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*History of the Office of
Superintendent of Public
Instruction in Iowa*

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THE HISTORY
OF THE OFFICE OF
SUPERINTENDENT OF
PUBLIC INSTRUCTION
IN IOWA

PREPARED BY
HON. FRED SCHWENGEL
Representative from Scott County

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THE HISTORY OF THE OFFICE OF SUPERINTENDENT OF PUBLIC INSTRUCTION IN IOWA

Prepared by Hon. Fred Schwengel, Representative from Scott County, and published under the authority of the House of Representatives of the Fifty-first General Assembly, unanimous consent having been granted upon the request of Hon. G. T. Kuester, Chairman of the committee on appropriations.

A. C. GUSTAFSON,
Chief Clerk.

THE HISTORY OF THE OFFICE OF SUPERINTENDENT OF PUBLIC INSTRUCTION IN IOWA

By FRED SCHWENGEL

Believing that experience of the past is a guide to the future, and believing that the educational leaders in the early history of our state and throughout its history were fundamentally sound and contributed much to the philosophy of education, and in light of the fact that we are now considering some major legislation with reference to the office of Superintendent of Public Instruction, the following is a brief summary of that office taken from unbiased sources, principally, the **History of Education in Iowa** by Clarence P. Aurner, **Proceedings of Iowa State Teachers' Meetings**, Iowa Codes of 1856 to 1943, State Superintendents reports to the General Assembly and **The Administrative Functions of the Department of Public Instruction in Iowa** by H. C. Cook.

This study is necessarily brief, first, because to go in detail in a discussion of this office would take several volumes and, second, many of the details would not be of interest in the consideration of the information desired.

HISTORY DURING TERRITORIAL PERIOD

Education had its beginnings in what later became the Territory of Iowa as early as 1830. From October to December of that year Berryman Jennings taught the first school in what is now Galland, in Lee County. The first schools were for the most part private institutions, conducted by some person who undertook the instruction of such pupils as were sent to his school, receiving his compensation usually in kind from the parents and others who believed sufficiently in schools to subscribe to their support. Though the people were under the administration of the Michigan Territorial law of June 28, 1834, they took little heed of the school laws. Schoolhouses were built and schools were conducted, but were apparently without supervision. No apparent change was made in the status of schools in the Iowa country from July 3, 1836, when it was attached to the Wisconsin Territory to July 4, 1838, when the Iowa Territorial government was organized. Following the organization of Iowa Territory successive changes took place in school administration.

The first reference to the office of Superintendent of Public Instruction appears to be in the year of 1840 while Iowa was still a Territory. There being, however, some reference to it while Iowa was under the Michigan Territory, but nothing was gained until 1840.

When the office was provided for by the government of the Territory, and when the Governor of the Territory was directed to appoint such an official for a term of three years, his principal function then was the care and disposition of school funds. Dr. William Reynolds was appointed

by Governor Lucas for a term of three years; however, he was legislated out of office within the year. In the meantime, however, he made some effort to carry out the provisions of the Act under which he was appointed. He declared that one of the most striking features of the law was the provision "making it the duty of the Superintendent to use every exertion to effect immediate organization of the primary system." With this object in view, Dr. Reynolds prepared to visit the several counties of the Territory where he hoped to revive interest in education and schools, but after consultation with Governor Lucas, he conceded that this plan was not adaptable to conditions then prevailing within the Territory and so his plan was not carried out.

Governor Chambers succeeded Lucas in 1841, and so Dr. Reynolds stayed at the seat of the government instead of making the journey over the Territory to lecture on the public school system that was to be. In due time, he issued a circular to committee clerks who constituted the local connections between his office and the school districts, requesting the reports which the law contemplated. In December of 1841, Dr. Reynolds submitted his observation and report as the law required. His report was quite optimistic and reflected a very definite interest in a good public school system. Reynolds urged the necessity of the Superintendent of Public Instruction, giving his entire time to the office in the best interests of education. He outlined the right of the children to a free school and advanced many good ideas on education.

When the question pertaining to retaining the office of Superintendent of Public Instruction and of approving the recommendations made by him came before the Territorial legislature, the committee to whom the matter was referred were unanimously agreed on his ideas. Nevertheless, the Legislative Assembly disagreed, and so on February 17, 1842, this appointive office was abolished.

WHEN IOWA BECAME A STATE

Acting as it appears in accordance with the Governor's recommendations, the Legislative Assembly of 1839-1840 took over the Michigan School Law of 1838, adopting it section by section. So closely did the Legislative Assembly follow the Michigan law that in many instances the title, Superintendent of Public Instruction, appeared in the Iowa law as adopted. In Michigan this officer had been provided for in the Constitution, but no provision had been made for such official in the government of the Territory of Iowa. Yet, with the adoption of the new law, the Superintendent of Public Instruction was mentioned in several instances. It appears then that the earliest pattern of education in Iowa was adopted from the practices and experiences gained while part of the Michigan Territory.

With the adoption of the Constitution and the admission of Iowa into the Union in 1846, the office of Superintendent of Public Instruction was re-established by provisions of the fundamental law. The people were now authorized to elect the head of the school system for a term of three years—while the definition of his powers and duties were left to the General Assembly. So, in the General Act of 1847, the school

law of 1840 was amended and provided that at the next township election, a superintendent should be chosen whose duties should be the maintenance of an office at the seat of government—the keeping of documents, reports, etc. Also, he was charged with the care and distribution of school funds coming into his hands.

In 1847, also, the Superintendent was empowered to appoint a deputy clerk and he was to compensate him out of his own salary, which was \$1200.

At the *Spring Election* of 1847, it appears that James Harlan was elected the first Superintendent of Public Instruction. It was interesting to note here that the Legislature felt that the people were not a good judge, and so the election of Harlan developed into a contest. It might be interesting to point out that the reason it developed into a contest was obvious because of the fact that Harlan was a Whig and the House of Representatives was predominantly Democratic.

It was interesting to note also that the people did a good job in electing as further events proved Harlan to be an intellectual man and a leader. He was later elected to the U. S. Senate and served without question with honor and distinction. All people of Iowa of all times can look back to the record and feel proud that Iowa had a James Harlan.

After Harlan had been more or less legislated out of the office, the General Assembly anticipated a new election and a Thomas H. Benton, Jr. was a candidate in opposition to James Harlan. Notwithstanding the political significance of the election and the events connected therewith, it is necessary only in this connection to note that Thomas H. Benton, Jr. was elected in the *Spring* of 1848. Benton served two terms of three years and the record shows that during his administration, he became a distinguished leader of education and contributed much to its expansion and growth, and also much to the development of the proper attitude of the public toward education. This was borne out by the record that three normal schools were authorized. Great interest was promoted in the University of Iowa. High schools were established in Burlington, Dubuque, Davenport and Fort Madison.

In 1853, James D. Eads was elected in a *Spring* election. This administration was a stormy session of financial affairs. In spite of the conditions that existed and a controversy over these affairs, Eads contributed much to the continued interest in education in our state.

Maturin L. Fisher was elected in the *Spring* of 1857. At this time, the duties of the president were largely given to his attention—the financial affairs of the School Department. It was during this administration when the transition period came from a principally financial office to that of almost purely educational. Fisher proved to be an elected official who knew the responsibilities of his office, and also was well grounded in the philosophy of education. His recommendations to the Legislature were fundamental, declaring for the needs of constructive legislation and that the primary purpose should be the instruction of the whole people in the elementary branches in free schools—free in a sense not then recognized in the laws of this State. He further recommended that free schools were necessary to provide for the preparation

of teachers and therefore advised the establishment of two grades of institutions—the common school in which all the youth should be taught free of charge, and the high or secondary schools for the instruction, free of charge, of teachers for common schools. His recommendations relative to the creation of the office of the County Superintendent were the same as those of the Mann Commission.

Although elected by the people, and the fact that he did a good job, Fisher was legislated out of the office by the creation of the State Board of Education after he had occupied the position from June, 1857 to December, 1858. It is well to point out, I think, that it was the opinion of the minority of the State Board of Education that Fisher should have been retained in the Office of Public Instruction, especially since the term for which he had been elected did not expire until 1860.

It is interesting to note that Mr. T. B. Perry declared that one of the first principles of Government would be violated in declaring this office abolished, and further that it was feasible to maintain both the office of Superintendent of Public Instruction and the Secretary of the Board. Suffice it to say, however, that politics played a primary part in the creation of this Board and the desires of the people were not heeded.

THE NEW STATE BOARD OF EDUCATION

With the creation of the new Board of Education in Iowa came also the abolition of the office and the transference of all of its duties to the Secretary of the Board. Accordingly, December 24, 1858, the Board of Education, near the end of its first session, proceeded to elect Thomas H. Benton, Jr. in preference to M. L. Fisher by a vote of nine to three. The Secretary pro tem, Mr. Josiah T. Tubby, was authorized to act until Mr. Benton qualified; so that it was not until January 14, 1859, that the latter assumed the duties of an office which, in general, were the same as those with which he had been familiar from the years 1848 to 1854.

Mr. Benton served as Secretary of this first Board. It is significant to note that Benton, who had once been the choice of the people, demonstrated his patriotism by resigning during a period to serve in the Armed Services in the Civil War. It is significant to note also that by a provision of the Board of Education, which was in fact the re-enactment of the law of March 12, 1858, an extraordinary power was conferred upon the Secretary, namely, an ordinance power by which he was authorized to supplement the acts of the Board should any defect due to "oversight" be discovered therein when they were not in session—such rules and regulations were to have the force and effect of law until the matter could be adjusted by the Board. Secretary Benton's second report was made to the Board of Education at their final session in 1861. This contained many recommendations—the published school laws and the amendments thereto made by the General Assembly that had been distributed through the County Superintendents to the counties of the State.

The final report from the Secretary of the Board of Education by

Benton contained documents in the educational field and indicated a very modern philosophy of education by comparison with that of the times.

Mr. H. A. Wiltse was appointed to act in Mr. Benton's stead, and performed the duties of his office as Secretary of the Board of Education from November, 1862 until April, 1863. The State Board of Education held its last session in 1861. The Secretary continued to perform the duties imposed upon that office.

Mr. Oran Faville had been assistant to Mr. Wiltse and had performed many of the duties of the office, and upon Wiltse's retirement, assumed the office of Secretary. The record shows that in December, 1863, the eleventh regular report of the Department was made. In this report was included valuable material relative to graded schools in a course of study which his predecessor, Mr. Wiltse, had recommended. One of the significant things of his report was the fact that he warned that the time had come to consider the matter of compulsory attendance and the Board statistics in favor of this law. He dwelt further upon the State Board of Education, graded schools, textbooks, laws, the school fund and the County Superintendents.

In 1864, in the abolition of the Board of Education, Mr. Faville was elected by the General Assembly to the re-created office of Superintendent of Public Instruction to serve until 1866; it being provided that the choice of the electorate at the general election in 1865 and every two years thereafter, should have the right of electing a Superintendent of Public Instruction for the re-created office.

Mr. Faville was elected in 1865 and served until 1867. During his term he worked hard for, and gained much, in the direction of preparing people for the profession of teaching. He again emphasized the report of the County Superintendents.

To the vacancy which occurred on the resignation of Mr. Faville, Governor Stone appointed D. Franklin Wells. He began the duties of his office on March 9, 1867. Mr. Wells was well qualified, having been trained at the Albany Normal School, and was employed for some years in the public schools of Muscatine. For ten years he directed the Normal branch of the University of Iowa.

On November 24, 1868, Mr. Wells died in office; however, from a study of his reports, his qualifications were unquestioned, his habits were thorough, and his philosophy considered very highly by educational leaders of his time.

Governor Merrill appointed Abram S. Kissell to the vacancy created by the death of Wells, and he began his term January 28, 1869. It appears from the record that a Mr. Lewis I. Coulter served as acting superintendent from the time of Wells' death until Mr. Kissell took office.

The General Assembly of 1868 passed an act increasing the duties assigned the Superintendent of Public Instruction which had to do with the laws concerning the conducting of meetings of County Superintendents and making more clear the work of the County Superintendent.

Mr. Kissell proved to be a very energetic worker, verified by the fact that he traveled over 14,000 miles, which was an unusual distance considering the mode of transportation of that time. Governor Merrill in

his message to the General Assembly in 1870 recommended the appointment of six assistant superintendents. This was based upon the study of what was being done in Massachusetts.

In 1872, Mr. Kissell submitted his final report to the General Assembly. This bears much evidence of his real interest in schools and of his contribution. In his report he again called the attention to the enactment of the compulsory attendance law and the idea of textbooks, the kindergarten system and objective teaching had great emphasis.

The period from 1858 to 1872 as thus summarized is marked by many changes in the supervising authority in the State. If one includes, as it appears one should, the Secretaries of the Board of Education, there were elected or appointed at least five Superintendents of Public Instruction, one Secretary pro tem, and one deputy (who exercised the authority of the Superintendent) during the fourteen years; while the succeeding six Superintendents covered a period of not less than twenty-six years. It was a time of uncertainty in many respects and of trial and proof in others, so that what was rightfully termed supervision was not fully exercised. Much was suggested, but there was little that could be commanded. Throughout there seems to have been a feeling that no system had yet been established—a conclusion which subsequent events justify. Nevertheless, the men, the personalities connected with the office of Superintendent of Public Instruction, were of the highest type.

In January, 1872, Alonzo Abernethy assumed the office of Superintendent of Public Instruction, having been elected in the General Election of 1871. At this time, the school was operating under a three-fold plan of superintendents—state, county and district. It was evident that the provision of the law relative to local or district supervision—that is, by directors—was not complied with to any extent and so the plan could not and did not result in great advancement. The office of County Superintendent which had been provided for some fifteen years past, had not yet been fully established and there existed a difference of opinion as to its usefulness. With this situation, Abernethy gave great emphasis on the improvement that was necessary and the importance of reorganization in support of the County Superintendent plan on the idea of school inspection and visiting by the County Superintendent. The office of County Superintendent was being used as a contact between the district schools in the matter of counsel and advice to those interested in education in their local communities.

In the biennial report, Abernethy gave a review of the school system throughout the years and laid stress on the value of past and current information to show the worth and value of his ideas and also the importance of education in its application to our system and everyday living. This report also brought out the great progress that had been made in the field of education through the history of our State. It is also significant to note that this was the first time that this had been attempted—that a history had been written of its progress.

Mr. Carl W. von Coelln became the successor to Abernethy by election, and through re-election, served six years as head of the school system. Throughout his term came a great clarification of the laws of education and the intent and purpose, as well as the authority, of the state office.

It is significant to note also that during his last term, he declared—and this became an adopted philosophy of school organization—that the school organization could hardly be called a system since the main authority in providing for the actual operation of the schools was located in the board of directors of a district, and while there was state and county supervision, according to statute, this was largely advisory. He brought out also that it would be well to instruct the people in competent inspection and supervision and its benefits.

He also brought out the fact that the importance of the County Superintendent must and should be stressed as should a state office, and because of the expanding philosophy of education and its responsibilities, it should be relieved somewhat of its burdens by assistance of a Board of Education. This is significant.

The Board of Education that he suggested and that was adopted by the State Teachers Association was to serve as an advisory council to the Superintendent. The following representatives of different educational forces in the State constituted the Advisory Body: President Josiah L. Pickard of the State University; President William F. King of Cornell College; Professor Moses W. Bartlett of the State Normal School; Professor Charles E. Bessey of the State Agricultural College; Superintendent Homer H. Seerley of the Oskaloosa City Schools, and Superintendent Rufus H. Frost of Cass County.

The successor to von Coelln was Mr. John W. Akers, who was elected and retained office for six years—1882 to 1888. The record shows that through organized effort by way of conventions, district and county meetings, he was able to do much to further the organization of the high school system. It is important and significant to note also that throughout this period of elective officers, the high school system had developed to the extent that it was recognized for its outstanding features throughout our nation as borne out by the fact that Mr. Akers was offered an opportunity for a collective and exhaustive exhibit illustrating the entire school system of the State to be given at the New Orleans Exposition.

After seventeen years of service to the Clinton schools, Henry Sabin was elected Superintendent of Public Instruction in 1887. Before he had finished his term, he had served eight years—longer than any other in the history of the office. He realized the importance of the County Superintendent's office and exercised his authority in calling County Superintendents to conventions, and according to his reports, a very definite gain was shown in the matter of supervision of schools. He dwelt very much during these years on the question of an enlightened public relative to the principles which should control the election of men for the office of County Superintendent. He recommended closer supervision on the part of the Superintendent and suggested giving more power to that office and said that the functions should be more clearly defined. Sabin was personally responsible for much of the increase of power and duties of his office, and to this end the Twenty-second General Assembly made the Superintendent the ex officio president of the Board of Directors of the State Normal School, president of the State Board of Examiners, president of the educational council of the State Teachers Association, and a member of the Board of Regents of the State University.

In 1896 he observed that the work of the office had practically doubled within the period of eight years, and he pleaded with the General Assembly to give him more help to carry out the true functions of the office. Mr. Sabin's record was such that he can certainly be referred to as one of the great educational leaders of his period.

In 1897, Richard C. Barrett of Mitchell County succeeded Henry Sabin and served a term of six years. He consistently presented the educational needs of the state and was one of the greatest advocates of the most progressive movements then before the people. He made these things definitely clear, and if acted upon, would have removed some obscure passages in the laws governing his office. Because of his experience as a County Superintendent for many years and his thorough knowledge and understanding of educational matters, he spoke with authority and was respected as such. Throughout his term of office, he realized the duplication of effort and in the office of County Superintendent within county organizations, he made some very outstanding recommendations which were followed to a great degree.

In 1903, John F. Riggs of Sigourney was elected and succeeded Barrett in 1904 and due to a constitutional change, served the odd number of seven years in the office. He served during the period of large responsibilities in the office. The new issues which were presented and acted upon, increased largely the duties devolving upon the Superintendent, while the statutory revisions required more than the usual watchfulness to avoid friction in changing from established customs. He pointed out that the responsibilities of the office of the Superintendent were to a large degree correspondence, and should be in the field rather than in the four walls of the office. The records show that the active part he played in visiting several parts of the state and various counties proved his feelings in this matter. It appears that this administration was noted for its efforts to provide facts relative to the necessity of abandoning small schools; and to that end the accumulation of data was made a part of every report. Abandoning schools was a problem even in those days and was based on the question of economy and efficiency. He also dwelt on the question of making teaching a profession and raising the qualifications for teachers.

THE CHANGE TO APPOINTMENT BY GOVERNORS

In 1910, A. M. Deyoe was elected to the office of Superintendent. After serving one year, the office was made appointive by the General Assembly with largely increased powers and longer term of service. The Act of 1913 of the Board of Education extended the term of office of Superintendent of Public Instruction to July 1, 1915, when the first appointee to this office was to assume his duties.

It might be stated here that Mr. Deyoe proved to be one of the great educational leaders of our State, recognized for progressive ideas, integrity and the ability to get along with the educational leaders in the State. During his term of office, many progressive ideas were initiated and carried to a successful conclusion, such as promoting greater interest in

professional attitudes on the part of the teachers, encouraging higher standards of qualifications and instituting the consolidated school system.

In 1918, P. E. McClenahan of Johnson County was elected to the office and served until 1922, it having been provided by the General Assembly that the office be a four-year term. McClenahan was an experienced administrator and carried on much of the progress that was started by Deyoe.

In 1922, Mary E. Francis of Bremer County was elected, she being the first lady to have served in that office. During her term an attitude of misunderstanding developed that resulted in the disruption of the program somewhat. However, it may be said that she was conscious of the responsibilities of the office, and in spite of the disagreements and handicaps caused by the misunderstanding, she did contribute to educational development in our State.

In 1926, Agnes Samuelson was elected to the office and served until 1939—the longest period that anyone has ever served in that office. Miss Samuelson was recognized as a leader, was conscientious in her work, was active in all affairs concerning the teacher and the welfare of the teacher, contributed much to develop the proper attitudes toward teaching and the responsibilities of the teacher and became recognized as a great educational leader of the nation.

In 1938, Miss Jessie Parker of Winnebago County was elected to the office and has been serving in the office with respect and distinction.

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SUPERINTENDENTS OF PUBLIC INSTRUCTION

Name	Home County	Date of First Election or Appointment	Years Served
James Harlan	Henry	April 5, 1847	1847-
Thomas H. Benton, Jr.	Dubuque	April 3, 1848	1848-1854
James D. Eads.	Lee	April 4, 1854	1854-1857
Joseph C. Stone.	Johnson	March 4, 1857	1857-
Maturin L. Fisher.	Clayton	April 1, 1857	1857-1858
Oran Faville	Mitchell	March 26, 1864	1864-1867
D. Franklin Wells.	Johnson	March 4, 1867	1867-1868
Abraham S. Kissell.	Scott	Dec. —, 1868	1868-1872
Alonzo Abernethy	Crawford	Nov. 5, 1871	1872-1876
Carl W. von Coelln.	Black Hawk	Sept. 15, 1876	1876-1882
John W. Akers.	Linn	Oct. 11, 1881	1882-1888
Henry Sabin	Clinton	Nov. 8, 1887	1888-1892
John B. Knoepfler.	Allamakee	Nov. 3, 1891	1892-1894
Henry Sabin	Clinton	Nov. 7, 1893	1894-1898
Richard C. Barrett.	Mitchell	Nov. 2, 1897	1898-1904
John F. Riggs.	Keokuk	Nov. 3, 1903	1904-1910
Albert M. Deyoe.	Hancock	Nov. 8, 1910	1911-1918
P. E. McClenahan.	Johnson	Nov. 5, 1918	1918-1922
May E. Francis.	Bremer	Nov. 7, 1922	1923-1926
Agnes Samuelson	Page	Nov. 2, 1926	1927-1939
Jessie M. Parker.	Winnebago	Nov. 8, 1938	1939-

BRIEF SUMMARY OF THE MANNER OF SELECTION OF SUPERINTENDENT OF PUBLIC INSTRUCTION

Date	Manner of Selection	Salary
1840-1846	Territorial Iowa—appointment by Governor.....	\$ 250.00
1846-1858	Elected by the people.....	1200.00
1858-1864	Board of Education (elected Secretary to Board)....	1200.00
1865-1866	Elected by General Assembly.....	1500.00
1866-1912	Elected by the people.....(1870)	2200.00
1913-1918	Appointed by Governor.....	4000.00
1918-	Elected by the people.....(1931)	4500.00

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