

Sacramento City Unified School District - a part of California History

In the few years between John Sutter's arrival at the American River on Aug. 12, 1839, and the start of the public school system in Sacramento on Feb. 20, 1854, much changed in that frontier settlement. Prior to Sutter, there were few white settlers. Although it was under Mexican control, most of the population was American Indian.

Sutter received permission to explore the rivers and to select and possess eleven Spanish leagues (76 miles) of unoccupied land from Governor Juan Alvarado, the Mexican leader in charge of Alta California. It was on a gently rising knoll well back from both the Sacramento and American rivers where he erected a 40-foot adobe building which would serve as the hub of Sutter's Fort.

By 1849, the city had reached a population of 12,000. In that same year, California held its first constitutional convention. It was headed for statehood the following year. The new constitution guaranteed funding for public education and provided that a superintendent for public instruction be elected by the people.

Although more than 1,500 children lived in the city in 1853, private schools provided what little education was available. Finally, in January H. J. Bidleman, the county assessor and ex-officio superintendent, appointed three school commissioners to oversee the three city wards. But again, no action occurred to create public schools. On Feb. 10, the *Journal*, Sacramento's local newspaper, ran a scathing article criticizing the commissioners.

Eight days later, the following ad appeared in the paper: "Public School. The citizens of Sacramento are hereby notified that the school commissioners for this city will open a public school on the southeast corner of K and Fifth Streets on Monday morning, Feb. 20, 1854, at nine o'clock. Mr. Peck will have charge of the male department, and Miss Griswold of the female department."

In October, the Sacramento City Council appointed its own board of education. The board authorized the superintendent to rent a building on Fourth St. that had been occupied earlier by Crowell private school. The building was to be divided into three schools, one grammar school for girls, another for boys and a primary school for both sexes. They hired 12 teachers—nine females and three males. Salaries were set at \$150 per month for males, \$125 for females and \$100 for primary teachers.

By Feb. 1, 1855, six schools were operating with 578 students. Students studied orthography (writing), reading, penmanship, geography, arithmetic, grammar, philosophy, and some took algebra. Physical education was also required for all segments.

The first high school

The first high school, Sacramento High School, opened with 21 students on Sept. 1, 1856 in a one room of an old building at M Street. After three moves, the first high school building was erected in 1887 on the corner of 9th and M Streets. Along with the standard curriculum, pupils studied astronomy, bookkeeping, Latin, French and Spanish.

Early superintendents were elected, not appointed, as they are today. Dr. H. W. Harkness was elected in 1854. From 1857 to 1894 there were no elected superintendents. Instead, presidents of the Board of Education served as acting superintendents. Finally, in

1894, O.W. Erlewine, a former board member, was officially elected to head the district. His salary was \$2,700 per year. He held the position for 17 years, retiring in 1911.

Erlewine included “physical culture” as part of the curriculum. In his annual report he stated, “Sound, erect bodies, precision and grace of movement, and promptness to respond are among the direct results of physical culture.” The first specialist teacher hired to serve the entire district, Ferdinand Fischer, was hired to teach the program.

Between 1857 and 1889, district enrollment soared as the city expanded to the south and east and 12 new schools were erected. Two of the schools, Marshall and Fremont, are currently in their original location. The buildings, however, were demolished and rebuilt at later dates. The original location of Jefferson Primary School at 16th and N Streets, first built in 1886 and replaced in 1922, was used as the district’s administrative headquarters for nearly 45 years, from about 1950 to 1994. The building is on the California register of historical buildings.

For the first forty years, schools were segregated. Although free education was provided, minority students attended their own schools. In 1894, the board of education abolished segregated education. At that time, Sarah Jones, an African American teacher at Sacramento Ungraded School 2, was appointed principal of the newly integrated Fremont Primary School.

Also at that time, the first kindergartens were incorporated into the system. Originally privately sponsored, in 1895, kindergarten became part of the curriculum.

Old structure remains

Although most schools were built, razed and rebuilt, many of the original school names remain the same today, though most are not on their original sites.

One of the 1900s buildings, however, is still in use.

Marshall Primary School, now named Old Marshall Adult School, is still on its original site. Started as a two-room wooden schoolhouse in 1882, the replacement structure was completed at a cost of \$80,485 in 1903. It was completely renovated in 1960. In 1976, because of Field Act earthquake standards, the facility could no longer be used for K-12 students. As an adult ed center, the school has been in use days and evenings since that time.

At the turn of the century, 6,000 students were attending public school. Instead of building new schools, the unique concept of portable buildings came into play. The original cost was \$750 per unit, but by utilizing district maintenance personnel, the cost was reduced to \$250. By 1916, fifty portables were in use.

Innovative ideas

By the time Superintendent Charles Hughes was elected, plans were drawn to replace old buildings with large combination schools incorporating primary and intermediate grades. The first was William Land Elementary School, built in 1915. Built on one city block, it had 24 classrooms with a separate wing for manual training and domestic training. It also included a library, a 1,200-capacity assembly room, a science laboratory and a special art room. The third floor was called a “roof garden” and was used as a gymnasium. Washington, a duplicate school, was erected the following year.

Both schools were torn down and rebuilt in 1976 because they did not meet state earthquake standards.

Hughes had many ideas for changing education in Sacramento schools. He did not believe students should have homework. He felt it was more important for students to learn how to study and that training should be done under teachers' supervision, not parents. "It is the business of the school, not of the home, and the school has no right to shift the responsibility," Hughes stated. As a result, study periods became part of the daily schedule.

It was under Hughes' leadership that other far-reaching innovations were considered: departmental teaching, junior high schools, and a junior college. Other ideas included elimination of examinations in order to be promoted, subject specialists to coordinate instruction, school nurses, physical exams for all students and attendance officers to ensure all students could go to school. Many of his ideas were eventually incorporated in the system.

Hughes' dream of creating a junior college came true in 1916. First established as a department on the Sac High campus, 45 students enrolled the first year. In 1925, through a voter-approved bond measure, 60 acres across from William Land Park were purchased. Hughes Stadium, on the south side of the campus, stands today as a monument to the man who envisioned its existence. Sacramento Junior College was a division of the city school district until 1964, when it became part of the newly formed Los Rios Community College District.

World War I

School construction was postponed after the start of World War I. During the war, students contributed to the war effort. They helped establish "war gardens," purchased Liberty Bonds, helped with production of Red Cross supplies and received military training through the Junior Reserve Officers Training Corps. Students also had lessons in patriotism.

Returning its attention to the home front, crumbling, cramped buildings and burgeoning enrollment once again prompted the district to begin an ambitious program to replace and add new structures. From 1921 to 1924, 12 schools were under either reconstruction or construction. Sacramento was growing and outlying areas were being annexed to the city. The goal was to have a neighborhood school within walking distance in every community. By 1920, 66,000 residents lived in Sacramento. By 1928, the city experienced a 51% growth in population, which stood at 100,000.

By 1930, 30 schools were in operation, including an evening high school and the junior college. As the Depression took hold, enrollment dropped, largely because of the nation's financial condition and the nearly total shutdown of adult education programs. Financial support dropped dramatically. The district had to remain operating with 30% less funding. Despite the economy, voters approved a bond measure to complete three new junior high schools, California, Kit Carson and Stanford.

District unified

Up until 1936, the school system operated as three separate districts: K-8, 9-12 and junior college. Finally, following an act of the Legislature, the board passed a resolution combining the three districts into a unified school district. For the first time, it made it possible to have a single salary schedule. It's interesting to note that it was not until 1945 that classified employees—maintenance, clerical and custodians—were

eligible for a retirement program. It came about with the passage of a tax measure that added five cents to the annual tax rate

Building during Depression

The need for new schools, especially at the high school level, was most urgent; the population at Sacramento High School reached 3,576 in the spring of 1933. Once again, the board of education went to the voters and passed a bond measure for a second high school. At a cost of \$750,000, C.K. McClatchy opened its doors in the fall of 1937. It is now on the National Historical Register.

Also in 1937, through public works projects, the new Theodore Judah building replaced an elementary school made entirely of bungalows. Two bond measures and public works administration grants allowed for construction of eight new large buildings at Sacramento Junior College.

During World War II, almost overnight schools became registration centers for the U.S. Selective Service. They also served as centers for issuing ration books, holding salvage drives and the production of Red Cross materials. Because of the war and for the first time in the nation's history, women were entering the work force in large numbers. A sudden need for preschool child care centers emerged. Because local funds could not be used, the board applied for federal support. Sutterville and Washington child centers opened within one month of each other in 1943.

The Baby Boom

Peace brought still more people to the Sacramento area. In one year, the enrollment jumped from 24,569 pupils to 30,013—a 22% increase. To meet these pressing needs, the most ambitious building program in the district's history was put into action. Growth was particularly an issue at the elementary level, although junior high schools were also included in the overall plans.

Building continued at a constant pace throughout the 1950s and 60s. New legislation in 1958 gave the district its most sudden jolt. The Sacramento City Unified School District had to absorb all the surrounding small school districts. A total of 14 schools were annexed from unincorporated areas of the city.

As the 1970's approached, school integration was a major concern. Although all schools were open to students in their neighborhood, the city itself was becoming more segregated. To keep court-ordered integration at bay, the district began efforts to balance school ethnicity by busing students to neighboring areas. Later, as district enrollment declined, magnet and alternative schools were established offering innovative programs to attract diverse student bodies. Today, Sacramento is one of the most ethnically diverse cities in the United States, and the schools reflect the community.

Major construction

By the early 1970s, enrollment stabilized, and in some areas declined, but new housing was making its way farther east towards Rancho Cordova. Schools in the Rosemont area opened, but a high school, though needed, wasn't constructed during that period. Rosemont High opened for freshmen at the start of the 2003-04 school year and will be completed by next fall.

The oldest of the district schools faced the wrecking ball as the Field Act legislation was enforced. Schools built prior to 1937 had to be retrofitted to meet earthquake standards, torn down or designated for other use. Some of the buildings, including Donner, Newton Booth, Coloma, El Dorado, Lincoln, Marshall, Fremont and Sierra elementary schools were spared. Though most are still standing, they are not used for K-12 education. Some are no longer district property.

The district had no choice, however, in replacing many others. In 1976, large scale building began. In most instances, schools did not close. Students attended classes in the old facilities while new structures were built on same site in vacant areas and playgrounds. Though Crocker school was never rebuilt, the attendance area merged with Riverside School; the new structure was renamed Crocker/Riverside. The outdated Washington, William Land, David Lubin, American Legion, Bret Harte, California, Kit Carson and Sacramento High buildings were demolished once the replacement schools were complete.

Development of the rich Pocket-area farm land during the 1980s brought the last of the large scale housing areas into reality. While houses were selling quickly, no schools existed. Area parents mobilized and began the arduous task of creating a special tax district. Eventually, three schools opened to take care of neighborhood children.

In Oak Park, parents also campaigned for a school in their area. For more than 20 years, students in this urban area of town were bused to schools. With the opening of Father Keith B. Kenny Elementary School in 1993, neighborhood schools were centered in the heart of every community.

Growth and decline have been a part of the district's rich and long history. Responding to declining test scores and run-down facilities, Mayor Joe Serna Jr. rallied widespread city support behind a movement for reform of Sac City Schools. After a new school board was elected, student performance improved and Sac City has become a national model for reform. With more than 80 schools and 50,000 students, plus approximately 20,000 adult students, today Sac City Unified is one of the 10 largest districts in California. But the city itself has very little room for growth. Most neighborhoods are well established and vacant lots are a rare sight

District headquarters

In the early 1980s, when enrollment was dropping, some campuses were closed and used as administrative offices. The district headquarters in the old Jefferson School at 16th and N Streets was filled to capacity. Even closets were converted to office space. Administrative offices were spread out to 11 different sites. Eventually the headquarters moved to Capitol Mall, but once again the building wasn't adequate to meet district needs and parking was inconvenient, at best.

Looking for a central location in the heart of the district, a large parcel was purchased on 47th Avenue. In 2002, the new Mayor Joe Serna Jr. and Isabel Hernandez Serna Community Education Center opened its doors.

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