

# The History of Public Education in Georgia

By

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Public education is probably one of the most critical issues of our times. For that reason, I was pleased to accept the challenge for making a presentation on the history of public education in Georgia. I was duly mindful of the discerning audience of Georgia historians I was to address. Therefore, I carefully selected viable references which could augment my perceptions which reflect nearly three decades of educational service in Georgia. My search of the literature on this subject was extensive, my findings were humbling, and I hope that the synthesis that I present here this evening will be informative so as to spark your further investigations.

The public schools in Georgia have long struggled in a pursuit for excellence without the financial support commensurate with national averages. The state has established a highly adequate framework for providing a good educational system for its citizens. Nothing more has been needed except funds to fully implement some very well thought out educational programs.

The challenge is apparent: Georgia citizens will receive no more or less than what they are willing to pay for

education. If education is deemed to be expensive, as some claim, then ignorance has proven to be more than twice as expensive. We must help people understand this, and for that reason my presentation will highlight significant points in the history of public education in Georgia. A better understanding of the development of Georgia public education can help us appreciate present conditions, and can thereby help us shape the future.

The history of public education in Georgia can be divided into three periods:

1. The Developmental Period when education was available only to those who could afford it.
2. The Established School Period where during the era of Reconstruction the state assumed a role of responsibility for public education.
3. The Equalization Period when the state began to struggle with integration and equal educational opportunities.

#### The Developmental Period

The Developmental Period began in colonial times when Georgia settlers were much more interested in survival than in education. The harsh reality of pioneer life was that children were needed to help clear forests, build roads, construct houses, and plant and harvest crops. Education was considered a privilege of the wealthy, not a right for all colonial citizens. The colonial schools were not really

public because no public funds were used for their support, and there was a clear emphasis on religious instruction.

After the Revolutionary War, Georgia ratified the first state constitution which provided for public schools to be erected in each county and supported at the general expense of the state. However, that directive did not appropriate any funds for implementation. The state constitution of 1798 permitted the legislature to establish local schools, and by 1850 Georgia had 219 chartered academies. Although these were not free public schools and only the children whose parents could afford to pay tuition were able to attend, they served as a foundation for the development of public education. Black Georgians were not considered in any of these early developments because slaves were excluded by law from public education. Nevertheless, in colonial days, the Georgia trustees required all masters to teach their slaves the Christian religion (The Colonial Records, GX11-2).

Some communities tried to fill the gap in public education by erecting one room log buildings in barren old fields. The "Old Field Schools" held two month per year school terms, and the schoolmaster was usually a drifter hired by community parents. There was no state or county funding for these "Old Field Schools", and a large number of children did not go to school at all. In 1817, the legislature passed an act to

establish a fund for the support of these schools throughout the state. Each county was to receive funds for children whose parents could not afford to pay tuition. As a result, for fifty years or more the stigma of "Poor Schools" applied to public education in Georgia. The poor people in Georgia rejected with contempt the pittance doled out to their children, and in 1845 only 53 of 93 counties applied for their share of the fund. The "Poor School Fund" was a failure because many proud Georgians chose to let their children grow up illiterate rather than to be labeled "poor" (Mayo 1987).

Church-supported "Manual Labor Schools" were also begun in the early 1800s. These schools allowed students to work in school owned agricultural fields a part of the day to defray the cost of tuition. Many legislators felt that this was an excellent idea, but they were unsuccessful in providing state aid for the schools. As a results, the census of 1850 indicated that only one-fourth of Georgia's white population was being educated.

During the Civil War, there were no organized school programs in Georgia, and at the end of the war the state was destitute and all governmental structure was dismantled. Georgia's economy was destroyed, and the social order of the state was greatly changed. After the War, the education of black children improved somewhat. Under the Freedmen's



Bureau, the federal government spent \$6 million in staffing 2,500 black schools throughout the South. In Georgia, the Freedmen's Bureau reported 66 schools, 66 teachers, and 3,500 pupils. Although short-lived, it was the first public education provided for blacks in the state. The Freedmen's Bureau schools reached only about 10 percent of all black children, black adult illiterates were very little affected, and blacks who did enroll attended the schools irregularly. Therefore, the effectiveness of the Freedmen's Bureau was not as great as it could have been for black education (Thompson 1971).

It should be noted that the newly freed slaves saw education as the real symbol of their freedom, and as a result large numbers of freedmen sought an education with some diligence. In fact, the greatest postbellum success among blacks was realized in education. Postwar southern education was a racial issue of immense proportions, even greater than the cultural emphasis on voting and going to church (Clark and Kirwan 1967). Black ministers such as Bishop Daniel A. Payne and James F. Cook established church schools that later became the foundations for black public education. By 1870, twenty-one percent of all blacks were able to read and write. Blacks were eager to demonstrate that they could learn and that they could make substantial contributions as useful citizens.

During Reconstruction, Georgia's teachers banded together to form the Georgia Teachers' Association in an effort to establish a system of public education. Using grant money obtained from George Peabody, the Association formed a committee to develop a state system of public education. These teachers lobbied for educational reform, and worked diligently to win the support of state legislators. As a result, the Constitution of 1868 provided for:

1. The establishment of a system of general education to be free for all children of the state and to be paid from tax funds.
2. The governor to appoint the State School Commissioner.
3. Taxes levied on shows, carnivals, "spirituous liquors," and poll tax to be used for public education (Joiner 1979).

Black state legislators played a pivotal role in writing education into the 1868 Constitution. They served in the General Assembly that passed laws in 1870 which: (1) provided for a state Board of Education, (2) outlined procedures for selecting textbooks, (3) set the apportionment of school funds based on the census of school-age children, (4) established licensing procedures for teachers, and (5) set the school term at three months per year (Joiner 1979). They specified that county school boards were to be established and defined the duties of the county school commissioners as well as the State School Commissioner. However, a glaring omission was the

failure to grant county boards of education the authority to levy school taxes to supplement state funds. Also, the politics of the times did not allow the legislature to tax property to fund public schools, despite the fact that the 1868 Constitution provided for it.

The issue of funding for public education had been a stumbling block in the South even before the Civil War. The Reconstruction legislators therefore saw an opportunity to correct a condition long in need of redress, and they had that in mind when they rewrote Georgia's state constitution in 1868. However, no adequate campaign was conducted to sell the concept of universal education for blacks and whites on its own merits. White southerners failed to discern the value of public education for themselves, and were blinded by unmitigated racial prejudice. In fact, the two main sources of resistance shown by southern whites in the years 1870-1876 were in the areas of (1) biracial education and (2) taxes for education (Clark and Kirwan 1967). Consequently, no adequate state appropriations or taxes were made for public education in Georgia during the 19th Century.

#### The Established School Period

The Established School Period began by providing for the instruction of white and black students in separate schools. In 1871, black students represented only four percent of the



state's total enrollment. When Dr. Gustavus James Orr was appointed State School Commissioner in 1872, he brought to the job a genuine concern for the fair and equitable treatment of black children. He faced a difficult public relations problem, as many Georgians viewed the common schools set up during the Reconstruction period as "Yankee schools." Further, the emancipation of slaves had almost doubled the number of children to be educated, while state tax revenues had substantially decreased. Many citizens felt that only those taxes paid directly by black citizens should be used for the support of black schools. If adopted, such a policy would have virtually eliminated black children from public education. Commissioner Orr argued that black children had a moral as well as a legal right to free education along with white children. He prophetically wrote,

The white and colored races are so dissolubly lined together that they are destined . . . to be common occupants of our territory. . . It is certainly [to] the highest interest of both races that reasonable means be used for their elevation and improvement (Joiner 1979, 86).

During Orr's sixteen year tenure as state commissioner, he worked in vain to give black children a full share of Georgia's educational opportunities (Ga. Dept. of Education 1876).

The funding for public schools continued to be a serious problem. In the period of redemption, the public schools were



not highly valued by the white conservatives who regained control of the state legislature. The conservatives were willing to sacrifice the education of the state's poor whites rather than to build upon the fairly equitable school system established by the so-called "Radical Republicans." However, they successfully gerry-mandered state funding for white schools. In 1904, the legislature passed an amendment empowering each county to organize board of education districts of sixteen square miles, and gave counties the right to levy taxes on property to support public schools.

Georgia was one of the three last states in the nation to establish high schools. The lack of high schools in the state was a serious problem and was not addressed until 1911 (Joiner 1979). In that year the General Assembly passed a package of new school laws which added public high schools to Georgia education. The 1911 laws also made the county superintendents responsible for consolidating schools and arranging for transportation for students who lived more than three miles away. New standards for teacher certification included the requirement that each teacher pass an examination on Georgia history and have at least two years of high school and two years of college.

Two Georgians, Senator Hoke Smith and Representative Dudley Hughes, were responsible for a national thrust in vocational

education. In 1917 the United States Congress passed the Smith-Hughes Act providing federal funding for vocational education in agriculture, trade, industry, and home economics. Teacher salaries, teacher training, and administrative costs were also included in this seed money that was matched by each state. The Smith-Hughes Act of 1917 stands today as the cornerstone for subsequent acts of federal legislation for vocational education (Thompson 1973). Since that time, it has been the foundation for a partnership among federal, state, and local governments. Subsequent acts have greatly affected economic development for business and industry nationwide, and have aided students who do not pursue a baccalaureate degree but who seek gainful employment. In Georgia, the acts have been a primary source of funding for the 32 postsecondary technical institutes and hundreds of vocational programs located in comprehensive high schools throughout the state.

The move toward consolidating schools continued in Georgia during the 1920s, and financial assistance rewarded counties for consolidating. About 3,500 small rural schools were consolidated into 900 larger, better equipped schools with better trained faculties. The state continued the effort to equalize support for public schools across the state. As tax support for schools differed from district to district, so did the quality of education. For example, yearly teacher

salaries ranged from \$292 in one area to \$1,418 in another area (Joiner 1979). In 1926, the General Assembly passed a law providing that gasoline taxes be used to "equalize" educational funding in poor districts.

During the economic depression of the 1930s, local school support virtually collapsed. In many communities bank failures, tax delinquencies, credit shortages, and personal losses made existing school support wholly inadequate and impossible. The state school superintendent led a statewide campaign to support candidates in favor of educational reform. In 1937, the legislature enacted new school laws which provided for a state- supported school term of seven months, free textbooks, and a state board of education. Again, as in the past, the legislature established adequate programs for public education but failed to make adequate provisions to finance them.

One of the most productive elements emerging from the depression years was the construction and rehabilitation of school buildings in most local school systems by the Works Progress Administration (WPA). The WPA also organized and maintained numerous courses in general and vocational education. Blacks received special attention and held 47 percent of the WPA teacher's jobs (Joiner 1979). This work provided employment for those in need of jobs as well as

supplementing public education. The State Superintendent of Schools was successful in securing WPA financing to keep the schools in many areas of Georgia operating when the state and local funds gave out and the teachers could not be paid. Unfortunately, many local schools were forced to close due to the lack of state funds.

Georgia began significant educational reform in 1949 with the Minimum Foundation Program for Education. The state recognized the need to set a minimum amount of money aside for each school system. The school term was extended to nine months, teacher salaries were increased, and funding was made available for pupil transportation.

Let me remind you that the cornerstone of the separate and unequal educational opportunities that I have described was the Supreme Court's Plessy v. Ferguson decision of 1896. As a result of this decision, white southern politicians vividly kept alive the posture that any type of black/white integration was the menace of all menaces. Indeed, blacks up through the mid-20th Century were powerless to affect any constructive reaction to the Plessey v. Ferguson decision because the racism it reflected permeated the entire country.

#### The Equalization Period



The Equalization Period began when in the 1954 Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas decision, segregation in public schools was ruled unconstitutional by the Supreme Court. An immediate controversy raged among politicians, school officials, and the public about whether Georgia's public school system could be converted to a private school system. The General Assembly met in special session and passed a resolution creating the Georgia Commission on Education to review present school laws and to formulated a plan whereby the state could continue its segregated schools.

An amendment authorizing the General Assembly to legalize granting tax funds to citizens for private school tuition was passed in the general election of 1954. Over the next few years, the General Assembly passed numerous bills relating to the "private school" amendment, but because of lack of funding they were never implemented. However, a sign of the times was indicated in a decree set forth by the Georgia Board of Education in 1955 that stated: "all teachers who support, condone or agree to teaching of mixed classes will have their licenses removed" (Joiner 1979).

Despite the controversy and a lack of compliance that persisted for many years, the 1954 Supreme Court decision marked the beginning of the end for legally segregated public schools. Considering the financial limitations, Georgia and

its local school districts had made substantial gains for the education of blacks and whites prior to 1954. But the failure bred out of racial feelings and segregated public schools was one of the greatest tragedies of the state. It is nearly impossible to calculate the loss of human potential, black and white, that resulted from the two separate, unequal, and inadequate school systems. It would take decades for Georgia and other southern states to catch up with the rest of the nation in that regard (Potter 1967)

At the same time the private school debate was raging, the Georgia Education Association, the Department of Education, and the University System of Georgia were urging the adoption of an Adequate Program for Education in Georgia (APEG). This program was designed to improve teacher allotment, increase maintenance and operations funding, increase teacher salaries, improve transportation facilities, strengthen curriculum, and provide for special education. However, it failed to pass the General Assembly. Twenty years expired before the APEG was finally passed in 1974 to increase state funding and state responsibility for public education. It also attempted to address the problem of equalization by providing extra funding to certain poor school districts. But again, funding lagged behind good intentions and equalization was not supported financially.

In the early 1980s, a national report on education entitled "A Nation at Risk" focused attention on the need for educational reform in the United States. It was deemed that the public schools were not providing the education necessary for students to compete in a highly technical global economy. As a result, in 1984 Governor Joe Frank Harris appointed an Education Review Commission to look at the current education laws of the state and to recommend new laws. For the first time the business community became actively involved in educational reform. Company executive officers took an active role in seeking federal funding for programs like the four-year old preschool program, and the business community played a major role in the development of the Quality Basic Education Act (QBE).

Under QBE, the state assumed a greater role in policy decisions, and state funding for education was increased dramatically. The state increased the monitoring of school systems and mandated more stringent testing of students and teachers. As a result, many veteran teachers who could not pass the Teacher Certification Test were summarily dismissed from their jobs. That controversy, which affected many black teachers, has yet to subside in Georgia public schools.

We are now entering the second "wave" of QBE reform under Governor Zell Miller. The State Department of Education has

been restructured to be more service oriented, and a new focus has been placed on improving instruction in our schools. The state will continue to provide funding for the school systems and will set major policy, but the trend is toward "site-based management" of schools. The reasoning is that decisions about education are deemed to be best made by the local school systems which can set local priorities and allocate funds to programs of local concern.

#### Conclusion

It is a truism that Georgia's public school programs and the good intentions of its lawmakers historically have not been matched with proper funding. As we enter the 21st Century, Georgia must make education a top priority and appropriate sufficient funds accordingly. Public education is the key to the state's economic growth and development. Several problems persist:

1. We are faced with an ever growing need for more technical education as advances in technology change the face of our society.
2. Increased fluency in foreign languages is important as we move toward a global community.
3. We are facing an acute shortage of qualified teachers in several disciplines.
4. Georgia continues to have one of the highest drop-out rates, and highest student/teacher ratios in the country.



5. Georgia lags almost a billion dollars per year behind the national average in per pupil expenditure.

These are only some of the challenges facing us in the days ahead which must be met to insure Georgia's future. I feel that quality basic education is a right and a responsibility for every Georgia citizen. We must go forth to meet these challenges, and I pledge my support in all areas when the need arises.