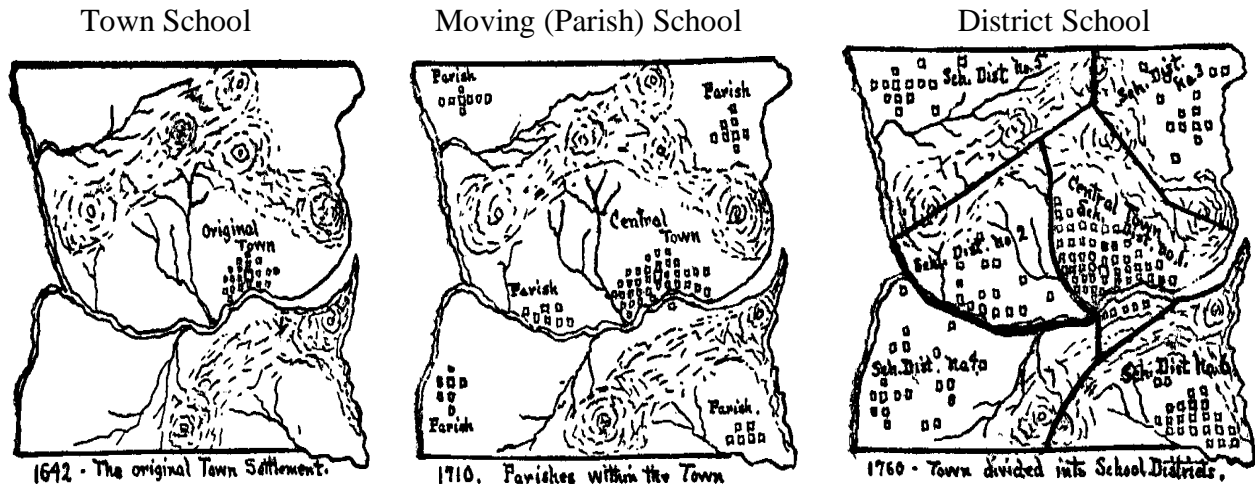


## The Historical Development of the *Independent* School District...

1642-1760: From *Town School* -- *Moving School* -- *District School*



**FIG. 11. SHOWING THE EVOLUTION OF THE DISTRICT SYSTEM IN MASSACHUSETTS**

### 1702: The Earliest Historical Record of "Moving School"

An example of such a moving school is found in the town record of Malden, Massachusetts, for 1702. It reads as follows :

John Sprague is chosen schoolmaster for ye year ensuing to teach children to read and write and to refmetik according to his best skill, and he is to have ten pounds paid him by ye town for his pains. The school is to be free for all ye inhabitants of this town: and to be kept in four several places, one quarter of a year in a place.

Samuel Chester Parker, *The History of Modern Elementary Education*, 1912. 1970 Edition by Littlefield Adams & Co., p. 255.

### 1789-1827: The Creation of the *Independent* District School System

In 1789 the state legislature passed a fundamental law legalizing many of the practices that had grown up, including the district system. At first each district enjoyed only the privilege of using its share of the town tax to support its own small school, but in 1800 the districts themselves were authorized to levy school taxes. In 1817 they were made corporations with power to enforce contracts, etc., and in 1827 were empowered to choose a committeeman who had charge of the school property and of the employment of teachers.

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**1870: A British Observer's Comment:**

Massachusetts was the first State in which a common school law was enacted. Upon the model set up by this State all the New England States and many other States of the North and North-West have founded their school systems. In Massachusetts, and all the New England States, the township is the "political unit" upon which lies the obligation to make provision for education; <sup>(1)</sup> and the township as the area of the school district has been adopted in Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Ohio, Missouri, and some other States. <sup>(2)</sup>

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Although, at first sight, the area of a school district may appear to be an unimportant matter of detail, yet upon it, as the experience of the United States has proved, the efficiency of any school system largely depends. The most formidable difficulty which the American system has encountered has arisen out of this question. This is what is known in the United States as "the district system." It had its origin in a law passed in Massachusetts in 1789, authorising the division of townships into districts for school purposes. The original object of the law, Fraser remarks, was innocent and praiseworthy; the result has been to create a most powerful impediment to the easy working of the system.

.....

Mr. Horace Mann said that this was "the most unfortunate law on the subject of common schools ever enacted by the State."<sup>(1)</sup> Unfortunately, it was not confined to Massachusetts. The spirit of the law was in harmony with the strong political predilection of Americans—the right of each locality to govern within its own limits; and the system was adopted in New York and many other States, before its action in Massachusetts had demonstrated the mischief it would occasion.

### **1800s: *An Evil Effect of The Local Control...***

The school district now, from being a mere social convenience, has become a political institution. . . . The year 1827, therefore, is a memorable one. It marks the culmination of a process which had been going on for more than a century. It marks the utmost limit to the subdivision of American sovereignty — the high-water mark of modern democracy, and the low-water mark of the Massachusetts school system.

*Selfish political strife dominated school districts.* — The school districts as thus organized became seething centers of selfish political activity, motivated by petty private interests, usually opposed to the common good. The election of the school committeeman, the selection of the site of the school building, the employment of the teacher—all became issues in intense local strife.

In most of the States the system soon ran rampant. The district meeting became a forensic center in which questions the most remote and personal animosities of long standing were fought out. Petty local interests and a “dog-in-the-manger spirit” too often prevailed, to the great detriment of the schools. District jealousies prevented needed development. An exaggerated idea of district rights, district importance, and district perfection became common. District independence was often carried to a great extreme.

In Massachusetts, for example, Horace Mann found that in two thirds of the towns teachers were allowed to begin teaching without any examination or certification, and frequently were paid without either; that the trustees refused generally to require uniform textbooks, or to furnish them to poor children, as required by the law; and that one third of the children of school age in the State were absent from school in the winter and two fifths in the summer, without the trustees concerning themselves in any way about the situation. In Ohio the trustees “forbade the teaching of any branches except reading, writing, and arithmetic,” and in

1866

## No Means of Measuring Students' Accomplishment

In such an inquiry as we now propose to make, there meets us at the threshold the difficulty of establishing any standard by which the proficiency of a child or a school in good learning shall be determined. Each of the several States being left to adopt its own scheme, and to determine what shall be the method and the measure of education, imparted at public expense, to all classes of children and youth within its bounds, it is quite impossible to secure that uniformity of method, or thoroughness of administration, or strictness of responsibility which a well-managed national bureau might achieve. The whole work is fragmentary and immethodical. Each State must have a different standard, grade or measure of school culture. It must have its own mode of preparing and employing teachers, of paying school expenses, supplying books and superintending the movements of the machinery. Some have boards of education, some superintendents of public instruction; others manage their schools by committees, and in not a few cases are they left in a great measure to take care of themselves. And even when the reports of any two States happen to embrace the same items *in form*, they are made up on different bases, and no comparative deductions can be made from them. This will be obvious if we contrast any of our State reports with the reports of the Committee of the Privy Council on Education in England, or of other European countries, in which we have a single connected view of the working of the whole machinery and all its connections and results, as if it were the report of a parish or district school.

If we look over our vast territory, we shall find indeed a very liberal expenditure in this department of public affairs, and in many of the States an imposing array of functionaries charged with the special duty of making the schools prolific of wise and good men and women; but if the details are investigated with candour and thoroughness, it will be found, we apprehend, that the faculties have been exercised very much at random, that what has been attained has been almost as much the result of accident as design, and that a dull routine has oftentimes weakened and wearied the immature mind that should have been excited and led forward to ennobling pursuits.

Frederic A. Packard, The Daily Public School in the United States, 1866

## The Evil Outcome of the Independent District School System

### 1892: First School Survey Conducted by Dr. John Rice, a Pediatrician

I was thus enabled to observe more than twelve hundred teachers at their work. In all, the schools of thirty-six cities, and some twenty institutions for the training of teachers, were visited.

#### Rice Report:

As the characteristic feature of the American school system lies in the fact that each city, each county, and in some States each country district has practically the privilege of conducting its schools in accordance with any whim upon which it may decide, it is but natural that the schools of different cities should vary considerably in their standing.

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Besides, this analysis will be the means of showing clearly why the schools of different localities vary so much, and where the roots of all educational evils must be sought.

**1902:** Dr. Rice conducted a math test of **6000** students from 4<sup>th</sup> to 8<sup>th</sup> grades distributed through eighteen school buildings in seven cities. The results:

|                               | GRADES  |         |         |         |         | SCHOOL AVERAGE | Minutes Daily |
|-------------------------------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|----------------|---------------|
|                               | IV      | V       | VI      | VII     | VIII    |                |               |
|                               | Results | Results | Results | Results | Results | Results        |               |
| City III . . . . .            | 68.4    | 79.5    | 79.3    | -81.1   | -91.7   | -80.0          | 53            |
| City I . . . . .              | 72.7    | -84.7   | 80.4    | 64.2    | 80.9    | 76.6           | 60            |
| City I . . . . .              | —       | 80.3    | -80.9   | 43.5    | 72.7    | 69.3           | 45            |
| City I . . . . .              | 54.5    | 74.7    | 72.2    | 63.5    | 74.5    | 67.8           | 45            |
| City I . . . . .              | 60.0    | 70.8    | 69.6    | 54.6    | 66.5    | 64.3           | 45            |
| City II . . . . .             | -81.3   | 78.2    | 71.2    | 33.6    | 36.8    | 60.2           | 60            |
| City III . . . . .            | 70.1    | 53.6    | 43.7    | 53.9    | 51.1    | 54.5           | 60            |
| City IV . . . . .             | 70.5    | 73.2    | 58.9    | 31.2    | 41.6    | 55.1           | 60            |
| City IV . . . . .             | 62.9    | 70.5    | 59.8    | —       | 22.5    | 53.9           | —             |
| City IV . . . . .             | 59.8    | 65.3    | 54.9    | 35.2    | 43.5    | 51.5           | 60            |
| City IV . . . . .             | 53.5    | 53.5    | 42.3    | 16.1    | 48.7    | 42.8           | —             |
| City V . . . . .              | 38.5    | 67.0    | 44.1    | 29.2    | 51.1    | 45.9           | 40            |
| City VI . . . . .             | -28.1   | 38.1    | 68.3    | 33.5    | 26.9    | 39.0           | 33            |
| City VI . . . . .             | 41.6    | 45.3    | 46.1    | 19.5    | 30.2    | 36.5           | 30            |
| City VI . . . . .             | 36.8    | 55.0    | 34.5    | 30.5    | 23.3    | 36.0           | 48            |
| City VII . . . . .            | 59.3    | 53.7    | 35.2    | 29.1    | 25.1    | 40.5           | 42            |
| City VII . . . . .            | 47.4    | 65.4    | 35.2    | 15.0    | 19.6    | 36.5           | 45            |
| City VII . . . . .            | 41.1    | -37.5   | -27.6   | -8.9    | -11.3   | -25.3          | 45            |
| General Average .             | 59.5    | 69.4    | 60.7    | 39.4    | 49.4    | 55.7           | —             |
| Number of pupils examined . . |         |         |         |         |         | Total,         | 5963          |

Dr. J. M. Rice, The Public-School System of the United States, 1893.