

Public Education: It Only Seems Like It Has Always Been Among Us

Bright yellow-orange school buses snarling rush-hour traffic with their frequent stops to pick up or drop off children are a familiar sight across the state and nation. Indeed, the idea that children attend school every day—particularly schools paid for by state and local governments—is largely taken for granted. However, education, especially public education, has not always been a part of the lives of North Carolinians.

Before the American Revolution, the loosely formed colonial government in North Carolina took no responsibility for education.¹ The educational opportunities available resulted primarily from the efforts of religious leaders of the Anglican, Presbyterian, Quaker, and Moravian churches to educate the children of their congregations and from private tutors hired by a single family or several families.² Literate parents sometimes taught their children and others in the community. In the state's early larger cities like Edenton and New Bern, schools with several teachers were established. In fact, a state highway historical marker in Elizabeth City reads, "First School. Charles Griffin Taught In This County, the First Known School in North Carolina, 1705–1708." However, these schools were the exceptions rather than the rule.³

The first North Carolina State Constitution adopted in 1776 did include a provision for education that stated, "A School or Schools shall be established by the Legislature for the convenient Instruction of Youth." However, the framers of that constitution evidently did not foresee anything akin to public schools as they are known today. The legislature provided no money to support these schools, but did authorize private entrepreneurs to establish the schools, hire teachers, and fix fees for attendance.⁴

Public education in North Carolina as we know it today began to develop in 1817, when Archibald D. Murphey, a State Senator from Orange County, presented a plan to the General Assembly for the state to establish a public school fund to be managed by an elected State Board. Any county that would build two or more schools for teaching reading, writing, and arithmetic would be provided funds for paying the teachers' salaries. Although the Gen-

eral Assembly did not immediately implement Murphey's educational plan, it adopted part of the plan in 1825 by establishing the Literary Fund to subsidize public schools and appointing a Literary Board as the fund's manager. Although the Literary Fund was not large enough to have great impact at first, it was important because it represented the state's first dedication of funds for public school programs.

The movement toward establishing public schools in North Carolina ambled along for four decades until the state, through the State Constitution of 1868, mandated a general and uniform public school system. The Constitution stated, "The General Assembly, at its first session under this Constitution, shall provide by taxation and otherwise for a general and uniform system of public schools. . . ."⁵ This provision is almost identical to Article 9, Section 2 in the state constitution today. Still, in spite of this constitutional requirement, the public school system did not become *general* until the turn of the century under Governor Charles B. Aycock, and a *uniform* system of public schools was not achieved until the Depression.⁶ (see "Highlights of Public School Education in North Carolina" p. 81).

Since these first commitments to public education and the state's initial public school mandate, North Carolina has come a long way in efforts to educate its citizenry. The state now has 117 school systems covering all 100 counties.

—Joanne Scharer

FOOTNOTES

¹ William W. Peek, "History of Education in North Carolina," N.C. Department of Public Instruction, Raleigh, N.C., p. 3 at www.dpi.state.nc.us/students/edhistory.html

² William W. Peek, "History of Education in North Carolina," N.C. Department of Public Instruction, Raleigh, N.C., p. 3 at www.dpi.state.nc.us/students/edhistory.html

³ William W. Peek, "History of Education in North Carolina," N.C. Department of Public Instruction, Raleigh, N.C., p. 3 at www.dpi.state.nc.us/students/edhistory.html

⁴ William W. Peek, "History of Education in North Carolina," N.C. Department of Public Instruction, Raleigh, N.C., p. 3 at www.dpi.state.nc.us/students/edhistory.html

⁵ N.C. Constitution of 1868, Article IX, Section 2.

⁶ Calvin Criner, "Non-Public Schools in North Carolina," N.C. Division of Non-Public Education, Raleigh, N.C. at www.doa.state.nc.us/dnpe/hhh138.htm