THUMBNAIL HISTORY OF PUBLIC EDUCATION IN CALIFORNIA

The framers of California's first Constitution in 1849 set the pattern for the state's role in the education of its citizens.

Meeting in Monterey, they debated hotly the theory of public education, finally deciding in its favor. The result was constitutional creation of the post of Superintendent of Public Instruction, a job to be filled by statewide vote.

That didn't end the debate, and the battle over public education continued down through California history. Only four years after adoption of the 1849 Constitution, Governor John Bigler asked the Legislature (1853) to abolish the superintendency.

Let the clerk of the Supreme Court handle school affairs in his spare time, Bigler argued, but the Legislature would have none of it. Thereafter, superintendents led the fight for better public schools.

Beginning with Judge John G. Marvin of Sonora (1851), the superintendents helped build the foundations of today's public school system aided by allies in the Legislature and public support.

Early recognition was given the principles of local administration and state aid to local schools (1851). Later that same year the first free public school opened in San Francisco, and within 12 months, the city had seven schools in session with 791 children on the rolls.

Each year the superintendent went before the Legislature asking more tax support for public schools, longer school years (the first were three months in every 12), and high schools. An early superintendent pressed for and received funds for the first state normal school (1862) to provide trained teachers (thereby laying the groundwork for today's state college system).

State responsibility for uniform textbook series and courses of study (1866) led to compulsory school attendance for children 8 to 14 (1874) and guaranteed state aid for each school based on the number of children in each district (1874)

The fight for high schools was a long one, and not until 1902 did Californians vote annual state funds for them. A year later the first class for the deaf (1903) set the precedent for such special local classes for the handicapped. The California School for the Deaf had been founded in 1860, however, to provide a residential school for the deaf and blind.

In 1911 the law was changed so local districts received state aid only for children in school, instead of all children living in the district. Textbooks became free (1912) and local school boards were given the task of setting their own budgets and taxes (1921).

Through the early decades of statehood, California's state department of education was the superintendent's notebook. Gradually the state school chief added an assistant or two and a secretary. As late as World War One, however, Superintendent Edward Hyatt's wife was his chief deputy.

As this small group grew, it more frequently was called the department of education. In 1913 commissioners of elementary, secondary and vocational education were appointed, but not until 1921 was the State Department of Education officially organized. Since then it has been reorganized three times (1927, 1946 and 1961).

The State Board of Education was created three years (1852) after the superintendency. In its infancy it contained the Governor, Superintendent and Surveyor General. In following decades it changed composition and powers several times, emerging in 1927 as we know it today.

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