

These county superintendents' narrative reports give a first-hand account of the major problems and difficulties experienced in the growth and development of public education in Florida just before the turn of the century. The struggles for financial support and public acceptance of new ideas were ever present. This period saw the beginning of public school transportation through the use of wagonettes--a controversial move. It also saw the beginning of the move toward compulsory attendance, uniform textbooks, teachers' examinations, and the idea of concentrated (consolidated) schools. Even school people objected to some of these "progressive steps" as is brought out in some of the narrative reports.

Speaking of consolidation and transportation of pupils, State Superintendent William N. Sheats wrote:

During the past two years several of the counties have inaugurated the system of consolidating the smaller schools and transporting the pupils by wagons, thereby materially decreasing the number of their schools. This system is now in operation in many of the States and is being commended as lessening the cost of the schools and proving beneficial to the children in rural and thinly populated districts. It is confidently believed, if the tendency to multiply the number of schools had not been checked, that their number in the State would have been over 3,000 by this date, their real value being diminished in proportion to the increase. The chief design of the three-mile limit, made law at the suggestion of my predecessor, was to counteract the tendency to establish new schools.

One school to a township in many of the rural districts with a properly conducted transportation of the pupils living over two miles from a strong and centrally located school, would doubtless better educate all the children at less cost, prove conducive to health and morals of the pupils, and relieve the anxiety of parents at the danger attending their children on the way to and from school. No alarm need be caused at the decrease of the number of schools, consolidation with transportation points to better instruction, longer terms, and more attractive and comfortable school houses--a decided gain for all. Let the system be generally adopted and perfected.

In summarizing the need for compulsory attendance laws, Superintendent Sheats added in his report to the legislature:

In the beginning compulsory education is every where and always felt to be severe and meets with energetic contradiction and opposition. Those who favor keeping the masses in ignorance encourage opposition, whether openly or secretly. In the course of time, however, the masses become reconciled, and the law enforcing regular school attendance is recognized as a protection; yet its suspension would be followed by a noticeable falling off of attendance, even in the most advanced states.

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The County Superintendents in State Convention, after free and full discussion, declared with much unanimity that such a law is necessary