

# RESEARCH BRIEFS

March 2015

## What are Public Schools?

Public schools arose soon after 1800 in America, the result of a national movement. The demand for popular education was an outgrowth of Enlightenment thinking that informed many aspects of the American Revolution. Public school advocates believed that in order for the nation to succeed average men needed the ability to read, have knowledge of the principles of government, and have an understanding of the responsibilities of citizenship in a nation that was for the first time comprised of “we the people.”

The need to assimilate different cultures immigrating to the continent and concerns about the perils of idle youth also drove the movement. Ultimately, however, public school advocates believed that the establishment of common education was the near-equivalent of democratic expression itself: that in a democracy, every man needed to be given an equal opportunity to get ahead.

Congress passed the Northwest Ordinance in 1787 to establish rules for governing new territories and establishing statehood in the Midwest. With Thomas Jefferson as the primary author, the Ordinance was a landmark document furthering the concept of natural rights in American governance by including guarantees for freedom of religion, habeas corpus, and the right to a jury trial, foreshadowing the Bill of Rights that would later be enacted as part of the U.S. Constitution. The Ordinance called for the creation of common schools in the new territories, stating that “schools and the means of education shall forever be encouraged.”

When it gained statehood in 1848, Wisconsin established the office of state superintendent to govern public instruction. Wisconsin’s Constitution further stipulated that “The legislature shall provide by law for the establishment of district schools, which shall be as nearly uniform as practicable; and such schools shall be free and without charge for tuition to all children between the ages of 4 and 20 years.”

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Common schools evolved from a scattered system consisting of thousands of one-room school houses to a more modern system based on consolidation, grade level hierarchies, and increased professionalism and curricular standards. Originally supported with the property tax, a state funding system evolved to equalize disparities in local wealth, furthering the ideal that all children should be provided with equal educational opportunities.

Public schools have long been charged with teaching social values such as how to get along with others, the virtue of hard work, and the importance of physical health. In addition to these values, the school curriculum expanded to subjects beyond reading, writing and arithmetic to include career and technical education, art, music, literature, and theatre. The charge of public education also grew through time to include a wide range of services for special education students, formally shunned from mainstream social interaction.

Wisconsin today has 424 public school systems governed by democratically elected school boards in local communities. Wisconsin started the nation's first Kindergarten, created the first magnet schools to serve as alternatives to traditional high schools, and has a proud tradition of public education that ranks among the best nationally on graduation rates, ACT scores, and other achievement measures.