THE IOWA STANDARD SCHOOL LAW

A Turning Point for Country Schools

BY WILLIAM L. SHERMAN

"Let us take a look, in imagination, at the little (once white) schoolhouse. There it stands out in the corner of some field without a fence to bound its plot of ground, no trees to afford shelter from the winds of winter or to offer shade in summer. The weeds have taken possession of much of the school yard, the cattle have been permitted to trample the grass under their feet and to destroy the trees that may have been planted by the teacher and the boys and girls on Arbor Day. The out-buildings are sometimes without doors, the worst sort of places for vice, nastiness, and evil thoughts. The school building is shaped like a boxcar with a coal shed attached to the rear and opening directly into the school room by a loose fitting door, permitting free access of cold air laden with coal dust. Desks are sometimes placed within two or three feet of the stove which stands in the center of the room; the walls are blackened with accumulation of dirt and coal soot; a poor old map or two hang on the walls."

This is how Albert M. Deyoe, Superintendent for Iowa's Department of Public Instruction (DPI), described a typical rural schoolhouse in 1912. Deyoe echoed the concerns of social critics and reformers across the nation who saw American agriculture and its rural populations as lagging behind in the nation's shift to economic efficiency and industrialization. Nor had rural schools kept pace with modernization in town and city schools. By urban standards, critics charged, rural schools suffered from failing physical plants, limited supervision, undertrained teachers, low attendance, outdated curriculum, and poor sanitation. Sociologists and educators crusaded to change rural education into a more urban model, thereby improving the lives of farm families, securing their commitment to laboring on the land, and industrializing agriculture. Indeed, the Country Life Movement, as it was called, was initiated by urban Americans and defined by urban values.

One approach for improving midwestern rural schools was pioneered in Illinois by State Superintendent of Public Instruction Alfred Bayliss in the early 1900s. His plan was simple. He would devise criteria, visit Illinois rural schools, evaluate the buildings and academic programs, and then award "diplomas" to those that qualified. His successor, Francis G. Blair, formalized the plan, writing regulations and hiring inspectors. Little did Bayliss and Blair realize that this early form of review by an outside evaluator would put into motion improvements in thousands of midwestern country schools during the next four decades.

Bayliss's and Blair's school improvement effort—

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more commonly called the standard school program—gained national recognition when the U.S. Commissioner of Education issued a bulletin about it in 1912. In 1914 George Herbert Betts and Otis Earle Hall included the program in their book *Better Rural Schools*. This exposure, plus the informal communication network among state superintendents, helped spread the idea to other midwestern states, including Iowa, Kansas, Michigan, Missouri, and Nebraska.

Meanwhile in Iowa, educators had been using another approach for improving rural schools—school consolidation. Although only 37 districts had consolidated between 1897 and 1913, by 1921 some 439 consolidations had taken place in Iowa. But not everyone believed in school consolidation. Falling farm commodity prices after World War I and the cost of new building construction and operational expenses, combined with the desire by rural Iowans to maintain local control over their children's teachers and education, stalled consolidation in Iowa.

As historian Wayne E. Fuller explains, farmers saw school consolidation as "much different from rearranging urban schools." Fuller writes, "To close a country school was to destroy an institution that held the little rural community together. It was to wipe out the one building the people of the district had in common and, in fact, to destroy the community, which, in those years, so many were trying to save and strengthen. Even more important, as far as the farmers were concerned, the destruction of their school meant that their power to set the length of the school terms, to employ their teacher, and to determine how much they would spend for education would be taken from them and given to some board far removed from their community and their control."

Another critical factor in turning farmers against consolidation was a significant increase in school taxes in a consolidated school district. As David Reynolds relates in his book *There Goes the Neighborhood*, "For an average-size farm, [the additional tax levy] represented a tax increase of $140 per year, shrinking average profits of its owner-operator to only $105 per year." Reynolds concludes that "it was an increase many farm families felt they could not afford."

Although Iowa educators would soon resume the push for consolidation of rural schools, interest now turned to an approach similar to that tried in Illinois. May E. Francis, who became a DPI supervisor of rural schools in 1919, was the chief architect of the standard school movement in Iowa. She drafted the legislation, which was approved in 1919, and then wrote the regulations to implement the new Iowa Standard School Law, which went into effect for the 1919/20 school year.

As supervisor of rural schools, Francis visited more than 1,800 one-room schools and worked closely with county superintendents, who were responsible for carrying out the standard school evaluations. These minimum requirements dealt with teaching, general equipment and seating, heating, lighting, ventilation, water supply, library, care of grounds, and fire protection. A school that scored 80 points on a 100-point checklist qualified as a "standard school" and received $6 of state aid per student (based on the number of students in attendance for at least six months of the school year). Thus, a school averaging 15 students would receive $90 of state aid for that year.

Half of that aid was to supplement the teacher's salary. A $45 increase for the school year—essentially a bonus—for a teacher of 15 students was significant, given that this could be nearly a 5 percent increase for a teacher with at least two years' experience and training beyond high school. As Francis pointed out in her 1924 DPI biennial report, the salary supplement allowed "the country school to offer at least ONE other inducement in its attempt to keep some of the best teachers in the rural schools instead of allowing the towns to take them all."

The other half of the standard school's state aid was to be used to purchase equipment and supplies. Again, for a qualifying school with average attendance of 15, that yearly supplement of $45 could buy essential items in 1920: 15 desks and a set of 8 pull-down wall maps, for example; or an 18-inch globe in a stand, a 10-gallon crockery water jar with bubbler attachment, a fire extinguisher, an American flag, and portraits of Washington, Lincoln, and General Pershing.

A final incentive was the oval brass plate that read "IOWA STANDARD SCHOOL." Many qualifying schools displayed them proudly over their front doors. Some can still be found on rural schools today—including Antioch School (in Jones County), Lancaster School (Keokuk County), Hoosier Row School (Warren County), and relocated schools in Lake Mills (Winnebago County) and Massena (Cass County).

The standard school law remained in place for the next 29 years. Aside from consolidation, it became Iowa's first statewide school improvement program. It marked the first attempt in Iowa to develop statewide voluntary standards. And it provided Iowa's first state funding earmarked for local schools based on student enrollment. Up to that point, schools were financed exclusively with local property taxes.

The law proved to be a pathway to progress for