

Are Public Schools in Crisis?

No, they are not,” argues William Galston, director of the Institute for Philosophy and Public Policy.* Yet he points out that too many students in rural areas are not completing high school. Too many receive high school diplomas without mastering the basics. Too many are ill prepared for higher education or technical training. Congress, state legislators, and local leaders are all debating ways to improve the schools. Yet there is nothing really new about this, Historian Robert Frenz argues. A backward look reveals similar concerns in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Frenz’s inquiry focuses on a number of strategies, e.g., legislation, the founding of normal schools and a state board of education, the election of superintendents of public instruction, school inspections, and data gathering. Perhaps the most memorable is an innovative effort called the Standard School Program. Frenz argues that this program, which evolved over time, was a major state-wide effort to improve all the country schools of Illinois.

—Eds.

School Improvement and the Illinois Standard School Program

Robert W. Frenz

Introduction

School improvement and education standards are again “hot button” issues across the country. For example, New York’s mayor, Bill de Blasio, found himself in a war of words with former Mayor Michael Bloomberg, Governor Andrew Cuomo, and the business community over how much of the public education dollar to spend on charter schools. The war of words concerns whether charter schools, as publicly funded private schools, lead toward educational excellence for children often neglected by traditional public schools. Mayor de Blasio sought to reassure his opponents that he was not out to destroy charter schools, but that all children in all schools are worth saving.¹ In Wisconsin an all-out battle over the new Common Core Standards has erupted between the Democratic State Superintendent Tony Evers and the Republican-dominated legislature. Evers accused his opponents of trying to torpedo the new standards so they could rewrite the state’s curriculum to reflect their conservative ideology.² In Tennessee the debate

over the Common Core has even reignited the argument over state sovereignty versus federal power. The Tennessee State Senate approved a resolution, supported by the governor, that “expresses Tennessee’s sovereignty over education standards.”³ These contemporary responses to school reform give students and scholars reason enough to pause and look back on earlier efforts at school improvement and the reactions they engendered.

This article traces early efforts toward school improvement, with a specific focus on the Standard School Movement in Illinois. Bill Sherman and Paul Theobald have insightfully linked early twentieth-century school standardization to the Progressive Era and the Country Life Movement of the same time period. They argue that progressivism influenced “economic, political, and educational policy”; the Country Life Movement sought to keep youth on the farms and focused on rural schools.⁴ The tensions therein are where lessons can be learned.

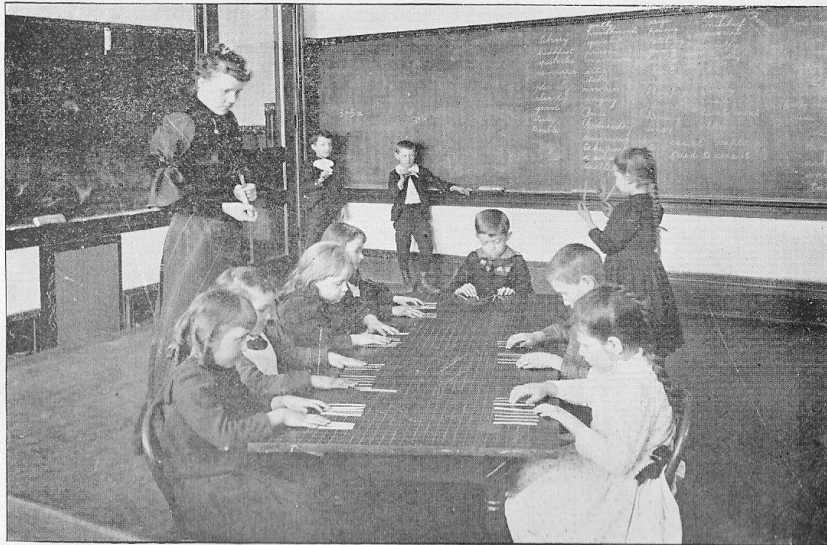
American historian Samuel Eliot Morison defined progressivism as the “belief in the perfectibility of man, and in an open society where mankind was neither chained to the past nor condemned to a deterministic future; one in which people were capable of changing their condition for better or worse.”⁵ According to Morison, progressivism began in the last two decades of the nineteenth century at state and local levels. Arguably, and in Illinois at least, the school improvement undertaking began in the second half of the nineteenth century.

Early Efforts at School Reform in Illinois

The Illinois Free School Act, mandating the opportunity for a public education for the state’s children, was signed into law in 1855. Almost immediately, so-called “subscription” schools (those in which parents of the community who could afford to, hired a teacher, and arranged for a suitable school building) and private academies closed down while tax-supported one- and two-room schoolhouses sprang up across the state. And seemingly as fast, the cry for some means of standardization was heard throughout Illinois. The Standard School Program was, at its heart, a school improvement program.

In an attempt to improve the quality of education students experienced in the thousands of new one- and two-room schools that burgeoned after 1855, the State of Illinois tried several different approaches. One of the earliest, with present-day bearing, was to improve teacher preparation. The Illinois State Normal School was founded in 1857, a mere two years after the passage of the Free School Act. Now known as Illinois State University, this is the oldest public

university in the state. The school's mission was clear: to train teachers in the accepted methods, materials, curriculum, and pedagogy of the day (Figure 1). That same year also witnessed the establishment of Illinois' first statewide Board of Education and the first election of the state superintendent of public instruction.⁶ Illinois law gave the state superintendent broad power to supervise the common schools.



PUPIL TEACHER AND CLASS, ILLINOIS NORMAL, NORMAL.

Figure 1: Student teacher and class in the Illinois State Normal School. From the *Twenty-First Biennial Report of the Superintendent of Public Instruction of the State of Illinois, July 1, 1894 – June 30, 1896* (Springfield, IL: Phillips Bros., 1896).

Bringing a degree of uniformity and enhanced quality to schools whose teachers could not afford to travel to or pay tuition at a normal school was problematic. One answer was the creation of regionally located normal schools, such as Northern Illinois State Normal School, and ultimately, county normal schools. Another solution was the annual week-long county institute. County superintendents spent months planning and preparing for this event. They arranged speakers, gave lesson demonstrations, and provided updates on laws and certificate renewal. Teachers (some barely out of the eighth grade) trained in teaching penmanship, reviewed the rules of grammar, sharpened their math skills, and learned how to conduct a proper “spell down.”

To ensure a successful and well attended event, superintendents could be less than subtle in exhorting teachers to attend the institute. In 1865, McHenry County Superintendent T. R. Ercanbrack wrote, “Live [t]eachers will be anxious to attend. Indifferent teachers, of course, will have a dozen excuses.” He continued, “But there is one thing certain, the contrast between our good scholars and poor ones will become more marked, as our indifferent teachers neglect these means of *improvement* [emphasis mine].”⁷

Ercanbrack's comments leave nothing to the imagination regarding his position on improving teacher effectiveness.

Similarly to the above efforts, McHenry County Superintendent Theodore Mead highlighted four areas of the educational system that required improvement: teachers, methods, schoolhouse and grounds, and directors. In January 1862, Mead, speaking of a school in Chemung Township, addressed the management of the rural districts, emphasizing the teacher improvement category:

Hard times (a cry which all penurious Directors at all times will set up whenever they see a person who looks like a teacher) has, perhaps, had something to do with curtailing their wages. But I also discovered another source (although said to be founded upon this) which has a good deal of weight with a certain class of our school Directors, and that is, the desire to employ cheap teachers. It may be well to purchase dry goods, groceries, land, etc., at as little cost as possible, but cheaply bought intelligence is generally, or at least apt to be a precarious article. . . .⁸

The three-member boards governing most rural schools in Illinois wielded considerable authority. The directors hired and fired teachers and, within the constraints set by the district annual meeting, set salaries, and allocated the remaining resources to effectuate a successful school program. Mead's comments do not conceal his attitude that a successful school program entails having good teachers, and, having good teachers might mean offering a quality salary. Again, what we are seeing is that the same issues that affect school leaders today were evident in the late nineteenth century.

Fifteen years later, Superintendent William Nickel returned to the topic of teachers and their training in a college or the state's normal schools:

Then there is another class who have been to college, or to normal school. Some of these—there are many honorable exceptions—seem to think that this alone should entitle them to a certificate, and they are almost insulted if asked to perform any work. We once supposed that a person who had been to college, [*sic*] or to normal school was a little superior to ordinary mortals, but we confess that we have lost much of that feeling. We yet believe in college and normal schools, but we do not admire all the specimens which they send out.⁹

Mead also challenged teachers to demand more of their pupils through the use of more rigorous methods. “The pupils are not required to criticize each others [*sic*] reading enough, and some of the teachers appear to be either too lazy or unqualified to do it themselves,” he wrote. “Whenever a paragraph or any reading is not properly executed, the reader should be required to

repeat it, or else it should be read by different members of the class until it is. There is great laxness on the part of the teachers in regard to reading.”¹⁰

Lastly, Mead turned his attention to the schoolhouse itself, presaging many of the arguments of later reformers:

The most of the schoolhouses I have yet seen are free commoners, at least, they are in the road, instead of being surrounded by a neat fence, as all school-houses should be. A neat school[-]house, well fenced in, with a well laid out yard, with well, etc. attached, is one of the strongest evidences of the intelligence of a neighborhood that can be held out to the public. But a dirty, slovenish school-house, with siding off, and set in the public highway, is the surest token that the people are either ignorant, parsimonious or care but little about education.¹¹

Mead’s criticism of the current state of education was spread far and wide, and in the decade of his visits, vast improvements were made in the county’s schools. At least thirty new schoolhouses were constructed: the majority of these replaced log or wood structures with more durable and aesthetically pleasing brick.¹² Within a year of Mead’s visit, one district’s residents replaced their “slovenish” building with a brand new stone one that remained into the twenty-first century.¹³ Neighboring DeKalb County also had a superintendent who regularly visited the schools and published his findings in the local press. There, at least forty of the 160 buildings were replaced between 1861 and 1871.¹⁴ Almost all of these were fine looking frame buildings, many of which remain to this day.

The Inglis Report

Despite decades of advancement at the local, county, and normal school levels, by the end of the nineteenth century the need for a concerted statewide effort at school improvement—and a degree of uniformity—remained evident. The statistics reveal a vast disparity among the state’s schools. Samuel Inglis, state superintendent of public instruction, in his 1896 *Biennial Report*, stated that there were 11,615 school districts and 12,632 schoolhouses in Illinois.¹⁵ Of the number of schoolhouses, 1,887 (14.9 percent of the total) were graded (having two or more teachers); and 10,736 schoolhouses (85.1 percent of the total) were ungraded, rural one-room schools. Students in the graded schools attended, on average, 140 days per year; but those in the ungraded schools, only 88 days. Twenty-six counties (1/4 of the total) averaged less than 140

days (7 months) of school per year. Thirty-seven districts provided less than 110 days (5 ½ months) of school per year. Only 64 percent of school-age children were enrolled statewide, and six counties enrolled less than 60 percent of their children.¹⁶

Other measurements of statewide educational progress—or the lack thereof—were also revealing. For example, costs per pupil based on average daily attendance ranged from \$8.25 in downstate Franklin County to a high of \$47.87 in Peoria County, making for almost a six-fold disparity. The statewide average cost per pupil was \$24.75.¹⁷ Average monthly teacher salaries ranged from a low of \$25.42 for females and \$31.44 for males in Jasper County to a high of \$59.73 for females and \$71.49 for males in upstate DuPage County.¹⁸ Only 2,619 districts (22.5 percent of the total) reported having a school library.¹⁹ Thirteen counties did not give central or final examinations to their eighth graders in rural schools. The superintendent of Jo Daviess County (Galena), H. P. Caverly, was especially blunt in his assessment of final examinations: “There were really no good results from the practice but, on the other hand, they resulted in much annoyance and dissatisfaction,” he said. “The charge of favoritism and partiality adds to the horror in which the county superintendent gets the lion’s share.” Caverly continued with an equally stark picture of Illinois school law:

Many changes are needed in our school law. Rais[ing] the ages for teaching to nineteen and twenty-one year[s] would help some. One year in a training school would be beneficial. . . . It is a positive fact that our certificates are ridiculed by our neighbors in Iowa and Wisconsin. Others may not realize it as much as I do, being here on the border where teachers are changing back and forth the year around. Our school law should be amended or make a new one. . . . Every time legislators have tampered with it they have made it worse.²⁰

When Superintendent Inglis asked his county superintendents how their districts employed teachers, he also received some extremely candid, and surprising, responses. While most reported that factors such as education, classroom management, experience, and reputation were determinative when hiring a teacher, others were shockingly blunt in describing why teachers were hired in their districts. Some remarks echoed Superintendent Mead’s comments of a third of a century earlier. For example, Massac County Superintendent Robert Alexander, in charge of seventy-nine schools, replied: “[With] a few exceptions, the very least amount per month for which services of applicant[s] can be secured has the first and greatest effect in securing

appointments in rural schools. In city schools,” he commented, “political favors have considerable effect in many instances.”²¹ J. S. Cole, superintendent of Logan County with 123 schoolhouses, was equally candid: “In the selection of teachers the boards are, in too many cases, influenced, not altogether by the superior qualifications that teachers may possess, but by considerations that smack of favoritism,” he wrote. “Member A votes for the candidate of member B to get member B to vote for his, [*sic*] politics, religion, caste, etc., having influence too often to the detriment of the school,” he complained. “I think I am safe in saying that thirty percent of the teachers secure their positions because they agree to teach for less money than others do who apply.”²²

The always candid H. P. Caverly of Jo Daviess County (123 schoolhouses) expressed it most succinctly in listing the qualifications needed in his county: (1) relationship, (2) religion, (3) experience and success, (4) cheapness.²³ The need for a statewide program of school improvement was obvious. That time came with the beginning of a new century.

The Illinois Standard School Program: The Early Years, 1907-1914

In 1915, Edith Lathrop, in her pamphlet, *The Improvement of Rural Schools by Standardization*, defined standardization as

the establishment of a definite level of school attainment through the adoption of certain minimum requirements authorized either by law or by the chief school administrative head of the State; these requirements relate either to the physical plant or to the management of the school, or to both.²⁴

Lathrop added that the Standard School Program began in Illinois in 1907.²⁵ However, the earliest use of the term “standard,” as it pertains to schools and schooling in Illinois, is found in State Superintendent Francis Blair’s 1909 report, *The One Room Country Schools in Illinois*.²⁶ After reporting that there were 10,638 one-room schools in the state in 1908, Blair identified the most needed improvements as better schoolhouses, better school grounds, heating and ventilation, and better furniture and supplies. In subsequent years, Blair worked tirelessly to improve schools through standardization.

Reflecting his expectations, Superintendent Blair announced that Assistant Superintendent U. J. Hoffman would, upon the invitation of the county superintendents, visit the country schools.

Those schools meeting certain “requirements,” or standards, would receive the designation of “Standard One Room School” and a diploma attesting to that recognition. The five requirements were grounds, schoolhouse, furnishings and supplies, organization, and the teacher.²⁷ These categories, in addition to being reminiscent of the ones identified a half century earlier, remained remarkably consistent over the course of the next decade. However, as will be shown, the requirements also became increasingly extensive. There was no mention in the 1909 report of a plaque or a superior-school designation.

When Illinois adopted its Standard School Program early in the twentieth century, the state had a number of models to emulate among the neighboring states: Wisconsin, Missouri, and Iowa. According to Horace Cutler and Julia Stone, authors of *The Rural School – Its Methods and Management*, Wisconsin divided its districts into two classes: those that maintained “a rural school or schools of the first class,” based on such factors as the building, apparatus, supplementary readers, and ventilation; and those that did not. These latter were second-class schools. The former were entitled to an extra 50 dollars in state aid for three years; the latter were entitled to nothing.²⁸

Missouri, beginning in 1909, attempted to standardize its schools without any extra financial incentive. There, the county superintendents, rural school inspector, and state superintendent attempted to “awaken public sentiment for better schools.” Before reaching standard-school status, Missouri schools had to demonstrate effective education in five categories: building, apparatus and equipment, grounds and outbuildings, organization, and the teacher. By 1913, three hundred Missouri schools had met the requirements.²⁹

Iowa, according to Sherman and Theobald, enacted the Standard School Law in 1919. It, too, established a list of requirements, or standards, similar to Missouri’s, together with a rating scale of up to one hundred points. Unlike its neighboring states, however, Iowa appropriated 100,000 dollars annually to implement the standardization program.³⁰

In light of the steps taken by its neighbors, Illinois used a “carrot and stick” approach to improving its schools. While never providing additional financial aid to successful districts, the state did employ the rewards of recognition through its diploma and standard school plaque program. These honors were to be presented before the public with great ceremony. Certainly the press was enlisted to augment attendance at these events. Superintendent Blair explained the importance of this recognition in his 1915 *Annual Report*: “The awarding of this diploma should

be made to serve to arouse the interest of the surrounding territory,” he wrote. “[A]ll the schools, the school directors, and the people within reach of the school [should] be invited to be present, [and] . . . a suitable program be provided to entertain the visitors.”³¹

In 1913, Horace Cutler and Julia Stone wrote, in *The Rural School – Its Methods and Management*, that refraining from granting state aid might be the preferable approach to school improvement. They argued that “probably, a better and purer public opinion can be aroused without state aid than with it.”³² On the other hand, as illustrated below, Illinois officials were not reluctant to remind local school officers that the state had the power to withhold aid from non-performing districts and condemn buildings they considered unsafe.

Apparently, Blair felt that one way to further the Standard School Program was through example and a certain degree of embarrassment. Putting the onus for school improvement squarely on the shoulders of the school directors, the state superintendent printed photos of two different schools. School #1, the “bad” schoolhouse, had the caption that there were 1,094 of these in Illinois. Blair wrote that a bad school is “[a]bout as bad as it can be. [The] foundation [is] gone, siding full of holes, crack under the door, no trees, no shrubs, no flowers [and] double outhouse. No one seems to care.” Blair saved his greatest invective for the double outhouse: “It is difficult to conceive of a worse arrangement than these double doored abominations,” he wrote. “To build one of them should be a penal offence. Better expose the children to a deadly contagious disease than to subject them to the moral leprosy which lurks in these double outhouses.”³³

By contrast, School #2, the beautiful school, had “[b]eautiful grounds, two outhouses, [and] the coal shed in the back instead of the front yard.” Blair noted the exact number (4,281) of these structures. Continuing with the theme of beautification, he also recommended planting a school garden that the children could work in during their lunch and recess breaks.³⁴ There is no record of how many school gardens were planted, but children working in a garden during recess seems less likely than their playing a game of baseball or tag.

Interestingly, there is no mention of school consolidation in the 1909 report. Instead, Blair praised the advantages of the country school: “The country school should utilize all the favorable conditions of country life,” he wrote, “and not merely try to imitate the city schools. The country school may be, and should be, the best school in the world.”³⁵

In 1910, when Superintendent Blair again made his report to the state, he announced that 307,111 children attended Illinois' 10,638 single-room schools. Note that this is an average of almost twenty-nine students per building. He also reported that Assistant Superintendent Hoffman had visited 293 of these schools in twenty-four (of the state's 102) counties and found 163 of them qualified for the standard school diploma.³⁶ These were evidently Illinois' first standard schools, as none had been mentioned in the report of the previous year. Most of these schools were in central or southern Illinois and, therefore, closer to Springfield and Hoffman. In 1910, school officials had few automobiles, or good roads, to ease travel to the far corners of the state. In northern Illinois, for example, DeKalb County had only eight standard schools; Lake County, three; Kane County, one; and McHenry County, none.³⁷

The five "requirements," or categories, to achieve standardization remained the same. However, Blair now fleshed out the "essentials" that a standard school must have: "a capable, well prepared and efficient teacher; good organization, discipline and teaching; a comfortable and sanitary [school]house; proper equipment, including a library suitable for the children, dictionaries, maps, and globes." The earlier category "grounds" was incorporated into the "comfortable and sanitary [school]house requirement. Blair warned, "Wanting any of these[,] no school can be as good as it ought to be."³⁸

The superintendent was emphatic that the burden for supervising the rural schools rested with the county superintendents and that his desire was simply to assist them in their work. He again made no mention of consolidation and instead praised the virtues of the country school. "There is great gain to the children to have all ages in the same room," he wrote," and "the country school has kept up with the times."³⁹ But hearkening back to the words of Superintendent Mead a half-century earlier, he warned: "Where the improvement is most needed is to secure teachers who are better prepared, and to make the schoolhouse more comfortable and better adapted for good school work. The most needed improvements can be brought about by the school directors."⁴⁰

Blair, in his 1912 *Annual Report*, made several significant announcements. First, he reported that a total of 657 country schools had been standardized and that in some counties already half the schools had achieved this distinction. A second assistant superintendent, W. S. Booth, had been hired to assist with school inspections.⁴¹ Apparently, this decision enabled the work to reach the farther corners of the state, as DeKalb County now had nineteen standard schools; its neighbor Ogle County had thirty; Kane County, twenty-seven; and McHenry County, three.⁴²

School betterment had become a topic of discussion at farmer's institutes and graduation exercises. Blair boasted, "The spirit of improvement has been aroused among the public."⁴³

However, in a foreshadowing of events to come, Blair reported that proper safety and sanitation remained a concern: "It has been found that even the good schools—those taught by good teachers—lack comfortable and sanitary conditions," he wrote, "[t]he worst lack being an active interest on the part of school officers and people in making their schools better than they are. They seem to think they are good enough and let it rest at that."⁴⁴ In 1912, few rural schools possessed indoor plumbing or even chemical toilets. Two years later the legislature responded with a Sanitation Act that would have significant consequences for the Standard School Program.

While the five categories for a standard school remained unchanged, the superintendent's office filled in more details as to what those requirements meant. For example, under the heading, "The Organization," these items were listed:

School well organized,	Attendance regular,
Classification and daily register well kept,	At least seven months school, and
Definite program of study,	Discipline good. ⁴⁵
Program of recitation,	

Blair also took the opportunity in the 1912 report to announce the superior-school designation. According to the superintendent, this change resulted from a demand by the school districts themselves: "Many school officers have expressed themselves in favor of having not only the essentials of a good school, they want their school to be as nearly right as it can be made."⁴⁶ He then defined the difference between a standard school and a superior one: "A standard school is one which has all that a school must have to be a good school. A superior school is one which has everything which a school should have to make it the best school."⁴⁷ The five categories remained much the same, but with more stringent requirements for the superior school. For example, while the standard schoolteacher needed to have only a high school "course" and had to receive a salary of at least 360 dollars per year, the superior schoolteacher had to be a high school graduate or have received "some training" at normal school and be paid at least 480 dollars per year.⁴⁸

Lastly, Blair used the 1912 report to introduce the subject of school consolidation. He cautioned, however, that this would not happen in the immediate future because of the large size of Illinois farms and consequently the large school districts. Blair reported that the average one-room school district occupied four sections of land (2,560 acres) and served sixteen families.⁴⁹ Despite the potential savings resulting from consolidation, he stated that “the people cling to the school which is convenient of access.” Blair continued, “Until means are provided for conveying children to and from school at public expense, the enlargement of districts will not take place. The one-room school will be a necessity in Illinois for many years.”⁵⁰

Blair argued that the call for consolidation would grow louder as the public realized an increasing need for a high school education. He believed the country school admirably served the needs of younger children. In fact, he made a powerful case for the one-room school: “The teacher, like the parent, takes an interest in each [child] and deals with him according to his needs,” he wrote. “The little ones are dependent upon her. The older ones respect her for what she is and for what she can do,” he continued. “The little ones receive much that is helpful from their older associates. The older ones are favorably affected by the presence of those younger whom they can protect and help.”⁵¹

However, Blair saw advantages in ending school with the eighth grade. Rural people might want their children to receive a secondary education but would be reluctant to send them far away to a town or city school. The answer would be the consolidated school, or township districts with a four-year high school. Then, Blair introduced a remarkable vision of social engineering which deserves quoting for what it says about its author and the philosophy of the department he headed:

Those who look forward to a better social life for country people realize that the consolidated school with its enlarged field of work is at the very foundation of a better country social life. They feel that the small district school tends to keep the people in small groups, while the consolidated school would unite them into larger groups and make a greater degree of cooperation in all social, [*sic*] and business activities possible.⁵²

Clearly, Blair and his department envisioned a far greater role for the schools in shaping the life of the community than many rural residents expected or desired. Hard-working farm families sent their children to small schools to learn the “3 Rs” under the close supervision of neighbors

they knew and trusted. Consolidation would remain a wrenching and contentious issue in Illinois for at least another third of a century.

In 1914, A. M. Shelton, McHenry County superintendent of schools, revealed a further category of improvement in the Standard School Program: honorable mention. Under the heading, "Honor Roll," Shelton listed thirty-four districts that had achieved this recognition in 1913-14 "because of the improvements made in the physical welfare of the school plant, etc."⁵³ This was an apparent effort on the part of the county to encourage districts to continue making improvements even if they were not quite up to standard-school status. He explained that many of the thirty-four districts would be standard schools the next year (1915), and others would "make sufficient improvement to warrant the placing of their names on the honor roll." Shelton announced that many county schools "ha[d] a fine outward appearance [and a] few dollars expended by them for half a dozen seats of proper size or the lowering of the blackboard would aid materially in bringing up the standard of our county as compared with other counties in the state."⁵⁴

In 1914-15, there were thirty-eight standard schools in McHenry County, a marked improvement from the sixteen the previous year and the three in 1912-13. McLean County in central Illinois led the state with 184 standard schools, and Kane County had seventy.⁵⁵ The Standard School Movement was making some progress in the first five years of its existence.

The Illinois Standard School Program: The Mature Years, 1915-1920

By 1915, when Superintendent Blair published Circular #100, *The One Room and Country Schools of Illinois*, he could announce that 2,471 rural schools had met the requirements for a standard school, and fourteen more had achieved superior-school status. State Supervisors U. H. Hoffman and W. S. Booth had visited 10,612 one-room and 370 village schools.⁵⁶ Before a school could be approved for either standard- or superior-school status, it had to be visited by one of the two state inspectors. Blair also made it clear that the standardization movement was all about school improvement and that the chief responsibility still resided with the 102 county superintendents. He stated, "It should be the aim to visit some schools in all sections of the county, and only those in which there is a good prospect of getting the necessary improvements made, and those which are up to that standard in essentials."⁵⁷

The five requirements for the standard one-room school remained the same as in 1910 with minor adjustments to the criteria in each category. For example, in the aforementioned “school organization” requirement, Blair added a “pupil’s reading circle” as a necessary ingredient. Under the schoolhouse category, the superintendent’s office now mandated separate cloakrooms for girls and boys. And under the “yard” category (“grounds” in earlier reports), the state dropped the requirement of “two well kept, widely separated outhouses.”⁵⁸ The reason for these changes became clear later in Blair’s report.

The 1915 circular also fleshed out the requirements for a superior one-room school. Some of the most interesting criteria included a school yard of at least one acre with a neat fence and appropriate plantings, a well or cistern and sanitary drinking fountain, a basement with play room, a well-stocked library, and a manual training bench with tools and “equipment for sewing and instruction in elementary agriculture.”⁵⁹ Obviously, only the bigger districts with a large tax base would be able to afford such luxuries. Most small, cash-strapped districts could not hope to achieve superior-school status.

Blair made it clear that many districts had made sincere efforts to bring their schools up to standard, and he held out the hope that one day they too would be able to hang the 4' by 24" plate (Figure 2) above their front doors: “For every school standardized at least three have made substantial improvements along the lines suggested,” he wrote. “Some have repaired the school-house, have painted the outside, decorated the interior. . . .”⁶⁰



Figure 2: Illinois standard school plate for an elementary school, 1920.

The superintendent cited McHenry County for special mention:

McHenry County is an example of this gradual improvement. When the first inspection was made five years ago many of the best schools were visited and only three were found which met all the requirements. During a two and one-half days’ visit in 1913 eighteen schools were inspected and thirteen received diplomas. The other five lacked only minor

details. The county superintendent says that this is typical of what is taking place all over the county. His plan has been to get the directors to do one important thing each year. In one or two years more[,] most of the schools will meet all the requirements. This method of gradual, systematic improvement partly explains the fact that more schools met the requirements this year than did so in the three previous years.⁶¹

Safety and health were other reasons standardization was important as the movement matured and why Blair was intent on helping schools achieve a standard level. Fire and disease proved to be the two great afflictions of the rural school system. Usually located many miles from the nearest volunteer fire department, the school with the smallest fire often led to catastrophic loss. At least a half dozen McHenry County one-room schools were destroyed by fire in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In one case the children and their teacher barely escaped through a window as the building went up in flames.⁶² Illness, especially of the contagious variety, closed country schools on a regular basis. Of course, the flu epidemic of 1918 comes to mind, but school classification books are filled with entries such as, "School closed due to measles [or mumps] outbreak." Should we wonder that this would be the case when twenty or more young bodies were confined to a 20' by 30' space, often with primitive sanitary conditions?

Nor should school directors and teachers have been surprised when Superintendent Blair announced in 1915 that the Illinois legislature had amended the school code so "as to require the heating, ventilation, lighting, seating, water supply, toilets, and safety against fire to be such as to conserve the health and safety of the children attending the public schools."⁶³ Forty-eight new requirements related to the above categories were added to the code. Blair announced that for new or remodeled buildings, the law was to go into effect immediately; but for older buildings the start date would be March 1, 1917. Failure to comply with the new regulations would result in the withholding of the district's Distributive Fund (state aid). At this juncture in his report, Blair also reminded local school directors that the county superintendents, acting in consultation with state officials, could condemn nonconforming schoolhouses.⁶⁴

These new directives had profound implications for the state's Standard School Program. In 1917 the McHenry County *Teacher's Manual* reported that the "new Sanitation Act . . . left our county without any standard schools, except those that have been remodeled or built new during the summer vacation of 1916." Prior to the forty-eight new requirements, half the county's

schools had been standardized.⁶⁵ This bulletin also revealed that Superintendent Blair had divided schools into three classes: (1) those that had already met the new requirements; (2) those that had not met all forty-eight but were attempting to do so; and (3) those that were not “systematically” attempting to bring their schools up to regulation. The first two classes would continue to receive state aid, the third would not.⁶⁶ We can be sure that many directors weighed the cost of meeting the new requirements against the loss of state money and any hope of becoming a standard school.

In Circular No. 100, Superintendent Blair again raised the issue of consolidation, a theme he returned to in later reports. While conceding that there was no law “authorizing the transportation of pupils at public expense,” Blair reported the county superintendents’ finding of twenty-three consolidated schools statewide.⁶⁷ After praising the virtues of several of the newly consolidated districts, Blair, under the heading “Advantages of the Consolidated School,” quoted at length Professor Newell Gilbert’s speech at the Kishwaukee (Winnebago County) Consolidated School, a speech that undoubtedly did not endear him to all his listeners: “I do not believe you farmers are holding a place of political and social influence nearly commensurate with your numbers, your wealth, your intelligence, or your force of character,” he charged. “So far as this may be true, it comes, I believe, from living rather isolated, being educated in isolated one-room schools, so that the farmer has lived and thought too much in individual, rather than social terms.” He continued, “The consolidated school offers a redemption from this situation, and at the same time a great expansion and enrichment of every phase of rural life.”⁶⁸

In his 1917 report, *One Room and Consolidated Country Schools of Illinois*, Superintendent Blair revealed that between 1915 and 1917, Hoffman and Booth had visited 528 country schools for a grand total of 3,090. Blair also reported that 2,949 of these had met the requirements for a standard-school designation.⁶⁹ If this number is correct, it means that 95.4 percent of the schools visited complied with the standardization requirements. We may also assume that the county superintendents only scheduled state visits that were likely to result in a favorable report. Furthermore, these words were undoubtedly written before the March 1 deadline for implementation of the new Sanitation Act. We have already learned that the McHenry County superintendent reported zero standard schools for the 1917-18 year, but Blair announced that there were forty-three (out of 120 one-room schools). Blair also revealed that there were now sixteen superior schools in Illinois, a gain of only two from his previous report.⁷⁰

Much of the rest of the language in Circular No. 124 is contained verbatim in Circular No. 96. Yet the superintendent did announce a new law taking effect on July 1, 1917, “which will make consolidation easier.” Consolidated districts would be able to use public funds to transport pupils at a distance from a school.⁷¹ Blair then launched into another advocacy of consolidation, including a reprint of Professor Gilbert’s speech at Kishwaukee Consolidated School.

Superintendent Blair prefaced his 1920 Circular No. 144, *Standard Elementary School, Illinois*, by writing, “The improvement in school buildings in Illinois from 1908 down to the outbreak of the World War is one of the outstanding events since the organization of the public school system, although much remains to be done.”⁷² He attributed the improvements to the Standardization Plan and the Sanitation Act, which among dozens of other requirements outlawed the common drinking cup and open pails of water in the classroom.⁷³ The superintendent reflected that were it not for the war and its disruptions, “our million boys and girls would all be housed in comfortable, sanitary schoolrooms today.”⁷⁴ Blair also used this opportunity to chide the “foot draggers” by saying, “Unfortunately, some districts gladly welcomed anything that would delay the doing of what they didn’t want to do.”⁷⁵ In fact, Blair spent about a quarter of the circular (thirty pages out of 120) promoting the benefits of the 1915 Sanitation Act and its subsequent amendments. In addition to a myriad of diagrams on proper installation of heaters, wells, and toilets, the state also instructed teachers on how to properly open a window and adjust a desk so as to insure proper posture for their students (Figure 3).

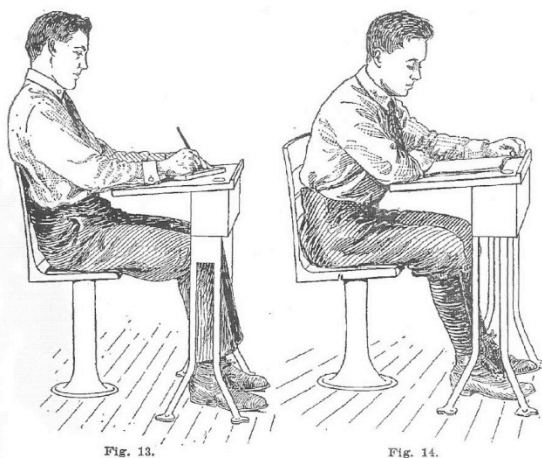


Figure 3: Posture considered proper for a student, in Francis Blair’s Circular No. 144, *Standard Elementary School, Illinois*, 1920 (Springfield, IL: Schnepf & Barnes Printers, 1920), 25.

Between 1915 and 1920, the only change to the twenty-nine requirements for standardization was an increase in the minimum teacher’s salary from forty to fifty dollars per month.⁷⁶ Blair

could now boast of 3,771 standard schools and twenty-six superior schools out of a total of 10,613 one-room schools (35.8 percent) in the state. However, a wide disparity still existed. A preponderance of standard and superior schools was concentrated in central Illinois close to Springfield. McHenry County had six standard schools out of 120 one-room schools, Winnebago County had two out of 99, and Kankakee had only one out of 130. LaSalle County, which had the largest number of rural schools in the state (241), had only nineteen standard schools.⁷⁷ Could inadequate transportation be the main reason for this variance, or were there other factors, such as politics, at work?

Superintendent Blair also used his 1920 report to again promote school consolidation as a path to school improvement. In fact, approximately 20 percent of the report was used to advance the subject. The thrust was to explain the process (i.e., how school districts and communities could effect mergers) and then to show successful examples, complete with photographs of beautiful new buildings and engaged students. Blair again stated the advantages of consolidation: “The consolidated school lends itself more readily to . . . progress. There are more teachers, more pupils, more parents interested in the school and in the community life,” he wrote. . . . “There is more ‘life,’ hence, a greater interest in an improved life. When such interest is aroused, progressive, forward looking ideas and purposes are more readily and kindly received.”⁷⁸



Figure 4: Huntley Consolidated School, ca. 1920; courtesy of the McHenry County Historical Society.

Blair apparently had been primarily thinking about the village or town schools, but he did hold out some hope, albeit in a condescending fashion, for the rural districts, too. “While it is more difficult to arouse the interest in the best things for the children in the one-room schools,” he wrote, “it is not impossible.”⁷⁹ The year (1920) that Blair published these words, seven tiny

rural districts in McHenry County plus several more in neighboring Kane County combined with Huntley to form Huntley Consolidated School District #158 (Figure 4).⁸⁰



Figure 5: English Prairie School, near Spring Grove, Illinois, 1929; courtesy of McHenry County Historical Society

Conclusions

On a warm day in June of 1929, Superintendent Francis Blair and his long-time assistant, U. J. Hoffman, arrived at the new English Prairie School (Figure 5) about a mile south of the Wisconsin state line and near the small community of Spring Grove, Illinois. At one p.m. they dedicated the new building, which was replete with a basement, separate cloakrooms, lavatories, kitchen, library, electricity, and indoor plumbing. The school sat on a fenced two-acre parcel which also included a baseball diamond, a dozen mature trees, and an outside well.⁸¹ English Prairie School met all the criteria of a superior school. Blair and Hoffman presented that diploma and plaque. After a basket lunch that was enjoyed by former teachers, students (including one who had attended the old school at the time of the Civil War), community members, and other dignitaries, Hoffman took the podium. He explained the difference between a good or standard school, and an excellent, or superior one. Hoffman lauded the community's effort in financing and building the new school, but then reminded his audience that "it is, after all, really the children who make a superior school."⁸² Finally, Superintendent Blair, in the main address of the

day, stressed the importance of a good education: “Education is given through two principal means—mothers and our schools. We must transmit knowledge to our children for failure to do this means disaster.”⁸³

Illinois’ Standard School Program lasted for over thirty years, from 1907 to the early 1940s. Great progress had, indeed, been made. Thousands of old buildings were modernized and brought up to the standard of the day, and hundreds of new schools were constructed. McHenry County, for example, which had only six standard schools in 1920, could boast of five superior schools by 1938.⁸⁴ It may be that the Illinois Standard School Program was a victim of its own success. As we have learned, over ninety-five percent of the schools visited were achieving standardization. Also, the depopulation of many rural areas as a result of the Great Depression and the subsequent teacher and materials shortages brought on by the Second World War may have compelled the state to abandon the program. From then on, schools were designated as either recognized or not recognized. A third category, probationary recognition, was available to those districts that had only a few deficiencies to correct and were making every effort to do so. It is interesting to note, however, that the categories upon which the schools were graded—building and grounds, equipment and supplies, teacher, curriculum, and community relations—remained much the same as under the previous Standard School Program. They were also the same ones that the county superintendents had identified for improvement nearly a century earlier.

As this article argues, the many debates and concerns of schools and schooling and of education writ large in the mid-nineteenth century are almost a perfect facsimile of today’s concerns regarding standardization and accreditation, teacher salaries and preparation, the physical conditions of school buildings, and the role of the boards and superintendents. Blair’s comments, if one didn’t know, could be read as a contemporary editorial in any newspaper around the country. Rather than bemoaning the fact that nothing has changed over the past 160 or so years in the history of education in our country, we should find solace in knowing that schools, schooling, and education are so important that debates about them have stood the test of time.

Notes

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Robert W. Frenz, M.A., earned a master's degree in history from Northern Illinois University and taught at Huntley (IL) High School for thirty-five years. He is the author of *Historic Country Schools of McHenry County, Il.*, (M.T. Pub. Co., 2008) and "Inquiring into Northwoods Country Schools," *Country School Journal* (2013). Currently, he serves as president of the McHenry County Historical Society where he works as a volunteer archivist. Visit him at lakesideantiques@netzero.net.



