

# A Brief History of Public School Organization in Vermont

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*"No rural education issue has been as long-lived or volatile as the reform of school and district organization."*

*Jonathan P. Sher, 1977*

## **Introduction**

As each generation of citizens reaches a certain age of stewardship, it is natural that they should seek to understand the constructs of society handed down to them from their forbearers. This inquiry may include a study of the system for organizing delivery of public education, a key resource for all modern societies. This modest account seeks to satisfy such understanding of such systems in the State of Vermont.

The history of education in Vermont is itself a larger topic that cannot be adequately addressed in short form. Subjects interwoven with school organization, such as pedagogy and financing, are at least equal partners in formulating a true picture of teaching and learning within the state's borders over the previous four centuries. Nevertheless, for brevity and utility, the following is a focused history of decision-making with regard to organization of public education in the Green Mountain State.

## **Pre-Republic Era (1609 - 1777)**

Records from French settlements in what became Vermont during the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century did not make reference to formal school programs. What education children did receive was at the discretion of parents and priests and likely occurred at home or in church.<sup>i</sup>

As English-speaking settlers immigrated to Vermont during the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century, they brought with them customs from England and southern New England. At minimum, most of these settlers possessed a basic education from their parents, a tutor, or a "common school" (a one-room elementary school that is partially a public institution). These settlers expected their children to learn basic literacy and arithmetic as they had. Town land grants in Vermont (issued from dueling New Hampshire and New York state governments) typically included a designation of at least one lot in each settlement as a school lot. Nevertheless, many settlements did not build a school and education there occurred in homes. Schools that were built were not publically funded; most of their income came from parental fees. Governance of the school was the exclusive domain of the neighborhood parents. There were no standards for the teaching profession; any literate person with knowledge of arithmetic could be judged a suitable instructor.<sup>ii</sup>

## **The Vermont Republic (1777-1791)**

When Vermont declared itself an independent Republic in 1777, its Constitution made explicit reference to the provision of education:

*A school or schools shall be established in each town, by the Legislature, for the convenient instruction of youth, with such salaries to the masters, paid by each town, making proper use of school lands in each town, thereby to enable them to instruct youth at low prices. One grammar school in each county, and one university in this state, ought to be established by direction of the General Assembly.*

Historian John Huden notes that although this constitutional provision appears to prescribe a system of state organization of schools with local funding, that division of authority was widely ignored across Vermont. Both the organization and the funding of school districts continued to be locally directed.<sup>iii</sup> Nearly all school districts were established by town governments. A school board, then called trustees, would be elected at a school district meeting.<sup>iv</sup> This organization followed the pattern of Massachusetts and Connecticut, familiar to many settlers, wherein the state legislature had nominal control of the system but the onus for education delivery rested on local shoulders.

Nevertheless, this era marked the first step towards a centralized and public system of education. In 1782, a law was enacted allowing towns to levy property taxes for at least half of the cost of their common schools, and to levy taxes for school construction.<sup>v</sup>

## **Early Statehood (1791 – 1840)**

The education provisions in Vermont's state Constitution borrowed heavily from the Republic's Constitution, but several changes are notable:

*Laws for the encouragement of virtue, and prevention of vice and immorality ought to be kept in force and duly executed: and a competent number of schools ought to be maintained in each town, for the convenient instruction of youth; and one or more grammar schools be incorporated, and properly supported in each county in this state.*

The state constitution therefore codified existing practice of town governance of schools, placed grammar school (an early version of secondary school) governance at the county level, and omitted any reference to a state university. Starting in 1791, private high school academies sprouted up around the State (though receiving secondary education was not the norm for most children).

Population growth in the first decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century was explosive. Common schools in this era remained a public-private partnership and they became ubiquitous. For example, the town of Northfield had 21 schools and school districts at mid-century.<sup>vi</sup> Statewide, 2,402 schools served about 97,500 students in 1836.<sup>vii</sup>



**Dummerston District 3 Schoolhouse  
circa 1800**

During the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, change was slow and uneven but there was a definite trend towards state authority over public education. In 1797, a new law allowed the Legislature to prescribe the number of weeks in the school year (two months) and to fine towns that refused to support common schools. The financing of schools was entrusted to school trustees. Still, many district schools were poorly funded. As a result, in 1810, the Legislature levied a 1¢ property tax for education; the tax rose to 3¢ by 1826. The first law articulating standards for teacher certification was enacted in 1827; the certification was administered locally by a newly established and elected prudential committee.<sup>viii</sup> Prudential committees (one to three persons, usually one) were administrators of the school who had the authority to hire and fire teachers. School trustees were replaced by “superintendent committees” (another precursor to school boards) who retained control of the finances and oversight of school districts, including textbooks.<sup>ix</sup> Town electorates were empowered to establish, abolish, and modify their school districts as they saw fit. During this era, district lines were modified not infrequently owing to population changes and disputes between community members.<sup>x</sup>

Also in 1827, the Legislature established the first State Board for Common Schools. It was essentially an advisory commission. In 1833, the Board was abolished after having issued an unpopular report that sought to prescribe which texts should be used in public schools.<sup>xi</sup>

## **Development of the Public School System (1840 – 1892)**

The mid-19<sup>th</sup> century saw an end to the rapid in-migration Vermont experienced during its first fifty years of statehood. Westward expansion and the Civil War also contributed to slow the rate of population increase and settlement patterns shifted incrementally from the hills and farms of the State to its villages. In 1833, a new law exempted from a school tax families whose children did not attend; this action suppressed the enrollment of poor families.<sup>xii</sup> All told, many district schools suffered from under-enrollment and poor financial support; some were closed.<sup>xiii</sup>

It was during this period that the public began to debate the merits of offering all children a quality public education. Horace Mann, Massachusetts’s first secretary of its Board of Education, became the most renowned among a group of New England reformers who believed that common schools needed major improvements. Thomas Palmer of Pittsford brought Mann’s thinking to Vermont at an education convention in Brandon during 1841.<sup>xiv</sup> Mann believed that it was in the public interest to provide all children with a tax-supported education with high quality teachers and professional supervision.

Subsequently, a devotee of Mann’s teachings and a fellow Whig politician, Horace Eaton, was elected by the Legislature as Vermont’s first State Superintendent of Common Schools in 1845. That year, the Legislature also established a system of county superintendents appointed by county judges and elected town superintendents (who replaced prudential committees). Town and county superintendents were to visit each teacher and school at least once per year to inspect their condition. County superintendents were to report data to the state superintendent, and to gather teachers and give lectures on pedagogy.<sup>xv</sup> The state superintendent would collect information on the condition and finances of



**Horace Eaton**

schools, and work towards the improvement of common schools.<sup>xvi</sup> County superintendents were abolished four years later; the Legislature decided that the position was impractical and wasteful.<sup>xvii</sup>

During his five-year term, State Superintendent was not a full-time job for Eaton. He also served as Vermont's Lieutenant Governor the first year, and as Governor from 1846-47. All the while, he held a post as professor of science at Middlebury College.<sup>xviii</sup> Nevertheless, Eaton's appointment was an indication that Vermont was much a part of the New England common school reform movement headed by Mann. Eaton described his tenure as a battle with "... the paradise of ignorant teachers ... located in the small school districts."<sup>xix</sup> Eaton also criticized the condition of schools, noting that, "... the buildings themselves too generally exhibit an unfavorable, and even repulsive aspect."<sup>xx</sup>

The impact of Eaton, Mann and the philosophy they espoused was influential, but not immediate. At the time Eaton stepped down in 1850, common schools remained organized in small districts, parents paid fees, and the post of state superintendent went mostly unfilled. A succession of governors continued to push for reform, as did J. S. Adams, another Mann devotee who served as the Secretary of a new State Board of Education from 1857 through 1867. In 1864, the Legislature finally mandated that common schools be fee-free and tax-supported.<sup>xxi</sup> In 1867, school attendance became compulsory for all children ages 8-14.<sup>xxii</sup> Teacher training and compensation was improved. In 1886, Vermont provided for the establishment of Kindergarten.<sup>xxiii</sup>

In 1870, the Legislature passed a controversial law allowing towns to consolidate their district schools into single town-wide school systems. During the following 22 years, only 40 towns out of 248 adopted a town school system, and 15 of these later abandoned the structure and returned to district schools.<sup>xxiv</sup>

### **Mason Stone, the Carnegie Report, and Rapid Reform (1892 - 1916)**

In 1892, reformists calling for mandatory school district consolidation won their only substantial victory in the history of Vermont to date. District schools were abolished by the Legislature and town school systems became mandatory; overnight, Vermont transformed from a system with more than 2,500 districts to one with fewer than 300, as it remains today. Historian Jonathan Sher attributes the Legislature's action to "...eloquent advocacy of reform by state-level progressives."<sup>xxv</sup> The *Burlington Free Press* took a firm stance on school organization, editorializing in 1884, "[The state superintendent's] report calls for sweeping changes but the *Free Press* believes them well founded. The district system is a relic of barbarism."<sup>xxvi</sup> The rationale was for professional management of schools to reform many inadequate district schools long forgotten by town and state governments.<sup>xxvii</sup> Town school boards were established to oversee all of the town's schools, teachers and school finances.

Once it was established, the town school system quickly became an established norm. The last serious (and unsuccessful) effort in the Legislature to revert to district schools occurred in 1894.<sup>xxviii</sup>

Following the consolidation, a period of rapid change was initiated under the purview of State Superintendent Mason Stone (1892 – 1916, excluding 1902-1904). During this time, the state took control of teachers' schools and teacher certification. Districts were required to provide students with free textbooks and the length of the school year was extended to 34 weeks. Maintenance of a high school became required in all towns with a population of at least 2,500, and soon after, high school was made a fee-free service for all citizens, though attendance was not mandatory. Town superintendents were required to make recommendations on hiring prospective teachers and were directed to supervise employed teachers beginning in 1910.<sup>xxix</sup> In 1896, the Legislature allowed for several town districts to jointly employ a superintendent, professionalizing oversight of education in a "supervisory union."<sup>xxx</sup>

In 1914, at the request of the Governor and the Legislature, a commission was formed to study the educational system of Vermont. The commission invited the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching to implement the study; the Foundation and the commission issued a influential report with recommendations to improve education in Vermont. The commission was comprised of Vermonters and national educational experts from the Carnegie Foundation. The Commission visited 200 elementary schools and 36 of Vermont's 77 high schools.<sup>xxxi</sup> The report noted the devotion to education in the State (for example, it found that Vermont had among the highest school enrollment of youth in the country), and it praised the dedication of teachers, although it was critical of their lack of training and access to resources.<sup>xxxii</sup>

The Carnegie report made recommendations on improving educational services. The recommendations were praised for their comprehensive and scientific nature. The report recommended that oversight of schools should consider them as "... a whole, and that shall bring every high school and to every elementary school genuine, sympathetic educational advice."<sup>xxxiii</sup> Every elementary school teacher should be provided with "... a clearly defined and feasible program of work suited to the locality." A single teacher training school for all secondary school teachers in Vermont was also recommended.<sup>xxxiv</sup>

Regarding state oversight, the Report recommended that public schools be "... free from political entanglement." It suggested the establishment of a permanent State Board of Education with members appointed by the Governor, and a Commissioner of Education who would report to the Board. The



Map of District Supervision from Huden's *Development of State School Administration*

position of commissioner would replace state superintendent; therefore, the chief school officer in Vermont would become an agent of the Board and not the governor or legislature. The purpose was to further institute state oversight of public education while insulating its administration from political motivations. Those recommendations and several others were adopted by the Legislature the following spring, and the State Board of Education was created.<sup>xxxv</sup>

### **Professionalization of Education (1916 – 1945)**

Following the Carnegie report, the State Board of Education appointed professional superintendents to oversee contiguous groups of districts by mandating a statewide supervisory union structure. This was a controversial action towards centralization that displaced the elected town superintendent model still popular in much of the state. The new superintendents were paid by and reported directly to the State Board of Education. Each was to supervise approximately 50 teachers, and they were generally considered effective and popular.<sup>xxxvi</sup> Nevertheless, their recommendations for improving schooling were not always embraced by school boards.<sup>xxxvii</sup>

The Legislature retreated from centralized supervision of public education in 1919, when it allowed supervisory unions to select their own superintendents (an authority they retain today), and again in 1923 when it allowed towns to secede from the supervisory union and once again elect a town superintendent.<sup>xxxviii</sup> Approximately sixty towns broke away from supervisory unions but the trend eventually reversed and, in 1935, the Legislature reestablished mandatory supervisory union membership managed by a professional superintendent.

In 1915, the State Board established standards for public schools and directed state inspectors to grade each on a points system (three times as many points were awarded for a suitable building and equipment as were awarded for a quality teacher).<sup>xxxix</sup> This, in conjunction with the recent change to state certification of teachers, marked the beginning of state oversight of school quality. The method and rigor by which the State judged schools evolved over the years, but the authority for the state to measure school quality became firmly entrenched in the public educational system.



**School Certification Plaque,  
Mid 20<sup>th</sup> century**

Professional management of schools, state oversight of school quality, better transportation options, and sometimes-poor economic conditions were contributing factors that facilitated a transition from one-room common schools to modern elementary schools during this era. In 1917, 1,250 one-room schoolhouses educated the vast majority of elementary students. By the 1930s, the number remaining had dropped by 25 percent, and by 1947, there were fewer than 600 one-room schoolhouses.<sup>xli</sup>

From 1935 through the late 1950s, several studies of education organization were undertaken, but no changes to the structure of the system were enacted. Despite repeated calls for consolidation of schools and districts, the public resisted systemic change. Eventually, the perceptions of the needs of the education system and world politics drove the next phase of change.

## **Emergence of the Modern School Landscape (1945 – 1980)**

By the mid-1950s, the discourse among education reformers, nationally and within Vermont, focused on school district consolidation (for efficiency) and school consolidation (to ensure schools had sufficient enrollment to provide a broad, modern curriculum). This era saw a continuation and acceleration of the closure of one-room schoolhouses, leading to their near-extinction by 1965 (just 22 remained that year).<sup>xiii</sup> Early Soviet space exploration, highlighted by the launch of the Sputnik satellite, served to draw attention to reformers' calls for high quality high school education with an emphasis on science. Vermont's Commissioner of Education during this period was Dr. A. John Holden, Jr.; Holden led the implementation of new curricular requirements and instructional techniques.<sup>xliii</sup>

Commissioner Holden and his predecessor Ralph Noble also strongly supported the creation of union high school districts (wherein several towns unite for the provision and administration of a high school). The Commissioner believed that mandatory consolidation would not be successfully foisted upon local school districts so he adopted a strategy of persuasion and information. Holden's Education Department issued pamphlets reasoning that aligning high school districts to be inclusive of several communities centered on a regional economic and cultural center would provide a larger tax base and better programs than could be provided by town high schools.<sup>xliii</sup> Nevertheless, many small towns preferred not to join a union and when the union school district law was crafted by the Legislature, it was made permissive, not mandatory. During this era, professional educators and the business community joined the Commissioner in supporting voluntary school consolidation.<sup>xlv</sup>

By 1965, two dozen union school districts were created throughout the state,<sup>xlvi</sup> but it is notable that at least ten proposals to form a union district were defeated at the ballot box as well.<sup>xlvii</sup> By 1970, most of the 30-plus union districts in existence today had been formed, including an innovative interstate school district that linked the towns of Norwich, Vermont and Hanover, New Hampshire. A half-dozen "joint contract schools" were also created in the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century; these entities are physically similar to union schools but retained a town structure for governance and financing.

Many of the same reformers who believed small town high schools were insufficiently preparing students also advocated for the creation of a system of technical and vocational education that would serve 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> graders as well as adults. Federal and state laws passed in 1963 and 1964 charged the State Board of Education with developing technical and vocational centers for each region within the state. Six opened within a few years, and by 1980, 16 technical centers were operating in Vermont, allowing eligible students from any district to access technical training.<sup>xlviii</sup>



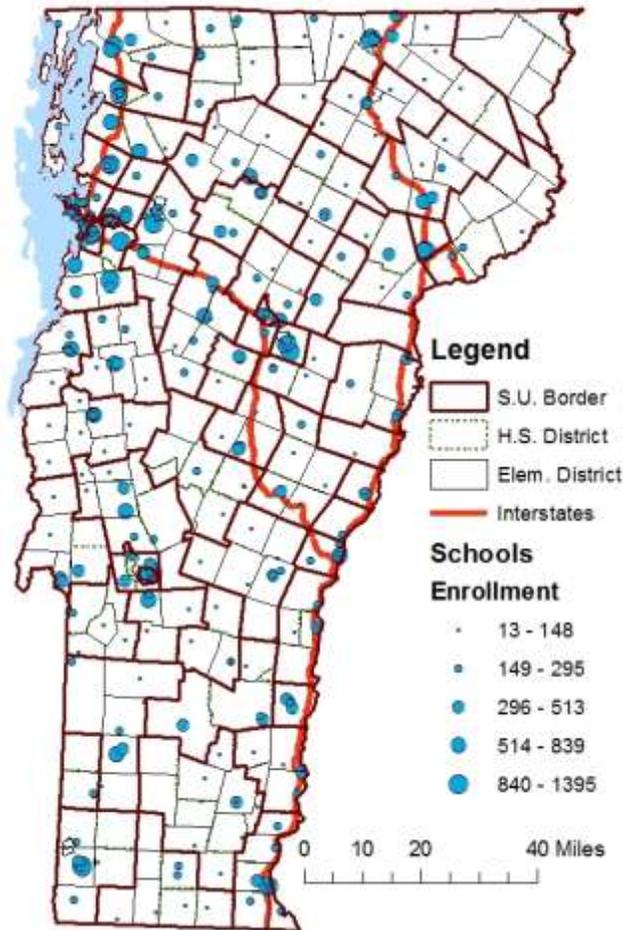
**Green Mountain Technical Career Center in Hyde Park**

The union school and vocational school movement had a tangible impact on high school attendance. In 1950, the dropout rate was approximately 50 percent and Vermont's public high school capacity was insufficient to serve all children. After union high schools were built, capacity increased approximately 70 percent, and vocational centers served about 2,000 additional students. By 1975, the dropout rate was reduced to 15 percent.<sup>xlix</sup>

### **Contemporary Trends (1980 - 2011)**

The union school and technical center movements remain the most recent systemic changes to school organization in Vermont. As in earlier decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, a succession of state leaders (including Governors Hoff, Kunin and Douglas, and Commissioners of Education Mills, Cate and Vilaseca) advocated for school district consolidation, usually suggesting a plan to collapse districts along supervisory union or technical center region boundaries. In the requisite position papers that accompany these proposals, a cursory listing of the benefits of consolidation was often paired with a brief history of past efforts towards centralization. Examined today, one cannot help but be amused by these series of recapitulations, each near uniform in its statement of problem, vision for solution, and lack of success in implementation.

In 2010, the Legislature was once again grappling with ideas presented by advocates for district consolidation and those who extolled the virtues of town-level democracy. The Legislature chose a middle ground, enacting Act 153, a law providing limited state support for locally driven school consolidation initiatives. Act 153 also required all supervisory unions to assume additional management responsibilities on behalf of their member districts. As of this writing, two dozen district and supervisory union voluntary merger studies are underway. Four votes have been taken to merge districts according to the provisions of Act 153, but only one was successful. The law, the studies and the votes could be dually interpreted to say that interest remains in effecting significant governance changes in Vermont, but that Vermonters remain skeptical of the benefits of larger school districts.



**Vermont's Schools and Districts in 2009**

## **Conclusion**

Vermont has a long and proud tradition of valuing public education, as enshrined in its 18<sup>th</sup> century Constitutions, the visionary Carnegie report, and the well-funded and popular public schools of today.

Over more than two centuries, Vermonters have grappled with balancing the benefits of centralized and professional educational delivery with those of traditional New England democracy and local accountability. At times, the State has embraced and even led national trends in education, and at other moments, it has resisted the same with at least equal vigor. The long-range trend has been towards centralization. Nevertheless, it would be incorrect to ascribe that movement in Vermont education as a natural and immutable progression of history, mirroring trends in technological and cultural change. As those twin engines churn relentlessly into the new millennium, Vermont's most significant alterations to its public school organization are now a century old.

Education is such a critical public service that it is a virtual certainty that the future will bring more debates, more studies, and more cries for organizational change that promise enhanced efficacious outcomes for children and the State. This discourse will seek to balance or upset competing local, state, and federal spheres of authority, knowledge and vision. At its best, this discourse will be healthy for the stewardship of the educational endeavor. When change occurs, it will be dictated to an extent by the circumstances of the times, but to a greater degree, by the will of citizens of the State.

*The author is grateful for the academic research provided by the authors cited below. This work is substantially a distillation and recapitulation of earlier efforts, updated and formatted for the contemporary reader.*

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<sup>ii</sup> Huden, p. 56

<sup>iii</sup> Huden, p. 16

<sup>iv</sup> Douglas, James H. and Paul S. Gillies. *A Book of Opinions*. Office of the (Vermont) Secretary of State: July, 1992. p. 498

<sup>v</sup> Douglas, p. 498

<sup>vi</sup> Douglas, p. 504

<sup>vii</sup> Huden, p. 69

<sup>viii</sup> Huden, p. 65

<sup>ix</sup> Stone, Mason. *History of Education*, Capital City Press: Montpelier. 1935. p. 53

<sup>x</sup> Stone, p. 57

<sup>xi</sup> Huden, p. 35

<sup>xii</sup> Douglas, p. 498

<sup>xiii</sup> Richardson, Bruce A. *Education Governance Studies in Vermont: The Search for the Ever-Elusive Silver Bullet of School Reform*. Doctoral Dissertation, University of Vermont. 1994. p. 18

<sup>xiv</sup> Huden., p. 53

- <sup>xv</sup> Stone, p. 66
- <sup>xvi</sup> Douglas, p. 499
- <sup>xvii</sup> Huden, p. 73
- <sup>xviii</sup> Huden, p. 52
- <sup>xix</sup> Richardson, p. 19
- <sup>xx</sup> Kenny, Jody. *The Vermont Schoolmarm and the Contemporary One-Room Schoolhouse: An Ethnographic Study of a Contemporary One-Room Schoolteacher*. University of Vermont: 1990. p. 3
- <sup>xxi</sup> Huden, p. 75
- <sup>xxii</sup> Douglas, p. 500
- <sup>xxiii</sup> Huden, p. 81
- <sup>xxiv</sup> Huden, p. 82
- <sup>xxv</sup> Richardson, p. 23
- <sup>xxvi</sup> Huden, p. 244
- <sup>xxvii</sup> Huden, p. 82
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- <sup>xxix</sup> Richardson, p. 5
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- <sup>xxxii</sup> Kenny, p. 5
- <sup>xxxiii</sup> Richardson, p. 35
- <sup>xxxiv</sup> Richardson, p. 37
- <sup>xxxv</sup> Richardson, p. 39
- <sup>xxxvi</sup> Stone, p.71
- <sup>xxxvii</sup> Huden, p. 41
- <sup>xxxviii</sup> Huden, p. 91
- <sup>xxxix</sup> Richardson, p. 40
- <sup>xl</sup> Lengel, James G. “Local and State Responsibility” (unpublished memorandum to Phil Hoff & Emory Hebard). Department of Education: August 18, 1987. p. 2.
- <sup>xli</sup> Kenny, p. 2
- <sup>xlii</sup> Kenny, p. 1
- <sup>xliii</sup> Mathis, William J., *Accelerating Change: Vermont Education 1965-1995*. Unpublished study. Center on Research on Vermont, University of Vermont. 1996. p. 10
- <sup>xliv</sup> Richardson, p. 54
- <sup>xliv</sup> Richardson, p.142
- <sup>xlvi</sup> Mathis, p. 10
- <sup>xlvii</sup> Nuquist, Andrew E. and Edith W. Nuquist. *Vermont State Government and Administration: An Historical and Descriptive Study of the Living Past*. Government Research Center, University of Vermont, 1966. p. 280
- <sup>xlviii</sup> Mathis, p. 20
- <sup>xlix</sup> Lengel, p. 3