gruffness offensive.<sup>7</sup>

6. *Clinton Age*, 15 January, 16 August, 20 September, and 12 December 1872; E. LePrevost to C. R. Aurner, 2 April 1928, Aurner's Letters.

7. *Clinton Age*, 6 September 1872, 28 March 1873, 6 March 1874; E. L. Miller to C. R. Aurner, 28 February 1938, and Lilian Goodwin Peck to C. R. Aurner, 20 March 1928, Aurner's Letters.

School politics in Clinton did not always operate as harmoniously as the schools. During the mid-1870s Sabin and the board had to fend off demands from the city's large German population for German instruction in elementary school. The board, in accordance with Sabin's wishes, denied the petition, reasoning that to teach German in the elementary grades would be contrary to the principles on which the common schools were founded: "to provide a liberal English education to all nationalities alike at public expense." Moreover, it would be too expensive to provide language instruction for all ethnic groups of the city. Although defeated in their demand, the power of the Germans in Clinton was reflected by continued teaching of German in the high school.<sup>8</sup>

Rising school costs during the hard times of the 1870s provoked a sharp public debate in 1878. There were demands for the reduction of teacher salaries and the discontinuance of the high school. The high school survived, and although monthly teacher salaries were maintained, annual salaries were reduced in effect by shortening the school year from ten to nine months. Similarly, Sabin's annual salary was cut from \$1,800 to \$1,650.<sup>9</sup>

Despite these difficulties, Sabin, during his tenure, presided over a remarkable growth of the Clinton schools. The number of buildings increased from 2 to 7, teachers from 26 to 44, pupils enrolled from 1,266 to 2,419, high school graduates from 3 in 1874 to 20 in 1887. Moreover, working for a city school system made Sabin and his colleagues the elite of Iowa teachers, most of whom were poorly paid employees of country schools. In the 1880s Sabin's annual salary was \$1,900, and the average monthly salary for the staff of forty-four female teachers was \$45. Both were considerably above the state average monthly compensation of \$26.28 for females and \$31.16 for males.<sup>10</sup>

During his Clinton years Sabin lectured extensively and engaged in many professional activities. He gave the annual commencement address in Clinton, and was in demand as a com-

8. *Clinton Age*, 11 August 1876.

9. *Clinton Age*, 22 March, 28 June, and 30 August 1878.

10. "Annual Report of Supt. Sabin," 4 December 1887, Henry Sabin Scrapbook, Edwin L. Sabin Papers, Special Collections, University of Iowa Libraries, Iowa City; *Clinton Age*, 13 January 1882 and 5 March 1886.

mencement speaker in neighboring towns. He also spoke at high school benefits, church heritage days, and as part of the Young Men's Association lecture series. Sabin's lecture topics were frequently historical—"Puritan Trials," "The Discovery of the Mississippi Valley," "The Life of Aaron Burr"—but his commencement addresses touched on current events. Whether he spoke on a historical or current topic, Sabin, in keeping with the values stressed by "the aristocracy of character," always focused on character as a fundamental factor in success or failure. He illustrated his lectures with material gleaned from newspaper reading on the subjects of education, history, politics, and religion. Generally well attended, Sabin's lectures were, according to the *Clinton Age*, "excellent productions" based on "careful study" and delivered in a manner "concise, compact, and at times elegant."<sup>11</sup>

Sabin's work as a community lecturer flowed naturally into his professional activities. Each summer he worked at normal institutes in Clinton and neighboring counties. These two- to four-week institutes were the principal method of training public school teachers in the nineteenth century. As David Tyack and Elisabeth Hansot have emphasized, institutes were an important forum for "the aristocracy of character" as they carried on their common school crusade. Institutes followed the revival model, beginning and ending with prayer and hymns, with "the sermon" delivered by educational revivalists who attempted to convert teachers to their vision of educational salvation. Sabin organized and conducted institutes, taught grammar and didactics, and frequently delivered his historical lectures as edifying evening entertainment. Newspaper accounts often praised Sabin for his skills as organizer, teacher, and lecturer.<sup>12</sup>

Institutes were only part of Sabin's professional work. He early became active in educational associations, another important instrument "the aristocracy of character" used to carry on their educational crusade. In addition to regular attendance at annual meetings of the Iowa State Teachers' Association (ISTA) and the National Education Association (NEA), he served as

11. Henry Sabin Scrapbook, Edwin L. Sabin Papers; *Clinton Age*, 21 March and 17 October 1873, 20 February 1874, 6 August 1875, 18 and 25 February 1876, 15 June 1877, 26 December 1879, 15 June 1883.

12. See, for example, *Clinton Age*, 13 August 1875 and 10 June 1879. Tyack and Hansot, *Managers of Virtue*, 48-49.

president of the Association of Principals and City Superintendents in 1877 and president of the ISTA in 1878, and in 1884 was Iowa general manager in charge of the state educational exhibit for the NEA. Given his many activities it is not surprising that Sabin would complain in an 1886 letter to a close friend, "they give me no time. I go into my regular work more tired than I was when we closed in June." Sabin had been at institutes all summer, had yet to finish his annual school report, and had an article due for a professional journal.<sup>13</sup>

As an educational speaker and author Sabin used the lecture platform and the press to spread the common school ideology and to arouse public support for the common schools. In articles and addresses published and presented in the 1870s and 1880s Sabin articulated for educators and the public his conception of the social functions of public education, the role of the schools in training character, and the contributions of the new education to improving public schools. Sabin, like most educators comprising "the aristocracy of character," perceived an intimate connection between religion, morality, and citizenship. In his articles and addresses, Sabin, an active and devout Episcopalian, insisted that good citizenship required instruction in morality, and that sound morality rested on Christian religion. Throughout his educational career in Iowa, Sabin favored perpetuating in the common schools a religious atmosphere, a kind of Protestant middle ground between sectarianism and secularism, as a requisite for good citizenship and social order.<sup>14</sup>

Sabin proclaimed the unity of knowledge, science, and religion in an 1874 commencement address delivered to an overflowing crowd at Clinton's first high school graduation. Rejecting the religion of sects and creeds, he maintained that there is a "broader religion proclaimed in . . . 'God is love;' a purer Christianity whose divine founder went about doing good. This is the religion which is the companion of knowledge and science."

13. *Clinton Age*, 18 May 1877 and 29 February 1884; Sabin to Seerley, 10 September 1886, Homer H. Seerley Letters, Special Collections, University of Northern Iowa Main Library, Cedar Falls.

14. Tyack and Hansot, *Managers of Virtue*, 46-47. For fuller treatment of these issues, see Carroll Engelhardt, "Religion, Morality, and Citizenship in the Public Schools: Iowa, 1858-1930," in *Ideas in America's Cultures: From Republic to Mass Society*, ed. Hamilton Cravens (Ames, 1982), 45-57.

And this was the religion that ought to be present in the public schools because it provided the foundation for republican stability and capitalist accumulation. By developing the Christian character of pupils, "the free school system . . . proffered to the lowly children of poverty and toil . . . the surest road to wealth, station or power" and made "one people out of many" thereby ensuring the success of republican government.<sup>15</sup>

Sabin repeated many of these themes of the common school ideology in his presidential address to the ISTA in 1878. Suggesting that "in the formation of character our schools do not exert their legitimate influence," Sabin insisted that public education needed to pay more attention to moral training in order to provide the civic education required by the state. "The state has a vital interest in the moral culture of the children," he said, "because the character of the child becomes in time the character of the state." And the character training provided by the schools, according to Sabin, had to be grounded in religion. "This is in name a Christian nation. . . . If our government has any stability, it is a stability rooted and grounded in the heart of a Christian people." Therefore, the common schools "cannot safely exalt talent above virtue, education above rectitude, knowledge above religion." If education's "whole tendency is not to lead the soul up and back to Him who gave it, it is defective in its nature, and wholly unsuited to our wants." Sabin admitted that controversial sectarian doctrines could be rightfully excluded from the public schools, but he insisted that the common moral virtues of "honor, honesty, justice, love, fear, reverence, purity, obedience, the claims of God, and right, and duty may be taught and infringe on no man's conscience."<sup>16</sup>

Sabin's presidential address proposed several reforms he would later pursue as Iowa superintendent of public instruction. First, he advocated a new style of teaching that abandoned overreliance on rote memorization and led students to do as much as possible for themselves. This kind of teaching attracted Sabin to the new education. Second, subject matter should be

15. Henry Sabin, "Knowledge, Science, and Religion" (1874), "Education" (1876), and "Character" (1877), in *Talks to Young People* (Des Moines, 1899), 9-10, 13-14, 26, 29.

16. ISTA, *Proceedings*, 1878, in *Iowa Normal Monthly* 2 (January 1879), 177, 182-83.



revised in the primary grades to give the best possible education for pupils who did not remain in school for the grammar grades. Sabin recommended reading, writing, and geography for practical use. This was in accord with Sabin's view that common schools should eliminate the slavery of ignorance and thus "bring to the home of the laborer hope, courage, freedom." As part of this effort Sabin spoke of the need to improve country schools. He thought county courses of study that unify and simplify work by giving general guidelines to stimulate rural teachers were a necessary step in the right direction. Third, public high schools should be established to prepare pupils for university study. And, fourth, common schools must not neglect the character of pupils; they must be committed to moral training.<sup>17</sup>

Responding to the labor unrest and social turmoil of the 1870s and 1880s, Sabin's addresses often emphasized work and obedience to the law as important elements in character training. Sabin thought the schools could serve society "by impressing daily upon the minds of the children the worth and dignity of labor." Pupils should be taught "to seek for work as one of the greatest blessings God has bestowed upon man." To accomplish these ends, he advocated enlarging the elementary school curriculum by introducing the manual arts. This would put the schools "into closer touch with the activities of daily life" and thus make them more accessible to many children. In addition to teaching pupils to value labor, the common schools ought to train them in obedience because "obedience to law is the measure of every public and private virtue" and "the only hope for the future . . . against the incoming tide of lawlessness which threatens to undermine our republican institutions." Sabin linked the developing disobedience he perceived in American society to a growing irreverence and impiety in modern art and literature. To counter these tendencies, Sabin said, the schools must "cultivate, by all possible means, in the mind of the child, a taste for better reading." This would "induce a high ideal, a lofty standard for culture, and at the same time prevent the love for the low, trashy reading of the day."<sup>18</sup>

17. *Ibid.*, 177-81.

18. *Ibid.*, 184-85; Sabin, "Respect for Authority" (1886) and "The Work of Life" (1891), in *Talks to Young People*, 69-70, 84-85.

In many articles and addresses Sabin attempted to disseminate information about the new education to Iowa teachers. He thought the information would help them develop better techniques of character training. Derived from the teachings of Rousseau, Pestalozzi, and Froebel, the new education taught "that the teacher will best govern his school who can enter most heartily into the everyday life of his pupils" and teach "the child through natural means." The principal contribution of the new education, Sabin believed, would be shifting the focus from an overly exclusive emphasis on intellectual training to a concern for "how can we best fit the child for the duties of social life and citizenship." The new education, he continued, should teach children about personal health and cleanliness, patriotism, morals, religion, and "the mutual dependence existing between capital and labor." Sabin insisted that moral training, based on the principles of the new education, would enable children from all classes "to rise from penury to plenty, from ignorance to knowledge, from vice to virtue." He repeatedly warned against a narrow definition of practical education that closes off doors of opportunity to the son of a laborer. For Sabin a truly practical education was one that left a child the "master of himself" and taught him the value of hard work. In Sabin's view "there is no lesson taught in our schools so practical and yet so gratifying to the pupil as the consciousness that he has overcome some difficulty by his own unaided efforts."<sup>19</sup> Thus Sabin's advocacy of the new education reiterated the fundamental beliefs of the common school ideology preached by "the aristocracy of character": the new education trained virtuous citizens who, by their patriotism, ensured republican stability and who, by their adoption of the Protestant work ethic, enjoyed capitalist success.

"NOT A MAN of gushing sociability" and "rather retiring in his disposition," Sabin was nevertheless an effective speaker.<sup>20</sup> His

19. Henry Sabin, "The New Education," *Central School Journal* 2 (September 1879), 153-54; idem, "The New American Education," *Central School Journal* 3 (June 1880), 105-6. See also an address by Sabin, "The Quincy Methods," in ISTA, *Proceedings*, 1880, in *Iowa Normal Monthly* 4 (January 1881), 171-72.

20. "Editorial," *Iowa Normal Monthly* 13 (August 1889), 3-4; IaDPI, *Report*, 1918, 7.

addresses as Clinton superintendent and his activities in the ISTA made him a recognized educational leader in the state and earned him the Republican nomination for state superintendent of public instruction in 1887. Perceived as an educator rather than a politician, Sabin nevertheless was nominated five times and elected four in the next decade. Sabin's supporters waited a long time for this electoral success, which Sabin himself appears to have neither sought nor desired.

The favorable newspaper reaction to Sabin's ISTA presidential address led immediately to mention of him as a good Republican candidate to replace C. W. von Coelln as state superintendent. Clinton County Republicans resolved to support Sabin's nomination at the state convention. Despite this support Sabin was unable to unseat the incumbent, von Coelln, who was renominated. Clinton County Republicans again supported Sabin at the 1881 convention, and again the Sabin forces were unsuccessful, as John W. Akers, Cedar Rapids superintendent, won the nomination. A Clinton newspaper rather sourly explained that "church is more powerful than state, and the church carried off the prize." Because Methodism was closely identified with the Republican party, Akers, a Methodist, was nominated over Sabin, an Episcopalian.<sup>21</sup>

Given Republican dominance in Iowa politics during the 1880s, nomination meant election. Because state superintendents traditionally served three terms, moreover, Sabin supporters realized they would not have another chance to elect their man until 1887. With the withdrawal of Akers in that year, Sabin, according to the *Iowa State Register*, became "the available man." The office held few attractions for Sabin, so he decided not to be a candidate. Still, although he "disliked the whole thing," he allowed his name to be used to prevent nomination of a candidate he opposed for unknown reasons. However reluctant his candidacy, Sabin was nominated and became the first person from Clinton to be elected to state office. His plurality of almost one thousand votes in Clinton County, normally a Democratic stronghold, indicates the re-

21. *Clinton Age*, 3, 24 January, 6 June 1879, 24 June, 1 July 1881. On Methodism and Republicanism in Iowa, see Leland L. Sage, *William Boyd Allison: A Study in Practical Politics* (Iowa City, 1956), 106, 110.

spect Sabin had earned during his long tenure as city superintendent.<sup>22</sup>

Sabin's nomination and election set the pattern for his "biennial anxiety" over renomination and reelection during the next decade. As election year approached, Sabin's correspondence with his good friend, Homer H. Seerley, president of Iowa State Normal School, reflected his political worries. Sabin frequently wished he "was out of this thing," but he was determined to "stay in it until I am convinced that I am not wanted any more here." However distasteful Sabin found the politics of the state superintendency, he thought that "I have succeeded as well as anyone ever did in the office." Despite his often expressed aversion to politics, it pained Sabin to lose, as he did in the unusual Democratic victory of 1891. Writing to Seerley, Sabin blamed his defeat on "Rum and Boodle," which "had bought up conscience of the state." The disgusting situation left him "sorry for Iowa." Nevertheless, Sabin was again eager for renomination in 1893 if "the nomination should come . . . with any degree of unanimity," but, he vowed, "I will not go into a scramble in order to get it." Sabin then "scrambled" successfully; he was renominated after a stubborn contest in which, fortunately, he wrote, the opposition was "very gentlemanly and . . . left no unpleasant feeling." After his relatively anxiety-free renomination in 1895, Sabin, "heartily sick of politics and . . . glad to be free of them," was not a candidate in 1897 and did not seek support. His desire for renomination, however, is indicated by his statement that he would not refuse the nomination for an unprecedented sixth term if the schools, teachers, and party needed him. It was not offered, so Sabin retired from the office which, according to his friend Seerley, he had served so well for so long with so little recognition.<sup>23</sup>

As state superintendent of public instruction, Sabin played a key role in a campaign by Iowa educators to arouse an indifferent or hostile public to the need for educational reform. At that time 12,088 out of Iowa's 12,879 public schools

22. Sabin to Seerley, 8 and 15 August 1887, Homer H. Seerley Letters; *Clinton Age*, 11 and 18 November 1887.

23. Sabin to Seerley, undated, 20 April and 5 November 1891, 31 July and 17 August 1893, 24 May 1897; and Seerley to Supt. O. C. Magee, 2 July 1897, Homer H. Seerley Letters.

were rural and ungraded. Organized in a myriad of small districts, those one-room country schools reflected the state's agricultural economy and the prevailing, deeply held belief that education ought to be locally controlled, with a minimum of state supervision. To correct what they perceived to be the serious shortcomings of rural education—the inefficiency and inadequate tax base of small districts, poor buildings and lack of equipment, poorly trained and inexperienced teachers—professional educators like Sabin advocated consolidation of small districts, increased centralized administration with improved professional supervision, and expanded educational opportunity for all children.<sup>24</sup> These administrative reforms, inspired by the apparent efficiency of urban educational models, were intended to make country schools more efficient instruments for training character and citizenship as required by the common school ideology.

“Determined to work persistently to promote the interest of the common school,” Sabin attempted “to create an educational revival throughout the state.” He chose the role of educational revivalist from conviction, but the limited staff and powers of the office also dictated the choice. Sabin's staff consisted of himself, a deputy, and a stenographer; his powers were limited to record keeping, assisting with teachers' institutes, interpreting school laws, making reports, and general supervision of county superintendents and the common schools. Without extensive formal power, the state superintendent was forced to rely on his own character and personality to secure compliance of county superintendents and local districts with his educational policies. By adopting the role of an evangelist for education, Sabin was able to arouse support for his proposals. Little implemented in the 1890s due to the stubborn resistance of local-minded farmers, Sabin's administrative recommendations contributed to a decade-long discussion that set an agenda and developed support for statewide educational reforms implemented during the early twentieth century.<sup>25</sup>

24. Keach Johnson, “Elementary and Secondary Education in Iowa, 1890–1900: A Time of Awakening, Part I,” *Annals of Iowa* 45 (Fall 1979), 89–91, 93, 101–2.

25. Sabin to Seerley, 8 November 1893, Homer H. Seerley Letters; Sabin to E. E. Mack, 6 January 1894, Official Correspondence of the State Superin-

Sabin's concern for character was exhibited in his conduct of the office and in his biennial reports to the Iowa General Assembly. When he was seeking to appoint a deputy superintendent, Sabin insisted that the man must be "clean in every sense of the word": honest, reliable, and "moral," which meant no tobacco, alcoholic drink, or obscene stories. The selection of Ira C. Kling, an experienced teacher and county superintendent from Mason City and former deputy superintendent under C. W. von Coelln, met Sabin's exacting standards and won general approval throughout the state.<sup>26</sup>

In his biennial reports, Sabin, the educational evangelist, emphasized the importance of character by preaching the common school ideology of republicanism, Protestantism, and capitalism. Sabin's reports, like his earlier articles and addresses, adopted the premise that citizenship education required training in moral virtue, and that moral training, to be effective, must be based upon religious belief. To further citizenship, therefore, the public schools should teach the common moral virtues accepted by all sects: "temperance, regularity and promptness in meeting business engagements, honesty in dealing with others, reverence, purity, truthfulness and obedience, respect for law, the sanctity of an oath." These virtues, Sabin maintained, "are the foundation of that practical religion which alone makes this life endurable," and which, "by teaching the child the brotherhood of men enables him more fully to comprehend the fatherhood of God." The common moral virtues could be inculcated through flag ceremony, civics and history teaching, temperance instruction (as required by Iowa law), the example of a moral teacher, the order and discipline of a well-regulated school, and reading the Bible as an opening exercise. Sabin was pleased that the Bible was read in the

---

tendent of Public Instruction, State Historical Society of Iowa, Des Moines; Tyack and Hansot, *Managers of Virtue*, 18, 50-51; Richard N. Smith, "Iowa Department of Public Instruction," *Education in the States: Historical Development and Outlook* (Washington, D.C., 1969), 1: 402-3; Keach Johnson, "Elementary and Secondary Education in Iowa, 1890-1900: A Time of Awakening, Part II," *Annals of Iowa* 45 (Winter 1980), 194-95.

26. Sabin to Seerley, 10 October 1887, Homer H. Seerley Letters; *Clinton Age*, 16 December 1887.

majority of Iowa schools, because it gave a religious character to instruction and thereby aided moral training.<sup>27</sup>

Iowa's school-age population, numbering 576,834 according to the census of 1890, included 5.4 percent foreign-born children and 36.9 percent children of foreign-born parents. In the face of this strong foreign influence, Sabin did several things to encourage American citizenship. He twice sent county superintendents prepared programs for Washington's Birthday and Memorial Day, and he actively promoted flag ceremony. "Every school should possess a flag," he said, "and the children should be taught to respect and honor it because it is in accordance with the promptings of that patriotic instinct which the Creator has implanted in the heart." Sabin also insisted that schools be American in tone and instruction. Elected school officers should be able to "speak, read and write the English language with reasonable facility," no teacher should be certified "who does not write and speak the English language," and "the English language should be the language of the schools." As state superintendent, Sabin ruled that the common branches must be taught in English. Foreign language could be taught only as a subject; it could not be used as the language of instruction.<sup>28</sup> Of course, Sabin's official ruling and nativist beliefs could not be imposed on all districts. County superintendents, not Sabin, controlled teacher certification, so in some ethnic neighborhoods German or some other foreign tongue may have been the language of instruction.

Because he believed that the moral and civic training provided by public schools was essential to the future well-being of republican society, Sabin naturally urged extending the benefits of free education to everyone. To this end he recommended more high schools, free textbooks, and compulsory education. Convinced that high schools raised the quality of common

27. IaDPI, *Report*, in *Iowa Legislative Documents* (hereafter cited as *Ia Leg Doc*), 1890, 2: 118-19; *ibid.*, 1896, 2: 220; *ibid.*, 1898, 2: 90; Sabin to W. C. Hewitt, 30 November 1888, and Sabin to Rev. E. E. Reed, 4 November 1896, Official Correspondence of State Superintendent.

28. U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Compendium of Eleventh Census: 1890*, Part 2, 472; IaDPI, *Report*, in *Ia Leg Doc*, 1898, 2: 111-12, 135; *ibid.*, 1896, 2: 76-77; *ibid.*, 1890, 2: 56, 58; *ibid.*, 1892, 2: 155; Sabin to Supt. O. J. Laylander, 22 March 1889 and Sabin to James Sims, 14 February 1888, Official Correspondence of State Superintendent.

schools and the people's level of intelligence, Sabin encouraged their establishment and advised state inspection to stimulate them to achieve a common required standard. He advocated a free textbook law so no children would be kept out of school because their parents were unable to provide them with books and materials. He thought free textbooks would open the public schools to the poorest students, increase attendance by 10 to 20 percent, and reduce the cost of textbooks. When the legislature in 1896 passed a law permitting districts to choose voluntarily to adopt a free textbook policy, Sabin hoped its success would convince the General Assembly to make free textbooks compulsory statewide.<sup>29</sup>

Although Sabin said that a free textbook law would greatly increase attendance, he still advocated a compulsory attendance law because he believed universal public schooling provided the most effective prophylactic against dangerous social tendencies of the day. Sabin was alarmed that several thousand children in Iowa cities were not attending any school. He feared that these "children growing up in ignorance, which is a prolific source of crime" would "become a perpetual menace to the safety and peace of the community in which they live." In addition, "an ignorant populace, armed with the ballot, is the most dangerous enemy republican institutions can have." Sabin therefore recommended that children be compelled to attend "some approved school until they can read and write fairly good English; until they know something of the government of which they are to be a part; until they have developed the aim and spirit of an American citizen." This education should be available not only for native-born whites and European immigrants, but also for Tama Indian youth so that they "may be taught at least the rudiments of an English education and trained in the habits of industry and thrift."<sup>30</sup>

29. Henry Sabin, "Address by Superintendent of Public Instruction," in ISTA, *Proceedings*, 1895-96, 67-68; IaDPI, *Report*, in *Ia Leg Doc*, 1890, 2: 95; *ibid.*, 1892, 2: 95; *ibid.*, 1898, 2: 136; Sabin to Hon. C. C. Tyndal, 29 February 1896, Official Correspondence of State Superintendent.

30. IaDPI, *Report*, in *Ia Leg Doc*, 1890, 2: 99-101; *ibid.*, 1892, 2: 95; *ibid.*, 1896, 2: 193; *ibid.*, 1898, 2: 136-38; Henry Sabin, "Address by Superintendent of Public Instruction," in ISTA, *Proceedings*, 1897, 63-64.



Sabin realized that mere expansion of educational opportunities was not enough. The quality of public schools must also be improved. To this end his reports recommended rural school reform and adoption of the new education. Kindergartens should be established, because children who were prepared for more formal learning by the work and self-activity of the kindergarten did better when they entered primary school. Kindergartens also demonstrated the benefits of child study and thereby extended the influence of the new education. Child study—possessing a more complete understanding of the true nature of children—implied development of the whole child: body (physical), brain (intellectual), and heart (moral). Influenced by the insights of child study, Sabin advocated industrial education. Combined with the intellectual training provided by the traditional curriculum, industrial education, he insisted, “will fit the child to think, to feel, to do.” Drawing, readily introduced into the common schools, provided an inexpensive way to secure the benefits of industrial education. By developing “accuracy in the use of the eye, and skill in the use of the hand,” drawing, Sabin believed, provided a very practical training, especially useful to the majority of children who dropped out of school before the eighth grade to begin work.<sup>31</sup>

Despite its potential, the new education could not be introduced effectively unless rural schools and teachers were improved. Attempting to demonstrate the need for reform, Sabin’s reports chronicled the weaknesses of rural schools: low enrollment, high tuition, impermanent organization, inadequate supervision, and inexperienced, untrained, poorly paid teachers. To correct some of these problems Sabin in 1890 and 1891 prepared and distributed to county superintendents a *Handbook for Iowa Teachers*. Designed to be practical and containing materials that “teachers ought to know and teach in their schools,” the *Handbook* was published because Sabin perceived “the necessity of unifying and vivifying the work in the country schools.” Although ninety-five county superintendents reported that they had introduced this course, in 1891 Sabin unsuccessfully urged legislation to make the state course of study obligatory for coun-

31. IaDPI, *Report*, in *Ia Leg Doc*, 1890, 2:115–17; *ibid.*, 1892, 2: 29–30; *ibid.*, 1898, 2: 130–31.

try schools. Such legislation, in his opinion, would have provided a system to unify, direct, control, and stimulate the rural schools. Although the *Handbook* was allowed to lapse under a Democratic superintendent (1892–1893), Sabin prepared a new edition in 1895 because “it was one of the most useful publications that we ever had from the department.”<sup>32</sup>

Improved rural school supervision was another proposed reform. Sabin urged the adoption of legislation to reform the office of county superintendent to make it nonpartisan, to establish educational and moral qualifications, to increase the salary, to lengthen the term of office, and to enlarge its powers. To hold office, Sabin said, county superintendents should have teaching experience in the common schools and should possess a state certificate or diploma from some reputable college. County superintendents should be empowered to audit annually the books of district treasurers, to report teachers without certificates to the county attorney, and to investigate and report to legal authorities any religious or sectarian instruction given in the schools. Sabin did succeed in securing one small change during his tenure as state superintendent. In 1898 he noted that the change in Iowa law requiring county superintendents to hold a first grade certificate from the state board was a step in the right direction.<sup>33</sup>

Sabin addressed the problems of teacher training in his reports and in the first annual state superintendent’s address to the ISTA convention in 1894. He recommended creating a second state normal school, certifying college graduates, and establishing both chairs of teaching and one or two year programs for country schoolteachers at Iowa Agricultural College and private colleges. In 1895 Sabin recommended state standardization of Iowa high schools so they might provide normal training courses for country schoolteachers. He also worked to improve the quality of teachers’ institutes, which remained the primary means of teacher training. He revised the graded course of study of insti-

32. *Ibid.*, 1890, 2: 75; *ibid.*, 1892, 2: 36–38; Sabin to Principal George Chandler, 2 May 1890; Sabin to Colonel Abernathy, 30 August 1890; and Sabin to Professor D. L. Newkirk, 2 February 1895, *Official Correspondence of State Superintendent*.

33. IaDPI, *Report*, in *Ia Leg Doc*, 1890, 2: 52–55; *ibid.*, 1892, 2: 23–25; *ibid.*, 1898, 2: 113.

tutes, later reporting that most Iowa counties had received the course with favor and were guided by its requirements. He recommended state licensing of institute teachers in order to exclude incompetent instructors. To improve the quality of rural school teaching, he urged that no person under eighteen years of age be allowed to teach; that township boards be empowered to hire teachers for an entire year; and that the state board of examiners be allowed to certify, upon inspection and under fixed conditions, graduates of normal training courses in private schools. Thus Sabin took a twofold approach to the problem of improving rural school teaching: he advocated higher certification standards at the same time that he attempted to place within the reach of teachers the means of attaining those qualifications.<sup>34</sup>

Professional associations, Sabin believed, were one means for attaining higher certification standards. County associations of teachers, he noted, were useful because they aroused the interest and enthusiasm of rural teachers and informed them about teaching methods. Meetings of township and county associations, by bringing people into closer contact with the schools, benefited the entire community. Sabin therefore encouraged the growth of professional associations by publicizing their activities through the reports and circulars issued by the office of state superintendent. During 1895 his office printed several thousand circulars on many subjects: the NEA, child study, Iowa Library Society, school directors' convention, needed school legislation, and the rural school problem. His office also distributed 20,000 copies of *Handbook for Iowa Teachers*, *Flag Day Exercises*, and *Arbor Day Annuals*.<sup>35</sup>

Due to these efforts to improve rural education, Sabin received national recognition in 1896, when he was named chairman of the NEA Committee of Twelve to Study the Conditions of Rural Schools. Although Sabin found the chairman's task burdensome, he placed his "whole heart in that work," and even said, "if the report is a failure . . . it will be the last of me as a schoolman." It was not a failure. Much of the final report, submitted to the NEA in 1897, was written by Sabin. He also printed extracts in his 1898 report to the Iowa General Assem-

34. *Ibid.*, 1890, 2: 62, 66; *ibid.*, 1892, 2: 52, 62; *ibid.*, 1896, 2: 23; *ISTA, Proceedings*, 1894, 61-65; *ibid.*, 1895-96, 66-68.

35. *IaDPI, Report*, in *Ia Leg Doc*, 1890, 2: 85; *ibid.*, 1896, 2: 46, 73.

bly. This was fitting because Sabin had already championed in Iowa many of the committee's final recommendations, including consolidation to reduce the large number of small schools; improvement of the quality of rural school supervision by raising the qualifications of county superintendents; establishment of normal training schools with an annual short course to help raise the qualifications of untrained, immature teachers; creation of libraries and school extension; and introduction of new subjects to connect the school and home, especially the everyday life of the farm community. The Committee of Twelve report was thus an important early expression of the Country Life movement, which attempted to keep people on farms by improving the quality of rural life through advancing the quality of rural education.<sup>36</sup> Some of the report's proposals were eventually implemented in Iowa. Consolidation began during the 1890s; it stalled in the 1920s before experiencing another surge in the 1950s. Higher standards of certification for county superintendents and teachers and increased powers of supervision for a newly created Department of Public Instruction were important recommendations of the Better Iowa Schools Commission enacted by the General Assembly in 1913.

An advocate of efficient, centralized administration, Sabin anticipated a major concern of "the administrative progressives." Sabin was himself a skilled administrator who gave meticulous attention to detail. He wrote numerous letters to county superintendents trying to secure late reports, and then sent many more letters correcting or raising questions about the reports when they were finally submitted. These efforts apparently produced results. By his third term Sabin noted with satisfaction that county reports were more accurate and more prompt than ever before. Although Sabin extolled the virtues of centralized administration, he also urged caution and common sense. For example, in refusing to render a state ruling on the question of recess, Sabin wrote, "I am a great believer in the individuality of the teacher, . . . and in the individuality of the system of schools." Thus there should be no ironclad rule about recess or

36. *Ibid.*, 1898, 2: 162-63, 166-67; Sabin to Seerley, 2 December 1896, Homer H. Seerley Letters; David Danbom, "Rural Education Reform and the Country Life Movement, 1900-1920," *Agricultural History* 53 (April 1979), 463-64.

no recess; superintendents and teachers should use common sense in nonessential matters. In another case a county superintendent wanted to coerce teachers into attending the annual county institute by denying certificates to those who failed to attend. Sabin urged her to go slowly in raising standards: "exercise caution and forbearance and a great deal of common sense along with your determination."<sup>37</sup>

Sabin's annual summer speaking tour to county teachers' institutes shows how he combined administrative skill with the educational evangelism advocated by "the aristocracy of character." Letter after letter dealt with lecture arrangements. In order to maximize Sabin's appearances, a continuous line of travel, usually by rail but sometimes by horse and buggy, was arranged. Expenses were discussed: ten dollars per lecture and a room in the "best hotel in town." Finally, instructions about publicizing the lectures were sent. Enjoying a reputation as the "best educational platform man in Iowa," Sabin was anxious to use his ability and office to further a statewide educational revival. Lecturing almost daily from July 17 to August 31 in 1894, Sabin was pleased with the large audiences composed of both teachers and the public. Evidently the detailed instructions from his office to county superintendents had their desired effect. But daily lectures during hot Iowa summers were sometimes more than Sabin could stand. On occasion, "utterly exhausted," he cancelled. At other times, he complained, "I am tired," and wondered if he would "get through this month alive." But he fulfilled his duty as an educational evangelist. After all, the message of democratic education was too important to be silenced by mere fatigue. As he said in his final official address to the ISTA, "we have our orders from a higher power. We stand where God has placed us. We grow in strength, in firmness of purpose as the schools come nearer the head of the column." His faith in the divine purpose and ultimate success of his task enabled Sabin to carry on.<sup>38</sup>

37. Sabin to Seerley, 18 October 1894; Sabin to Supt. O. D. Scott, 14 November 1895; Sabin to Co. Supt. Viva Gilliland, 21 May 1896, *Official Correspondence of State Superintendent*.

38. Sabin to Seerley, 21 December 1896 and 12 February 1891, *Homer H. Seerley Letters*; Sabin to Supt. B. G. Ross, 21 August 1888; Sabin to Professor J. Breckenridge, 18 September 1894; Sabin to Supt. J. J. Crossley, 5 August

AFTER HE WAS PASSED OVER for renomination in 1897, Sabin insisted he was "not downhearted nor downcast," but was "glad to be relieved of all responsibility." Yet his doubts about the competence and honesty of his successor, R. C. Barrett, and his talk of taking employment outside the state indicate some bitterness over his defeat. The criticism of Barrett was only one of several negative comments Sabin made about the new generation of educational leaders.<sup>39</sup> He never explicitly discussed their shortcomings, but his anxiety suggests that he was vaguely aware of standing at the juncture of two types of educational leadership. Although a new generation—"the administrative progressives"—was emerging, Sabin continued to crusade for many of the goals long supported by "the aristocracy of character."

Whatever his disappointments, Sabin's enforced retirement from elected office did not mean retirement from educational work. Indeed, Sabin remained active for several years, maintaining a pace that would have exhausted a much younger person. He served as head of the department of education at Highland Park College in Des Moines. He continued lecturing and institute work in Pennsylvania, Ohio, Indiana, Nebraska, and Iowa. With his son, Elbridge, he reopened Sabin's Educational Exchange, first established in 1893. A highly successful teacher placement agency, the Exchange provided him with a satisfactory income for many years. He engaged in educational journalism, serving as an editor for *Midland Schools* (1899–1901) and the Iowa edition of the *Western Teacher* (1901). He authored two books and coauthored two others. *Talks to Young People*, published in 1899, collected his Clinton commencement addresses. *Common Sense Didactics*, which appeared in 1903, was based on Sabin's fifty years of practical experiences as an educator and specifically addressed country schoolteachers, a group that had long attracted his professional concern. Adopted by teacher reading circles in Nebraska, Kansas, Minnesota, South Dakota, and North Dakota and recommended by Chicago prin-

---

1890; Sabin to Supt. George W. Chandler, 18 August 1894; I. C. Kling to Supt. J. A. Townsley, 18 July 1896, Official Correspondence of State Superintendent; ISTA, *Proceedings*, 1897, 60.

39. Sabin to Seerley, 20 August, 5 and 13 September 1897, 2 January 1907, Homer H. Seerley Letters.

cipals to their teachers, Sabin's book was quite successful. It had a larger sale than any similar work published in twenty-five years, ranking it with a pedagogical classic of an earlier day, David Page's *Theory and Practice of Teaching* (1847 and 1885).<sup>40</sup>

*Common Sense Didactics* repeated many of the themes long advocated by "the aristocracy of character" that Sabin had enunciated in his addresses, some of which he reprinted in *Talks to Young People*, and in his reports as state superintendent. Public schools had to provide training in the common moral virtues that were the essence of all religion. Public schools accomplished moral training in several ways: efficient management, well-regulated discipline, effective government, and teaching the curriculum. Nature study, a new subject, contributed to responsible citizenship by making rural children more intelligent in farming matters and thus more contented with rural life. Hygiene, another new subject, educated children on the harmful effects of alcohol, tobacco, and narcotics, and by emphasizing that "the work of the world is done by sober men," convinced the child that "total abstinence is the only path of safety if he desires success in the business of life." The more traditional branches—reading, with selections from literary classics, civics, and history—all taught that good citizenship rests on sound morality, and that true morality is based on Christian principles.<sup>41</sup>

How history equated religion, morality, and citizenship—another favorite theme of "the aristocracy of character"—is especially evident in the two history textbooks Sabin coauthored with his sons: *The Making of Iowa* and *Early History for Young Americans*. Both books were written to draw simple, practical lessons from the lives of state and national pioneers. Both aimed to inspire children to place "a higher value on the privileges of citizens" and to instill "a more intense love of country" by developing in them "a feeling of admiration of the self-sacrifice, the heroism, and the patriotism of their forefathers." The Sabins thought the present generation's part in shaping the history of America would be well performed if "we always look for guidance to Him who never failed our fathers nor our forefathers in

40. IaDPI, *Report*, 1918, 7; Sabin to Seerley, 5 and 8 March, 22 July 1904, Homer H. Seerley Letters.

41. Henry Sabin, *Common Sense Didactics for Common School Teachers* (New York, 1903), 3, 107–29, 145–81, 209, 256, 296–329.

times of trouble, and who will not fail us if we call upon Him and try to do His will."<sup>42</sup>

Accordingly, the Sabins' history was peopled with heroes and villains. They pointed to George Washington's faithfulness, patience, bravery, and modesty amidst the trying circumstances of the American Revolution as an example to emulate. In contrast, Benedict Arnold's despicable deeds and horrible end served as a warning to all who would avoid becoming "forever contemptible and infamous in the eyes of all honest men." To betray his country Arnold "must have been of weak character, avacious, passionate, resentful and devoid of moral principle." The consequences of Arnold's act of treason were clear: "degraded he lived, deserted and lonely he died." In addition to prominent men like Washington, the Sabins praised the nameless men and women "who toiled and suffered at home, or fought and died in the field." Their example "should teach us that true success is for all who patiently, uncomplainingly, and bravely follow each day the path of duty, however humble."<sup>43</sup>

Moreover, history taught that nations, like men, suffer from evil deeds. If the United States were not "honest and thrifty at home, and did not govern with justice and kindness abroad, then will Cuba look elsewhere for protection, the Philippines pass into other hands, the trade of the Orient be lost, and our glory and our greatness likewise be gone forever."<sup>44</sup> Thus in Sabin's version of the civil religion that he would have the common schools teach, nations, like individuals, were judged by God and rewarded for their virtues and punished for their vices.

Sabin's active work ended in 1904 with his retirement from institutes, teaching, and lecturing. At age 75, Sabin decided "it is time to quit." He continued to be "the brains" at the Exchange while Elbridge attended to the details. In 1906 father and son briefly considered starting a new educational journal. Doubts about financial success ended the project. Sabin began another book, but his declining health prevented its completion. In 1913

42. Henry Sabin and Edwin L. Sabin, *The Making of Iowa* (Chicago, 1900 and 1916), 7, 280; Henry Sabin and Elbridge H. Sabin, *Early American History for Young Americans* (New York, 1904), 6-7, 10.

43. Henry Sabin and Elbridge H. Sabin, *Early American History*, 283, 323, 330, 347-48, 354, 369, 379-80.

44. *Ibid.*, 26.



he sold the Exchange and, seeking a more favorable climate, moved to California where he died March 22, 1918.

Pessimism, growing proportionately with increasing illness and inactivity, clouded Sabin's last years. He sometimes doubted his effectiveness as a preacher of morality, and, as his fellow "aristocrats of character" died, he questioned the educational leadership of the new generation. In his view, the new generation, preoccupied with salary and position, erred by neglecting morality. Sabin's doubts indicate that he was aware of a change in style of educational leadership and that he retained the educational faith by which he and his generation had lived. A 1913 letter, perhaps his last public statement on the subject, restated his lifelong belief that the common schools are necessary to the "intelligence, integrity, and moral uplift of the American people."<sup>45</sup>

45. Sabin to Seerley, 6 March 1899, 3 June 1904, and 2 January 1907; E. H. Sabin to Seerley, 22 and 25 January 1906, Homer H. Seerley Letters; Henry Sabin, "Letter," *Journal of Education* 77 (2 January 1913), 8; and *ibid.* 80 (27 August 1914), 159.

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.