

# CITIZENS LEAGUE REPORT

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## **County Superintendent of Schools**

Particular reference to Hennepin Co.

**November 1956**

FIRST REPORT ON A STUDY OF THE  
OFFICE OF COUNTY SUPERINTENDENT  
OF SCHOOLS

FIRST REPORT OF EDUCATION COMMITTEE  
OF THE CITIZENS LEAGUE  
ON A STUDY OF  
THE OFFICE OF COUNTY SUPERINTENDENT OF SCHOOLS  
with particular reference to  
Hennepin County

For nearly two years this sub-committee has been studying the office of County Superintendent of Schools as it exists in Minnesota and particularly in Hennepin County. This report sets forth the principal information gathered and conclusions reached to date.

A. Statutory Organization of the Minnesota School System and the Role of the County Superintendents of Schools

(1) The Local School District. This is governed by a board of three members who are elected for three-year staggered terms, and who operate the district and determine the year's tax levy. The common school district is widespread in rural areas and usually operates a single elementary school of one room.

(a) The Common School District. This has a board of six members that levies taxes, fixes the lengths of school terms (subject to statute), and establishes general rules and policies. It occurs in most villages and the smaller cities.

(c) Special School Districts. All of these operate under separate charters granted by the legislature and their organization, structure and procedures vary to a large extent. Their authority to levy taxes also depends upon the legislative grant. They appear in most of the larger cities. Minneapolis is a special school district.

(d) County Districts. By special state law, a county having less than twenty-seven organized school districts may form a county district which functions in essentially the same manner as an independent district. Only Lake County has formed such a district, although six other counties are eligible.

(e) Unorganized Territory. This is administered in each county by a school board composed largely of county officers, and provides elementary and secondary education for all school children in the territory. It has the usual school board power, and the actual administrative officer is the county superintendent of schools.

(f) Consolidated Districts. These are districts that maintain one or more transportation centers that enroll pupils transported from other districts. The district must contain at least twelve sections of land, with certain limitations. Consolidated districts may be common, independent or special.

The Minnesota Statutes provide that if no school has been held for two years, the school district may be dissolved by the Board of County Commissioners of the county in which it is located. This may be done either on the motion of the Commissioners themselves or on petition signed by a majority of the resident freeholders in the district.

As will appear below, this power has seldom been availed of by the county commissioners or by the people for the reason, apparently, that it is disadvantageous tax-wise to close a school district that has no students and to become part of one that is actively functioning. The reason for this is that in closed districts the charges for transportation and tuition are considerably less than the school property taxes in open and actively functioning districts. Although the tuition and transportation charges are meant to equalize the burden between operating and non-operating districts, they do not in fact do so.

The School boards are generally elected by the people and serve staggered terms. The school board itself chooses the officers to run the schools. Naturally, there is a tremendous difference in organization as practiced in, say, a school district with a one-room, ungraded elementary school, and a district such as Minneapolis, with the full array of kindergarten, elementary, secondary, junior and senior high schools, and vocational schools. In the smaller units the officers and the board will be only superficially versed in school matters. This is readily apparent from the fact that in 1954-55, there were 4,722 school districts in the State of Minnesota, the largest number of any state in the Union. It is hardly conceivable that all of the members of the board of the 4,722 school districts could have the qualifications necessary to carry forward their duties with the knowledge and skill of the administrators of the larger districts. There are not that many qualified educators in the entire State of Minnesota.

Of these 4,722 districts, 4,206 were ungraded school districts and included in the ungraded schools were 1,272 closed school districts transporting their pupils to other districts. In other words, one-fourth of all the school districts in Minnesota were closed districts, unmerged and unconsolidated with other areas. In the same year there were only 474 graded elementary and secondary school districts in the state. Of these 474, 33 were graded elementary school districts and the rest were graded secondary school districts. From these figures, it is obvious that Minnesota has an extraordinary number of ungraded school districts and closed school districts. In a state of such large size and sparse population, much of this cannot be avoided. However, it has been felt by many educators nationwide that the situation in Minnesota is extraordinarily bad. There is no excuse, they think, for our failure to consolidate the innumerable school districts on a rational basis. Some progress has been made in this line, of course. In 1940 there were 7,618 ungraded school districts and in 1950 the figure was down to 6,848, and in 1954 as we have seen, the number was further reduced to 4,722, a marked improvement, but not even close to a proper standard.

## (2) The State Board of Education.

At the top of the state educational structure is the State Board of Education consisting of a board of seven, appointed by the Governor by and with the approval of the Senate. Its chief duties

are the following:

- (a) It issues certificates to all public school teachers.
- (b) It is empowered to divide the state into high school areas, each area containing at least one classified public high school and to facilitate the transportation of non-resident high school pupils.
- (c) It exercises general supervision over public schools and educational agencies, classifies and standardizes public elementary and secondary schools, and prepares outlines and suggested courses of study (we are perhaps familiar with the state examinations given all elementary school pupils).
- (d) It prescribes rules for school sites and structure; the Board's approval is necessary for the building of any school.
- (e) Most important, perhaps, is its supervision and distribution of the state aids.

(3) The County Superintendents

The intermediaries between the State Board of Education and the numerous school districts are the county superintendents of schools. In the Minnesota Statutes 121.01 defining the duties of the county superintendents of schools, these officials are assigned a variety of duties. As representatives of the state education agency, they are responsible for enforcement of compulsory attendance laws and are required to make periodic inspections to check on compliance with the state aid requirements and the educational standards prescribed by the state. In addition, they are required to abstract information from local school district reports and forward consolidated reports to the state agency. Within the sphere of their respective counties, the county superintendents are the administrative and supervisory officers for all schools in their counties which do not employ their own superintendents.

In their county activities they work with the school boards in the local districts, but their powers are limited to advising and making recommendations; they have no power to enforce any of their proposals. Among the questions about which they are consulted are school curricula and the construction and layout of school facilities.

Perhaps the most influential duties of the county superintendent of schools relate to relationships with the teachers and school officials in the common school districts. They assist in procuring teachers, setting up and supervising curricula, settling of inter-district disputes concerning non-resident students and transportation, conducting annual meetings of all school officials; they hear teacher grievances, advise teachers in disputes with school boards, conduct teacher institutes, encourage teacher associations, administer teacher retirement funds, and are the official custodians of teachers' certificates.

Compensation for county superintendents is established by the Board of County Commissioners, subject to minimum levels fixed by statute.

There is also a provision for the payment of a salary to the county superintendent of schools.

Minimum salaries are computed at the rate of \$42.00 per year for each of the first 80 organized public schools in the county and \$12.00 for each school in excess of 80 up to a total of \$3,840 for county superintendents supervising 80 or more schools. Minimum salaries in counties with less than 74 schools are \$2,640 with some exceptions for even smaller jurisdictions. The present salary of the Hennepin County Superintendent of Schools is \$7,000.00 per year. The salaries of the Hennepin County, Lake County, St. Louis County and Cook County Superintendents are established specially by the legislature.

The county superintendents are elected in accordance with M.S.A. 282.01. It is interesting to note that the office of county superintendent, a position which many would seek to have filled by appointment instead of by election, was from 1864 to 1877 filled by appointment by the county commissioners. Since 1877 county superintendents of schools have been elected every four years, except in Lake and Cook Counties which operate under a special law. Hennepin, Ramsey and St. Louis Counties, since they contain cities of the first class permit only those living outside these cities to vote for a county superintendent of schools. Removal of county superintendents in cases of malfeasance or nonfeasance in the performance of his official duties is a function vested in the Governor, but is limited by the requirement of a hearing before discharge. Vacancies in the office are filled by the county board.

In the last legislature there was a bill introduced to provide for qualifications of county superintendents, but which was to have no application to the superintendents then holding office. This bill failed of passage. The qualifications would make the county superintendents hold the teacher's certificate required by the State Board of Education. The bill also made the office appointive, the county superintendents to be appointed by the Board of County Commissioners. The county commissioners were also authorized to establish or discontinue and re-establish the office, to enter into agreements with other counties, to employ the same county superintendent, and to fix his salary and expenses.

The office of county superintendent of schools was no doubt necessary and feasible at a time when school curricula were simpler than they are at the present time, but with the present organization of school districts and with the desire of educators to broaden school curricula, there seems less justification for the system. At the same time school district reorganization is changing the structure and responsibilities for education. Educational systems predicated on the needs of the last century cannot be made to function satisfactorily today.

Most progressive states have found a strong intermediate unit an important part of their educational organization. But these intermediate units must be charged with the responsibility and given the authority to provide educational leadership, specialized services and to coordinate educational efforts in their district. Of the thirty-nine states having county superintendents, twenty-seven states use the county as the intermediate district supervisors.

There are only two states that have no requirements for qualifications of the intermediate supervisor. They are South Carolina and Minnesota.

The Question now is "Can county superintendents still perform a useful function, or should the office be abolished?"

B. What should be done with the office of County Superintendent in Hennepin County?

(1) The County Superintendent in Hennepin County

The Hennepin County Superintendent of Schools has problems because of the location of Minneapolis and a number of large independent school districts within the county. As a result, she supervises approximately 40 school districts and of these approximately one-half are closed. There are about 60 teachers under her supervision and approximately 1,624 pupils in the schools in her area.

Within the limits of her authority, her budget and her staff, she performs her required duties well, but she recognizes, as do we, that her office as presently constituted is hardly justified. The alternatives are to discontinue the position, shifting the statistical and report abstracting duties to the state, or else to build up the office so that it performs a strong coordination influence on all school activities in the county and provides or facilitates the provision of many services which are now available in insufficient degrees, if at all.

It is her feeling that the office needs to be strengthened through legislation which would enable a broader scope of activity in all the schools in the county, and that this requires the establishment of educational qualifications and standards for candidates for the office of county superintendent.

She feels further that the office should not be abolished until all the schools in Hennepin County have been reorganized into units that are well organized, efficient, and on a sufficiently broad financial base to provide all the services necessary to meet the needs and interests of all the pupils in Hennepin County. This will take time. There are at the present time 20 closed school districts, 11 open and functioning one-room schools, 2 other common school districts, namely, Earle Brown and St. Anthony, 1 unorganized district (Fort Snelling), and 13 independent schools. There are 33 ungraded schools.

The problem of county superintendent is, of course, statewide. There is the possibility of making the office of the county superintendent cover a larger area than the county. Or, again, it is thought that the functions of the county superintendents might be passed over to a suitably expanded State Board of Education.

But there is at the present time a need for some intermediate units since the local boards are not sufficiently versed with school problems and are understaffed. They cannot handle the problems

confronting them. This is true of Hennepin County as well as the rest of the state.

The problem of county superintendents is common to most states. Some have solved their problems, most others recognize the problem, others are making studies and are working on legislation. Most educators favor strengthening the position of the intermediate superintendent. They generally recommend that the superintendent be appointed by an elected school board. They also recommend that qualifications and salary schedules be established.

(2) What was done in Ramsey County

Ramsey County, finding itself in much the same position regarding County Superintendents, as Hennepin County is now in, decided to take action. In Ramsey County there were 30 school districts. Eleven of these districts maintain ungraded elementary schools employing 101 teachers with 3,109 pupils.

The 30 districts were redistricted to 5 reorganized districts which took in all of the ungraded elementary schools. St. Paul remained a district unto itself. The remaining 4 districts took in the entire suburban Ramsey County. Each reorganized district has a district School Board and a District Superintendent. There is no intermediate school district and the 5 reorganized districts report directly to the state.

The office of County Superintendent was abolished.

(3) What can be done in Hennepin County?

If the office of county superintendent were abolished in Hennepin County at the present time, it appears that the school districts as now established would lose the benefit of the services that they now obtain from the present county superintendent. Furthermore, the State Board of Education would be deprived of certain services rendered to it by the county superintendent. Among the services lost by the school districts would be the work of the county superintendent in recruiting and screening teachers, the use of the audio-visual equipment made available by the county superintendent, the curriculum consultation offered by the superintendent, the inservice development program of teacher improvement and advisory services rendered to the schools who plan to consolidate. These services are made available and utilized to varying degrees by the 65 consolidated school districts. The schools would also be required to report directly to the State Board on authorization of state funds and would have to forward other statistical information. There are many other services performed by the county superintendent in respect to advice rendered in curriculum, inter-district disputes, teacher and retirement funds, and other miscellaneous activities mentioned elsewhere in this report. To deprive the small rural schools suddenly of these services is unwise. It would take them a long time to adjust to carrying these loads themselves if and when finances enabled them to carry the load at all.



Instead of abolishing the county superintendent's office in Hennepin County, it would be possible to enlarge and strengthen the office from what it now is to an office performing additional and expanded services. The present Hennepin County Superintendent has drawn this tentative list of services the office might perform if it were adequately staffed.

1. Research, study and experimentation center to carry on research in the schools as to teaching technique and methods, pupil testing.
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2. Teacher recruitment and teacher pool, investigation of credentials, references.
3. School Building Consultant Service, a clearing house for new ideas in construction, materials, planning.
4. Audio-Visual supply center for films, film-strips, recordings, projectors and other equipment, film screening, coordination.
5. Establish classes for handicapped and exceptional children including hiring of teachers, furnishing needed equipment and supplies, testing of pupils for eligibility.
6. Provide specialists such as psychologists, psychiatrists, speech correctionists, sight-saving teachers, visiting teacher service.
7. Provide other specialists such as consultants for remedial reading, physical education, music, art, industrial arts, home economics.
8. Provide consultants to serve as curriculum coordinators to assist classroom teachers with selection of text-books, methods, curriculum planning, techniques.
9. Maintain a library of professional literature for use by teachers for in-service development and professional growth and knowledge.
10. Organize and conduct in-service development workshops to aid in teacher improvement and study.
11. Coordinate off-campus classes for teachers working toward degrees.
12. Serve as a central purchasing agency and clearing house.
13. Assist school administrators, school boards, and lay committees with bond issues.
14. Serve as a statistical clearing house.
15. Serve as liaison between the State Department of Education and the local district.

16. Coordinate all school district activities to the end that there will be more of a unity of effort and performance.
17. Serve as Hot-Lunch coordinator.
18. Serve as Transportation coordinator.
19. Provide consultant services to lay and community groups.
20. Provide consultant service to school districts with respect to school laws, legislation, state aids, school district reorganization.

Certainly not all the school districts need all of these services, but all of the districts need most of them. If it were found that some districts could provide their own facilities in various fields, the districts could withdraw from the county service.

The wisdom of expanding the functions of the county superintendent at the present time is open to question. The school districts in the county are moving increasingly towards consolidation and it is to be expected that within four years they will be resolved into economically more feasible units. When such becomes the case, the authority of the county superintendent in regard to them will be largely at an end. Under the present law, she will have few, if any, duties to perform with respect to the consolidated districts. Districts will report directly to the State Board and will no doubt obtain for themselves many of the services now rendered to them by the county superintendent. At that time it might be wise to consider the role of the county superintendent, especially as regards Hennepin County.

However, by that time the school situation in Minnesota may have changed substantially. There is now a movement in progress to recodify the school laws and reorganize substantially the entire school structure of the State of Minnesota. At the present time, as has been indicated, the structure is vastly inefficient. Until the nature of the recodification and the reorganization has become apparent, it is unwise to attempt any large-scale reorganization of the office of county superintendent in Hennepin County or elsewhere.

#### CONCLUSION

Your committee makes the following conclusions:

1. That no action be taken at the present time in regard to the office of County Superintendent of Schools in Hennepin County except to support legislation establishing qualifications and making the office appointive.
2. That all interested persons, and especially the County Superintendent of Schools for Hennepin County, urge the consolidation of all school districts in Hennepin County into independent or consolidated districts.

3. That the possibility of an intermediate unit between the local school districts and the State Board of Education be reconsidered as consolidation is nearing completion.

4. If consolidation does not proceed among the school districts in Hennepin County with sufficient speed, legislation should be considered which would induce a speed-up along this line by curtailing or eliminating state aids to consolidate school districts.

A few words must be said to explain the conclusions above. If consolidation takes place in the rural areas, the county superintendent will have virtually nothing to do under her present statutory authority. Since consolidation is moving forward, and since consolidation is advisable from a financial standpoint it should be urged. As it nears completion, there will be time to consider the possibilities of the office of county superintendent. Some of the committee feel that there should be some intermediate unit between the State Board of Education and the local school districts, but some think that this unit should include more than one county. But no suggestion is made here as to what kind of unit should be formed, because reasons that could apply at the present time most likely will not apply in the future.

This report is, therefore, to be considered only a preliminary report as to the office of county superintendent. The matter will have to be studied again in the future when the common school districts in Hennepin County have consolidated.

We wish to make special mention at this point of the frank and able assistance given to us by Mrs. Viola Thompson, County Superintendent of Schools for Hennepin County, in the preparation of this report. Without her generous gift of her time and skill, the committee would have been seriously handicapped in the preparation of this report.