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A crisis of opportunity: the example of New Orleans and public education in antebellum Louisiana

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A CRISIS OF OPPORTUNITY:
THE EXAMPLE OF NEW ORLEANS
AND PUBLIC EDUCATION IN ANTEBELLUM LOUISIANA

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Louisiana State University and
Agricultural and Mechanical College
requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts

in

The Department of History

by
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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to explore the development of public education in antebellum Louisiana. Using primarily public records, I found that despite the successful system instituted in New Orleans in the early 1840s, the rest of Louisiana faltered in its attempts to establish free public schools. Notwithstanding the requirement contained in the 1845 Constitution that each parish must organize public schools, the lack of guidance, supervision, and funding from the state legislature all coalesced to condemn public education in most of the rest of the state. As public schools in New Orleans thrived throughout the decades leading up to the Civil War, the city's school system would stand in stark contrast to public schools in the rest of the state that proved unable to overcome the obstacles encountered.

Introduction

As a child of the South, I grew up with a deep interest in its history and the sources of its peculiar pattern of development. In examining the problems that confronted the region, it became clear that education remained neglected in states across the South. During the antebellum period public education took firm hold in the North, but during the same years very few Southern states implemented an effective public education system.¹ Modern scholarship on the topic is exceedingly thin. The history of public education in antebellum Louisiana offers a rich field for investigation; public records alone offer a largely overlooked account of the establishment and development of the free school system in the state. But the secondary sources related to public education in Louisiana remain much like the available analyses of education in the entire antebellum South - few modern scholars have produced detailed examinations of public school systems during the period. Despite its neglect in modern scholarship, there is much to report about public education before the Civil War. Though education languished in much of the South, some states and certain urban centers managed to initiate public school systems which despite inefficiencies and chronic problems, provided a basic level of instruction and set the stage for further development during the postbellum years.²

A popular history text on the American South notes with regard to public education that some Southern cities, such as Charleston, Louisville, and Mobile,

¹ William J. Cooper, Jr. and Thomas E. Terrill, *The American South: A History*, 3rd ed., 2 vols. (Boston, Mc Graw Hill, 2002), I, 244; Clement Eaton, *The Growth of Southern Civilization, 1790-1860*. (New York: Harper and Row, 1961), 117.

² Cooper and Terrill, 244.

instituted successful schools, but that “all too frequently a state made elaborate plans and then did nothing.”³ Louisiana fits this model perfectly. In 1841 New Orleans established a system of free public schools that continued to grow and prosper throughout the antebellum period, earning praise from across the South and the nation.⁴ Despite this prominent example of success, the rest of the state faltered in its attempts to establish public schools. In 1845 a new state constitution instituted democratic reforms, such as expanding suffrage among Louisiana’s white males by reducing property qualifications, and also extended social services such as education across the state.⁵ The 1845 Constitution required each parish to establish free public schools that would be available to all of Louisiana’s white youth between the ages of six and sixteen.⁶ Despite such promising requirements, education in Louisiana would remain haphazard and inefficient throughout the antebellum period.

By the time the legislature began making arrangements for a statewide system of public education in 1847, the city of New Orleans had been operating a successful and popular system of free public schools for six years. Within the first years of its operation, New Orleans public schools attracted scores of students and overcame the initial hostility of the population. When the public free system began, most residents viewed education as the responsibility of parents or the church rather than the state, yet within a few short

³ Ibid.

⁴ Alma H. Peterson, “A Historical Survey of the Administration of Education in New Orleans, 1718-1851” (PhD dissertation, Louisiana State University, 1962), 53-54; Donald E. Devore and Joseph Logsdon, *Crescent City Schools: Public Education in New Orleans, 1841-1991* (Lafayette, Louisiana: The Center for Louisiana Studies, University of Southwestern Louisiana, 1991), 22, 23; Robert C. Reinders, “New England Influences on the Formation of Public Schools in New Orleans,” *Journal of Southern History*, XXX (1964), 190-191.

⁵ Samuel C. Hyde, Jr., *Pistols and Politics: The Dilemma of Democracy in Louisiana’s Florida Parishes, 1810-1899* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1996), 58.

⁶ Richard Loucks, An exposition of the laws of Louisiana, relating to free public schools (Baton Rouge: Printed at the Office of the *Delta*, 1847), 1.

years the city's white residents embraced the public school system. Instituting public libraries and lecture series as well as night schools for young people who worked during the day, by the end of the decade New Orleans public schools attracted support from throughout the state and praise from across the South.⁷ The success of the city's schools can be directly attributed to the conscientious local officials who monitored and administered the system. Without any central influence or guidance from the state, city officials took control of their schools and ran the successful system themselves. The city organized an institutional framework to support the public school system and ensure its quality. Despite the success this model offered, most of the rest of Louisiana looked to state government to provide this framework, a responsibility that legislators neglected.⁸

Although Louisiana's lawmakers had the successful example of New Orleans to use in establishing the public education system of the state, legislators did not institute the necessary requirements and regulations to guide public school administrators. Rather than offering the direction that local officials continually sought from the legislature, state officials failed to fund the system adequately, to offer solutions or suggestions to obstacles encountered, or to set regulations for the basic functioning of the system, such as establishing standards for teachers, administrators, school-houses, courses, or materials. Indeed, rather than assisting local officials who encountered obstacles in establishing public schools in their area, many observers believed that the actions of the legislature caused more harm than good, frequently altering the law, abolishing the office of effective local school administrators, leaving contradictory sections in the statutes, and failing to address many of the most pressing matters that hindered the school system,

⁷ Peterson, 53-54; Devore and Logsdon, 22, 23; Reinders, 190-191.

⁸ See following pp. 14-44.

such as incompetent and illiterate teachers. Instituting some basic requirements would have ensured a level of quality in public schools, but instead legislators condemned the public school system through their inaction and negligence. In spite of seemingly constant appeals by constituents requesting relief and guidance, elected officials ignored those pleas and by doing so revealed their own disinterest in public education. Despite the presence of prosperous public schools flourishing within the state, the legislature did not use New Orleans' example to implement education policy in the rest of the state, but left local areas to run the system themselves haphazardly and unsuccessfully with no centralized regulations or direction to guide them.

Chapter One

Small Beginnings: Education in Colonial and Territorial Louisiana

“There are no colleges, and but one public school, which is at New Orleans,” President Thomas Jefferson lamented to the United States Congress on the eve of the Louisiana Purchase.¹ He went on, “not more than half of the inhabitants are supposed to be able to read and write; of whom not more than two hundred, perhaps, are able to do it well.”² Such a woeful assessment of education in the nation’s newest territory revealed the ongoing challenge facing proponents of education in Louisiana prior to statehood. While the territory would go through many important transitions, sadly the status of education would remain much the same. From the time of initial European contact to its acceptance into the Union, numerous and varied attempts to introduce schools into the state would be tried, but most failed. Certain individuals expended determined efforts on behalf of education but without the systematic support of the state, institutions of learning would prove inefficient and inconsistent; the only acceptable schools remained beyond the reach of all but the wealthiest inhabitants. Many obstacles hindered educational development in the territorial period, and these same obstacles would continue to haunt education proponents in Louisiana throughout the antebellum years. Like the colonial governments that failed to overcome these impediments, the state continued to falter in its

¹ *American State Papers: Documents, Legislative and Executive, of the Congress of the United States, Miscellaneous*, (38 vols., Washington: 1834), I, 353, quoted in Martin Luther Riley, *The Development of Education in Louisiana Prior to Statehood* (n.p., reprinted from *The Louisiana Historical Quarterly*, 1936), 33.

² *Ibid.*, 353.

educational policy, failing to overcome the many challenges it faced in establishing a public school system.

During the French period education remained the domain of the Catholic Church. Inhabitants believed that the Church maintained responsibility for instructing the youth, depending on their local priests and nuns to supervise the scholarship of their children as most did in France.³ In 1722 the Catholic Church divided the Louisiana territory into two “spiritual districts” to be controlled by the Capuchins and the Jesuits, and both orders took steps to establish schools in the area.⁴ Father Cecil, a Capuchin monk, gained credit for opening the first boys school in Louisiana in a small house near his church in New Orleans.⁵ The Capuchin Superior, Father Raphael, established “un petit collège” in New Orleans around 1725 that accommodated fifteen students whom he and an assistant taught reading, writing, music, French, Latin, and religion.⁶ Father Raphael recommended to the Company of the Indies that no fees be charged for admission into the school and that the Company provide all necessary supplies for the students free of charge.⁷ Unfortunately, this school never prospered as it suffered through lengthy litigation over the debt incurred for the purchase of the school house.⁸

Sieur Jean Baptist le Moyne de Bienville, the acting territorial governor throughout much of the period of French possession, emphasized the need for popular

³ Alma H. Peterson, “A Historical Survey of the Administration of Education in New Orleans, 1718-1851” (PhD dissertation, Louisiana State University, 1962), 4; T.H. Harris, *The Story of Public Education in Louisiana* (New Orleans: by the author, 1924), 3; Riley, 5.

⁴ Riley, 6; Peterson, 5. Riley notes that the Catholic Church originally divided the territory into three districts, but the Bishop was dissatisfied with the Carmelites’ administration of their district; he stripped them of their precinct and added it to the jurisdiction of the Capuchins.

⁵ Riley, 6.

⁶ Riley, 6-7; Peterson, 6-7; Charles Nolan, *A History of the Archdiocese of New Orleans* (Strasbourg, France: aEditions du Signe, 2000), 26.

⁷ Riley, 7.

⁸ Riley, 7-8; Peterson, 5.

education in the territory and looked to the Jesuits, the religious order often cited as being at the forefront of educational development in Louisiana, to provide for the colony's needs.⁹ In 1727 the Jesuits purchased a plantation from Bienville where they opened what can be considered Louisiana's first agricultural school, with instruction centered on the cultivation of sugar cane, oranges, figs, indigo, and wax myrtle.¹⁰

The same year the Jesuits offered a more significant contribution by arranging for the Ursuline nuns to come to Louisiana. In 1727 the Ursulines made their way from France, immediately establishing a girls school upon their arrival in the territory.¹¹ The order's contract with the Company of the Indies noted among their responsibilities to "relieve the poor sick and provide at the same time for the education of young girls."¹² The curriculum for their female students originally included catechism, reading, writing, and needlework to which they soon added French, English, geography, arithmetic, history, music, sewing, and housework. In addition to their French students, the Ursulines also taught Indians and free black women reading, writing, catechism, caring for silkworms, and the making of silk fabric.¹³ Many New Orleanians fondly credit the Ursuline nuns for opening the first girls school in the Louisiana territory, a success magnified by its perseverance as it continues to educate the youth of New Orleans today.

Many Catholic schools emerged in Louisiana throughout its early history; as one authority on education in the state explains, "it is generally conceded that wherever

⁹ Charles William Dabney, *Universal Education in the South* (4 vols., Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1936.), I, 359.

¹⁰ Henry Renshaw, "The Louisiana Ursulines," Louisiana Historical Society *Publications*, II (1901), 37. Translation of excerpt from "Traite de la Campagne des Indies avec les Ursulines," which is included in the article, quoted in Riley, 10, n. 26; Peterson, 7.

¹¹ Riley, 6; Peterson, 6-7.

¹² Riley, 13; Peterson, 8.

¹³ Riley, 13; Peterson, 9. It is assumed that the black women instructed by the Ursulines were free people of color, although the language used is ambiguous, referring to them as "negresses."

Catholicism dominated during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries education was primarily a product of the church.”¹⁴ Catholics established schools not only in the urban center of New Orleans but throughout the territory; the Religious of the Sacred Heart opened the first Catholic schools in rural Louisiana in Grand Coteau in 1821 and Convent in 1825.¹⁵ But while the Catholic clergy established numerous academies, parochial schools faced many of the same problems that secular schools would encounter, most lasting for only a few years such as Father Bertrand Martial’s boys school in New Orleans that operated successfully for eight years but closed with his departure.¹⁶ In 1835 only five Catholic schools for girls existed and none for boys, though the number of parochial academies increased as more settlers came into the area.¹⁷ By 1850 the state housed eighteen Catholic schools, and in 1860 thirty-three operated throughout Louisiana.¹⁸ As other nationalities and religious denominations moved into the area, they too set up schools in the territory, although most succumbed to the same impermanency that plagued all academies in early Louisiana.

In addition to parochial schools, private tutors provided education throughout the territory for those who could afford the expense. Wealthy families often employed an itinerant teacher, usually male, to teach their children in their homes. Negating the need for travel and ameliorating any anxiety associated with leaving home, this policy also better served the rural population where the considerable distances between homes deterred the establishment of community schools.¹⁹ The instruction provided by tutors

¹⁴ Riley, 5.

¹⁵ Nolan, 26.

¹⁶ Ibid., 27.

¹⁷ Ibid., 32.

¹⁸ Ibid., 32.

¹⁹ Julia Huston Nguyen, “Molding the Minds of the South: Education in Natchez, 1817-1861” (Master’s Thesis, Louisiana State University, 1995), 5.

usually served as preparation for boys to attend colleges in Europe or the Northeast. Although girls also received lessons, the lack of higher educational opportunities and the disposition of most parents limited the instruction of young women.²⁰ For both boys and girls, private tutors played a central role in advancing the education of Louisiana's youth; as historian Martin Luther Riley notes, "private tutors or itinerant teachers were integral parts of the colonial system of education."²¹

The relationship between a tutor and the family he served could often prove quite complicated. Many employers expected the tutors they hired to serve not only as educators but also as hired hands, helping out with chores and crops as the need arose, leaving many tutors feeling exploited and unappreciated. An example from 1779 highlights some of the peculiarities that could arise in relationships between tutors and their employers. Pedro Flouard, a tutor in New Orleans, sued his previous employer, Francisco Ense, for the amount contracted to educate Ense's children. Ense refused to pay because the tutor failed to remain for the entire length of the contract, but Flouard informed the court that he could not stay in Ense's home because the family failed to feed him adequately.²² Whether the dispute arose from Flouard's unreasonable culinary demands, from the Ense family's inhospitality, or perhaps from financial limitations, this episode illustrates that the employment of tutors often did not go smoothly. While an important form of education, the quality of instruction from private tutors differed drastically, and many tutors proved completely incompetent to discharge their duties.

²⁰ Peterson, 12; Harris, 3; James William Mobley, *The Academy Movement in Louisiana* (n.p., reprinted from *The Louisiana Historical Quarterly*, 1947), 9; Catherine Clinton, *The Plantation Mistress* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1982), 126; Joseph G. Tregle, Jr., *Louisiana in the Age of Jackson: A Clash of Cultures and Personalities* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1999), 44.

²¹ Riley, 16.

²² Peterson, 21.

Historian Joseph Tregle writes that tutors in Louisiana “generally proved a disgrace to the profession, intellectual mountebanks with a reputation for drunkenness and dissoluteness exceeded by hardly any other group in the community.”²³

In addition to tutors, private academies provided another option for education, though the exact conditions of private schools are difficult to document. Very few of them achieved any continuity, with most lasting only a matter of months.²⁴ That most teachers remained itinerant, moving often in search of better jobs and higher pay contributed to the impermanency of private academies. Most schools opened in someone’s home, and even the most successful institutions rarely continued after the departure of their founder. James William Mobley notes in his study of Louisiana schools that “in the early days the success of the school depended almost entirely on the personality of the teacher in charge.”²⁵ Like tutors, the quality of instruction differed, and many a charlatan swindled unsuspecting parents with his smooth talk but utter lack of educational ability.²⁶ Unfortunately, the cost of private academies rendered them inaccessible to many less wealthy families.

In 1762 Spain acquired Louisiana from France and in 1771 established the first public schools in the colony.²⁷ Although an admirable effort, most criticize Spain’s motives; as one scholar insists, “the Spanish had no interest in public education. They were, however, interested in assimilating a hostile French population and saw in public schools a means to that end.”²⁸ Although the Spanish established public schools in New

²³ Tregle, 44.

²⁴ Clinton, 126; Harris, 2-3; Tregle, 44; Mobley, 111.

²⁵ Mobley, 228.

²⁶ Ibid., 111-112.

²⁷ C. W. Hilton, Donald E. Shipp, and J. Berton Gremillion, *The Development of Public Education in Louisiana* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University, 1965), 9; Dabney, 359; Riley, 33; Peterson, 16-17.

²⁸ Hilton et. al., 9.

Orleans for both boys and girls, the French refused to attend and the schools never prospered; they nonetheless remained in operation until the time of the Louisiana Purchase.²⁹ Later generations remembered Spain critically for neglecting education in Louisiana. One senator commented over a decade after the Louisiana Purchase that the state, “had the misfortune of being soon after placed under the dominion of a nation whose government has adopted, as one of its most powerful means of ruling, a system tending to prevent the diffusion of knowledge.”³⁰

Once the United States acquired the territory in 1803 the territorial governor, William C. C. Claiborne, continually advocated legislative measures to support public schools accessible to all, noting that “in appropriating monies for the objects of public concern, the advancement of education is one, on which we cannot be too liberal.”³¹ Upon Claiborne’s urging one of the first acts of the territorial legislature authorized a public college, the University of Orleans, to be established in New Orleans and for one or more academies to be founded in each county (the largest territorial unit, composed of parishes).³² Although such early legislation for public education remains noteworthy, in the same fashion that would characterize most of Louisiana’s educational provisions, the legislature made no appropriation to support the schools. It merely “authorized” their establishment along with the use of two lotteries to raise funds to finance the College at a rate not to exceed \$50,000 annually.³³ Lotteries served as a notoriously inefficient method of procuring revenue; in 1807 the legislature revoked the provision for the

²⁹ Dabney, 359; Riley, 33; Peterson, 16-17.

³⁰ *Louisiana Senate Journal*, First Session, 1817, 42.

³¹ *Ibid.*, Second Session, 1816, 17.

³² Riley, 34; Harris, 4; Raleigh A. Suarez, “Chronicle of a Failure: Public Education in Antebellum Louisiana,” *Louisiana History*, XII (1971), 109.

³³ Riley, 35.

lotteries and reimbursed the directors \$711.00 for expenses incurred in their efforts to establish them.³⁴ In an attempt to find another means to fund the school system, in 1808 legislators passed “An Act to provide for the means of establishing public schools in the parishes of this Territory” which allowed parish school boards to levy a tax to support public schools. Again the limits of the legislature’s commitment to education proved painfully apparent when the following year they made the payment of the tax voluntary, a sacrifice that few residents in territorial Louisiana proved eager to make, rendering the tax completely ineffective.³⁵

The first state constitution, adopted in 1812, did not mention education. Despite its absence in the constitution, the legislature repeatedly passed resolutions concerning schools that seemed reasonable on paper but offered little of substance to advance education in Louisiana. As with its legislation for the College of Orleans, the legislature continually failed to appropriate sufficient funds or to provide substantive guidance, continuing the trend of inadequacy begun in the territorial period and leaving Louisiana’s youth to suffer without a school system.

Many obstacles hindered the development of an education system in Louisiana prior to statehood. The itinerancy of the population, the sparseness of settlements, and the polyglot of nationalities who held differing and often antithetical opinions about who maintained responsibility for educating the state’s youth, all challenged education proponents in Louisiana during the colonial and territorial periods and would continue to cause problems after statehood. Despite individual efforts, only systematic administration by a state government could hope to overcome such problems. Yet each

³⁴ Peterson, 29.

³⁵ Riley, 37-38; Suarez, 110-117.

government that controlled Louisiana proved incapable of providing for its educational needs. The French, Spanish, and Americans all failed to institute a system of public education for the state, so that the privileges of instruction remained out of reach for most of Louisiana's young people. Throughout the antebellum era, the education system in Louisiana would continue in the haphazard and inefficient manner initiated during the colonial and territorial periods.

Chapter Two

A Pioneering System: New Orleans Public Schools

The advent of American control in Louisiana seemed to herald a new and promising opportunity for education in the state. The territorial and first state governor, William C. C. Claiborne, became an early and ardent proponent of public education. He continually advocated a state-sponsored system of schools to provide instruction to Louisiana's white youth, including those financially incapable of paying tuition. Claiborne repeatedly pressured the legislature to make educational provisions for the state, asserting, "you cannot Gentlemen, but be sensible of the importance of this subject; it embraces the best interest of the community and mingles with the warmest affections of the heart."¹ Unfortunately most legislators did not share the same commitment to public education as the governor, though they made some nominal efforts to establish schools. Certain local officials concerned with the status of education continually requested legislative assistance to institute and regulate schools, but the legislature did not provide any substantive guidance. Appropriating inadequate funds, neglecting to institute standard regulations, and neglecting to grant the requisite authority needed to enforce rules, the legislature failed to provide a system of public education for Louisiana. Fortunately, the city of New Orleans would stand as an example by overcoming the ineptitude of the state administration and taking control of the city's system of public education.

¹ Dunbar Rowland, ed., *Official Letter Books of W. C. C. Claiborne, 1801-1816* (6 vols., Jackson, MS: State Department of Archives and History, 1917), IV, 293.

The legislature originally authorized the College of Orleans in 1805 but stymied its establishment by not providing funding for the school. Six years after the passage of the initial legislative act calling for its organization, the state allotted part of the surplus in the treasury to support education, granting fifteen thousand dollars to establish the College that year with an annual appropriation of \$3,000.² Although the War of 1812 distracted attention from the College, annual appropriations from the state continually increased to \$4,000 in 1819 and \$5,000 in 1821.³ Despite the expanded funding, in 1817 a legislative committee appointed to inspect the College of Orleans reported very unfavorably on its conditions. Sebastian Hiriart, the committee chair, noted that “in a large commercial city like New Orleans, all the necessaries of life sell at a high price, the board of the pupils was of course fixed at such a high rate that none but the richest could afford to send their children as permanent students in the College.”⁴ Not only could none but the wealthy manage to pay for the College, but attendance among the privileged also remained pitifully low as Hiriart explained that “the original number of pupils diminished as soon as the first ardor for whatever is new had subsided.”⁵ A legislative resolution prohibiting professors from simultaneously teaching at private schools had “a fated effect” according to the committee, since most teachers chose to keep private academies instead of teaching solely for the College.⁶ The resignation of the College’s English professor left the students without any instruction in the national language, effectively

² Martin Luther Riley, *The Development of Education in Louisiana Prior to Statehood* (n.p., reprinted from *The Louisiana Historical Quarterly*, 1936), 39; Raleigh A. Suarez, “Chronicle of a Failure: Public Education in Antebellum Louisiana,” *Louisiana History*, XII (1971), 111; Alma H. Peterson, “A Historical Survey of the Administration of Education in New Orleans, 1718-1851” (PhD dissertation, Louisiana State University, 1962), 32.

³ *Louisiana Senate Journal*, Second Session, 1816, 7; *ibid.*, First Session, 1819; *ibid.*, First Session, 1820.

⁴ *Ibid.*, First Session, 1817, 43.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.*

closing the school's doors to all but French students so that the College of Orleans "soon degenerated to a common school."⁷

Despite such unflattering observations, the legislature continued to support the College financially, in 1823 adding to its annual appropriation the revenue from the licensing of gambling houses.⁸ Although in 1823 another legislative committee reported much more favorably on the conditions of the College, the state withdrew appropriations in 1825 and abolished the College of Orleans the following year.⁹ The school's closure resulted from public controversy surrounding its president, Joseph Lakenal, a supposed regicide who fled France at the restoration of the monarchy.¹⁰ Still needing to support some sort of public education in the city, the legislature replaced the College with three schools, a primary school in both the American and French sections of town and one secondary school, referred to as a central school.¹¹ The central school simply continued the curriculum of the College without enjoying the title, as most so-called colleges during this era amounted to little more than secondary schools.¹² The legislature assumed that these schools would cater to less wealthy inhabitants, as the regents of the school later noted, "sublime, indeed, were the views of the Legislature who first brought into existence those philanthropic, benevolent, and charitable foundations. They were pregnant with the destinies of that class of our community, the most interesting, as it is

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid., First Session, 1823.

⁹ Ibid., First Session, 1825; *ibid.*, Second Session, 1826, 92.

¹⁰ Joseph G. Tregle, Jr., *Louisiana in the Age of Jackson: A Clash of Cultures and Personalities* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1999), 45; Joel L. Fletcher, *Louisiana Education Since Colonial Days* (Lafayette: Southwestern Louisiana Institute, 1948), 5; Donald E. Devore and Joseph Logsdon, *Crescent City Schools: Public Education in New Orleans, 1841-1991* (Lafayette, Louisiana: The Center for Louisiana Studies, University of Southwestern Louisiana, 1991), 9.

¹¹ T.H. Harris, *The Story of Public Education in Louisiana* (New Orleans: by the author, 1924), 7; Devore and Logsdon, 9; Peterson, 33; Suarez, 113; Fletcher, 5; John B. Robson, *Education in Louisiana* (Natchitoches, Louisiana: Northwestern State College, 1957), 1.

¹² Edwin Whitfield Fay, *The History of Education in Louisiana*, (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1898), 33; Fletcher, 5; Devore and Logsdon, 9.

the most unfortunate.”¹³ Regrettably the schools did not fulfill these high hopes, though education specialist Alma H. Peterson referred to their governing board of regents as the earliest school board in the nation.¹⁴

The three schools established from the College of Orleans received an annual appropriation of \$10,000 added to a \$15,000 tax on the two theaters in New Orleans.¹⁵ Although the institutions constituted “public” schools, established and supported by the legislature, they charged tuition, in 1830 \$2.00 a month per pupil for the primary schools and \$4.00 a month for the secondary school.¹⁶ The state did not yet commit itself to a system of free public education, supporting numerous private academies through annual appropriations in addition to the three public schools in New Orleans, all of which charged tuition. The dispensation of state aid depended on the admittance of a number of indigent students free of charge, usually designating the poor students as paupers. Private schools continued to prosper and enrollment remained unacceptably low in the three public schools, the community and later administrators looked on them with suspicion and bitterness, commenting that “after consuming large sums of public money,” the schools amounted to an “entire failure.”¹⁷

In 1833, 236 boys attended the three public schools in New Orleans, “most of them admitted gratis,” according to its governing board; 108 students attended the lower primary school, while 82 attended the upper primary and 46 the central school.¹⁸ Despite the low enrollment, the board of regents assured the legislature that “those schools, are so

¹³ “Annual Report of the Central and Primary Schools,” *Louisiana Senate Journal*, First Session, 1833, 24-25.

¹⁴ Peterson, 34.

¹⁵ *Louisiana Senate Journal*, Second Session, 1826, 92; Peterson, 38.

¹⁶ Peterson, 39.

¹⁷ Second Annual Report, Council of Municipality Number Two, (New Orleans: printed at the office of the Commercial Bulletin, 1844), 26.

¹⁸ “Report of the Central and Primary Schools,” *Louisiana Senate Journal*, First Session, 1833, 25.

organized, as to leave no doubt on our minds that children belonging to those families, doomed elsewhere by poverty, to live and die in ignorance, may be brought up therein as to induce us to indulge the hope that they may hereafter be ranked among those high minded and industrious citizens, constituting the true wealth of states, nay; as to stand foremost in society, in point of acquirements and talents.”¹⁹ The school board assigned a committee to conduct surprise inspections of the schools once a month and also instituted public examinations for all students twice a year. Following their first inspection of the schools, the regents reported that “although our committee had presented themselves unexpectedly, they found boys from eleven to sixteen years of age translating with a facility and especially with an acuteness of expression really remarkable, the French, English and Spanish languages, some of them translated without previous preparation, several Latin books, among them Virgil’s *Eneid*. Questions were put to them on Mathematics: they answered satisfactorily, problems were propounded and solved on the spot.”²⁰

Enrollment in the schools continued to increase so that in 1836 the two primary schools boasted an enrollment of four hundred forty while the central school catered to over one hundred students. Of this total, one hundred ninety remained pauper students educated at the expense of the state while the rest paid tuition.²¹ Unfortunately the number of students enrolled rarely coincided with the number of students attending class regularly. Although the board of regents reported an enrollment of 440 in the primary schools, according to later assessments average attendance remained at about seventy-five, failing to even surpass the number of students attending the abolished College of

¹⁹ Ibid., 24.

²⁰ Ibid., 25.

²¹ Peterson, 40-41.

Orleans which in 1823 accommodated eighty students.²² Although later reminiscences may have been overly critical of these first public institutions, their evaluation of the ineptitude of the primary and central schools remains powerful. The successors of the schools repeatedly emphasized their inadequacy; one critic of the system reported that “in reviewing the history of the past, we behold only the wrecks of noble enterprises, freighted with the hopes and expectations of the community, yet destined to common ruin.”²³

In 1836 a change in the governance of New Orleans took place which had significant consequences for the establishment of public schools. A new charter divided the city into three distinct municipalities in order to ameliorate ethnic tensions and allow the French and the Americans to control their own part of the city. The charter granted control of each municipality to a separate governing council under the general supervision of the mayor and a General Council (composed of all three municipal councils). The General Council had very limited powers and could only rule on matters that affected all the municipalities; it had no power over the purse. This division allowed each of the three municipalities within the city to function semi-autonomously, fostering differing public school developments.²⁴ The First Municipality or “Old Square” housed the French section of the city and encompassed the Vieux Carre. Americans enjoyed control over most of the city’s uptown which made up the Second Municipality, covering

²² [First] Annual Report of the Council of Municipality Number Two, of the city of New Orleans, on the Condition of its Public Schools, (New Orleans: Printed at the Office of the *Picayune*, 1845), 5; “Report of the Committee on Education,” *Louisiana Senate Journal*, First Session, 1823, 53.

²³ Report of the Board of Directors of the Public Schools of the Second Municipality, (New Orleans: Die Glocke Office, 1848); see also [First] Annual Report of the Council of Municipality Number Two. . . ; Third Annual Report of the Council of Municipality Number Two, (New Orleans: printed at the office of the Commercial Bulletin, 1844).

²⁴ Peterson, 40-41; Mel Leavitt, *A Short History of New Orleans* (San Francisco: Lexikos, 1982), 88; John Smith Kendall, *History of New Orleans* (Chicago: the Lewis Publishing Company, 1922), 134-135.

the Faubourg St. Mary between Canal and Felicity Streets, while the Third Municipality housed a mix of French, mulattos and Germans in the Faubourg Marigny.²⁵ This division of the city would allow public education in each municipality to develop independently.

In 1841, in response to a request by Samuel J. Peters and Joshua Baldwin both of the Second Municipality, the state legislature passed an act that allowed each of the municipalities in New Orleans to establish free public schools within their domain for white children, marking the watershed for public education in the city.²⁶ Several prominent businessmen from the American Quarter orchestrated the passage of the act so that they could initiate a new free school system for New Orleans.²⁷ The law authorized each municipal council to levy taxes in support of the schools and appropriated state aid of 2 and 5/8 dollars per taxable inhabitant, the current appropriation to each parish, not to exceed \$10,000. In 1845 the legislature increased this amount to 5 and 2/8 dollars per inhabitant, not to exceed \$15,000.²⁸

The three municipalities immediately commenced preparations for their schools after the passage of the statute but the general population received the law with hostility.²⁹ Catholic educators feared that state intrusion into the field of education would erode their power in the community while private teachers did not want the state to deprive them of customers. Wealthy citizens who could afford to pay tuition did not want to be taxed for the education of other people's children, and general public opinion

²⁵ Peterson, 41; Leavitt, 88; Kendall, 134-135.

²⁶ *Louisiana Senate Journal*, First Session, 1841; Robert C. Reinders, "New England Influences on the Formation of Public Schools in New Orleans," *Journal of Southern History*, XXX (1964), 183.

²⁷ Peterson, 48; Reinders, 183.

²⁸ *Louisiana Senate Journal*, First Session, 1841.

²⁹ [First] Annual Report of the Council of Municipality Number Two. . . , 6; Second Annual Report of the Council of Municipality Number Two, 25; "Report of the State Superintendent of Education," *Louisiana Legislative Documents*, 1847, 12.

opposed free “pauper” schools serving the entire community. According to municipal officials, “the community regarded the enterprise with distrust, if not entirely opposed to it.”³⁰ Despite local resistance, all three municipalities opened schools in their districts within one year that soon elicited praise from across the nation.³¹ Donald E. Devore and Joseph Logsdon note that “New England educators who normally scoffed at the educational backwardness of the South took notice of the New Orleans achievement.”³²

Left to their own devices to implement the Act of 1841 the three municipalities established schools in their districts individually, though the boards remained in contact and cooperation with one another. When a new charter in 1852 combined the municipalities into a single entity, it did not alter the successful school system but left control to the three distinct school boards.³³ The Second Municipality led the way for public schools in the city by adopting the proven methods instituted in New England, such as organizing the schools into grades, and incorporating the phonetic reading system and New England primers.³⁴ The other municipalities of New Orleans imitated the school system of the Second, though taking a bit longer to institute their systems.³⁵

The Council of the Second Municipality first appointed a board of directors of twelve prominent citizens to add to the Council’s standing committee on education.³⁶ It immediately abolished the existing public school developed from the College of Orleans noting with contempt the inferiority of the previous system and refusing to “build upon

³⁰ Second Annual Report of the Council of Municipality Number Two, 25; Robert W. Shugg, *Origins of Class Struggle in Louisiana: A Social History of White Farmers and Laborers during Slavery and After, 1840-1875* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1939), 68-69.

³¹ Peterson, 53-54; Devore and Logsdon, 22, 23; Reinders, 190-191.

³² Devore and Logsdon, 22, 23; Charles William Dabney, *Universal Education in the South* (4 vols., Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1936.), I, 363; Reinders, 190-191.

³³ Kendall, 172.

³⁴ Reinders, 186.

³⁵ See p. 23-24 following.

³⁶ [First] Annual Report of the Council of Municipality Number Two. . . , 5.

this apology for a system of public education.”³⁷ Critically remembering previous public school efforts within the state, the board of directors enlisted the aid of experts from other areas, looking to the education specialist commonly referred to as “the father of the American public school system,” Horace Mann, the secretary of the Massachusetts Board of Education.³⁸ Massachusetts led the country in the establishment of successful public schools and Mann was the architect of their system, widely acknowledged as the preeminent educator in the country. Through correspondence with city administrators, Mann suggested his former assistant, J. A. Shaw, to direct the organization of the New Orleans public school system.³⁹ The school board immediately contacted Shaw who accepted the offer and arrived in New Orleans in 1841, opening a school under his direction by the end of the year where he and two female assistants instructed twenty-six students in a single room.⁴⁰ The directors expended great efforts to publicize the new public school to all residents in the district, even going so far as to require board members to visit homes in the municipality to inform families of the new school.⁴¹ Despite such publicity efforts, the board noted with regret that only three hundred nineteen children enrolled at the school, a very small proportion of the children residing in the municipality (estimated to be about 2,300 at that time). But the municipal council praised the school board, claiming that “this general apathy, to take advantage of such high privileges, only stimulated them to persevere and make more vigorous and extended efforts in behalf of the cause.”⁴²

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid.; Jonathan Messerli, *Horace Mann: A Biography*. (New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 1972), xi.

³⁹ [First] Annual Report of the Council of Municipality Number Two. . . , 5; Reinders, 183.

⁴⁰ [First] Annual Report of the Council of Municipality Number Two. . . , 5.

⁴¹ Ibid., 6; Peterson, 122.

⁴² [First] Annual Report of the Council of Municipality Number Two. . . , 6.

Despite a meager beginning, municipal officers noted with pride that not a week passed without new enrollments. In 1842 the total number of pupils attending the public schools in the Second Municipality reached eight hundred forty, with a total of 1,397 students “belonging to and having participated in their advantages.”⁴³ According to the estimates of the Second Municipality council president, twenty-three hundred white children between the ages of 5 and 15 resided within the district of which about five hundred attended private schools in addition to the over eight hundred attending public school, leaving about one thousand children in the district without instruction.⁴⁴ School officials reported proudly that despite the initial opposition of the community, the success of the schools remained evident by their ever-increasing popularity, regularity of attendance, and the good behavior of students.⁴⁵

When the success of the Second Municipality schools became apparent, the other two sections of the city commenced their efforts to institute such a system. The Third Municipality immediately attempted to imitate the schools of the Second, opening a school within a year although its attendance levels never reached those of the Second district. The First Municipality, alternatively, did not immediately establish its schools in the same efficient manner. Rather than organizing entirely new schools in 1841, the municipality extended two schools established there in 1825 from the abolition of the College of Orleans.⁴⁶ Unfortunately these schools continued to fall far below expectations, and in 1843 the school board finally declared that the schools proved a complete failure. Despite the funding provided for their support, \$13,942.93 from June

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 12.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Peterson, 193.

1841 to September 1843, only one school remained in operation in 1843, catering to 115 male students.⁴⁷ The instruction provided proved unacceptable and the academic achievements of the students fell far below the school directors' expectations.

Accordingly, the First Municipality abolished the schools and instituted a new free school system based on the system of the Second Municipality.⁴⁸

The public school in the second district originally opened in a single rented room of a house on Julia Street, but within a year due to increasing enrollment and the need for more space to facilitate "physical development," it occupied "four large and commodious houses," as well as a fifth structure built by the Municipality.⁴⁹ The Third Municipality soon distributed children in seven classrooms in two different districts, and by 1845 the First Municipality administered six schools.⁵⁰ The number of schools, students, and teachers continually increased as did the accompanying programs, soon instituting lyceum series and adding libraries and other useful resources. Like schools across the South, despite the presence of a large free black community in New Orleans, Louisiana public schools were open to only white children, regardless of status.

An examination of the rapidly increasing enrollment in the New Orleans public schools reveals the immediate success of the system instituted in 1841. The table below provides an estimate of the increase in attendance at the public schools in order to suggest their growing popularity. In 1843, after only two years of operation, enrollment in the public schools of the Second Municipality increased from the original number of twenty-six students taught by three teachers to 1,574 students enrolled taught by thirty-three

⁴⁷ Ibid., 206.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ [First] Annual Report of the Council of the Second Municipality. . . , 6; Peterson, 119.

⁵⁰ Fay, 71; Peterson, 55.

teachers. Likewise, attendance in both the First and Third Municipalities increased rapidly. In 1845 the combined enrollment in the three municipalities reached 3,336 students taught by 80 teachers, and by 1850 the number of students climbed to 6,285. Officers of the Second Municipality bragged that a number of families moved within its borders strictly to gain access to its schools.⁵¹ The directors of the schools proudly claimed that the “accession to the public, and diminution from the private schools, is believed the most conclusive evidence of the former’s superiority, and moreover, further evidences with what facility prejudices, even the most deep rooted, are dissipated by the force of truth and wisdom.”⁵²

Table 2.1: Increasing Public School Attendance in the Three Municipalities of New Orleans, 1842-1850⁵³

Year	First Municipality			Second Municipality			Third Municipality		
	# of Schools	# of Teachers	# of Pupils	# of Schools	# of Teachers	# of Pupils	# of Schools	# of Teachers	# of Pupils
1842	-	-	-	2	7	840	2	2	110
1843	-	-	-	3	20	1156	3	4	230
1844	3	11	615	5	33	1574	3	4	230
1845	6	36	1029	6	37	1859	5	7	448
1846	6	38	1351	7	40	2004	7	10	672
1847	7	40	1512	8	46	2303	9	13	867
1848	9	43	1725	10	54	2693	12	15	902
1849	11	45	1850	13	57	2851	14	17	989
1850	12	50	2010	15	63	3155	17	21	1120

The city’s public education directors designated three levels in the schools: primary, intermediate, and secondary. All children entered the primary department regardless of age, “until they have some knowledge of reading, writing on slates, and

⁵¹ Second Annual Report of the Council of Municipality Number Two, 15.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Fay, 71; Peterson, 55.

mental arithmetic.”⁵⁴ Primary school students received lessons in spelling, grammar, composition, reading, writing, and oral instruction of numbers. The intermediate department added to this curriculum the Latin and French languages, geography, United States history, and declamation. Those courses continued in the high schools in addition to algebra, geometry, natural and moral philosophy, and French and English literature and history.⁵⁵ As the years progressed more advanced courses appeared in the high schools so that in 1859 students could choose from such classes as analytical grammar, Roman history, rhetoric, chemistry, botany, physiology, astronomy, trigonometry, surveying, and American constitutional theory.⁵⁶ Students in all grades received vocal music instruction, in which the schools took special pride, noting that music creates the “happiest effects, both as to the moral and intellect,” and that the “influence of music on the nation is no less obvious than on individuals.”⁵⁷ Beginning in 1841 the teachers also read scripture to the students in the mornings, “without note or comment,” followed by a prayer.⁵⁸ Although the directors insisted that the moral instruction provided in the schools remained non-sectarian, Catholic objections led to the discontinuation of scripture readings in 1850.⁵⁹ Nonetheless the school directors assured the community that “care is taken to instill in their young minds the precepts of a high morality and principles of lofty patriotism.”⁶⁰

⁵⁴ [First] Annual Report of the Council of Municipality Number Two. . . , 7.

⁵⁵ Second Annual Report of the Council of Municipality Number Two, 18.

⁵⁶ “Annual Report of the Treasurer of the Parish of Orleans, First- Fourth Districts, to the State Superintendent,” included in “Report of the State Superintendent of Public Education,” *Louisiana Legislative Documents*, 1859, 84-91.

⁵⁷ [First] Annual Report of the Council of Municipality Number Two. . . , 8.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*; Reinders, 189; Peterson, 141-145.

⁶⁰ Report of the Board of Directors of the Public Schools of the Second Municipality, 1848, 4.

Public education proponents in New Orleans refuted the charge that public schools endangered morals and manners. Sardonicly questioning if nothing vicious or rude ever entered private schools, local administrators insisted that “the sad results of unwise domestic training are not confined to the children of the poor.”⁶¹ Although some doubted whether free public schools could create a decent atmosphere, school directors did everything in their power to ensure that the schools maintained a respectable environment and that students received not only academic instruction but social as well, taking particular care to inculcate both manners and morals.⁶²

One of the complications for schools in New Orleans involved the challenge of catering to a bilingual population. The First Municipality bore most of the burden, for while it remained predominantly French the large English-speaking minority insisted on having schools conducted in the national language as well. In 1852, 1,288 students in the First Municipality schools spoke French as their first language while 968 spoke English.⁶³ The bilingual divide led to the costly practice of providing duplicate texts and teachers for both languages.⁶⁴ Language proved a contentious point as control of the First Municipality’s school board vacillated between the two nationalities throughout the antebellum period, leading to transient alterations in school practices and contributing to the volatility of relations between English and French speakers.⁶⁵ In spite of the numerous changes to school policies, duplicate courses for both languages remained until the Civil War.⁶⁶

⁶¹ Third Annual Report of the Council of the Municipality Number Two, 37.

⁶² [First] Annual Report of the Council of Municipality Number Two. . . , 8; Third Annual Report of the Council of Municipality Number Two, 37.

⁶³ Devore and Logsdon, 29.

⁶⁴ “Report of the State Superintendent of Public Education,” *Louisiana Senate Journal*, 1847, 43.

⁶⁵ Devore and Logsdon, 29.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

On average, New Orleans public schools operated five days a week, ten months a year, although some schools operated eleven months, closing only in August.⁶⁷ Originally the schools in the Second Municipality conducted class a half-day on Saturdays, but the board of directors discontinued this practice in 1851.⁶⁸ In 1856 the school board noted that their schools convened at 9:00 am and remained open until 2:30, with a half-hour recess at noon.⁶⁹ The principal teacher could also grant the students a ten-minute recess at his or her discretion. Six to seven hours a day seems to have been the normal session, though in 1859 the First District of New Orleans reported their schools conducted class for only three and a half hours a day.⁷⁰ Students underwent annual examinations twice a year, in December and June, with the school board often attending. Some primary schools initiated the practice of dismissing pupils under eight years of age earlier in the afternoons in order to allow teachers to work more closely with older students.⁷¹

The large amounts expended by the city in order to maintain its public schools allowed teachers' salaries in New Orleans to compare favorably with those received in other sections of the country. When the Second Municipality first hired Shaw to direct its schools in 1841, they offered him a salary of \$3,500, a very generous sum even in the

⁶⁷ Second Annual Report of the Council of Municipality of Number Two reports their schools were only closed during the month of August, although most reports, such as those included in the State Superintendent of Education Reports, document a ten-month term. See also "Report of the State Superintendent of Public Education," *Louisiana Legislative Documents*, 1858, 96-102.

⁶⁸ Peterson, 131, 147.

⁶⁹ Annual Report of the Board of Directors of the Public Schools of the First District of New Orleans, for the Year ending June 30, 1856, (New Orleans: printed at the office of the *Creole*, 1856).

⁷⁰ "Annual Report of the Treasurer of the Parish of Orleans, First District, to the State Superintendent," included in "Report of the State Superintendent of Public Education," *Louisiana Legislative Documents*, 1859, 84; Peterson, 224.

⁷¹ Annual Report of the Board of Directors of the Public Schools of the First District of New Orleans, for the Year ending June 30, 1856; Peterson, 244.

North.⁷² In 1856 principal teachers (head instructors) in New Orleans’ boys grammar schools received \$1,320, more than the same position received in Cincinnati or Philadelphia and only one hundred eighty dollars less than received in New York. School directors also boasted the comparatively higher salaries enjoyed by female teachers in New Orleans. For instance, while Boston paid their male grammar school principal teachers \$1,800, female principal teachers received only \$450. In contrast, New Orleans paid female principal teachers \$1,000, with men in the same position receiving three hundred and twenty dollars more.⁷³ These figures are included in Table 2 below.

Table 2.2: Salaries of School Teachers in Various Cities, 1856⁷⁴

	Male Principal Teachers	Female Principal Teachers	Male Assistant Teachers	Female Assistant Teachers
Boston	\$1,800	\$450	\$1,200	\$450
New York	\$1,500	\$700	\$1,000	\$400
Philadelphia	\$1,200	\$600	N/A	\$350
Cincinnati	\$1,020	\$504	N/A	\$360
New Orleans	\$1,320	\$1,000	\$1,000	\$800

The high pay for New Orleans public school teachers is indeed impressive. Alma Peterson noted in her 1962 study that “to this day, the New Orleans public school system has never equaled the status it enjoyed relative to salaries of teachers that it held during the early years of its operation.”⁷⁵ Likewise, Thelma Welch concluded in her survey of

⁷² Reinders, 184.

⁷³ Annual Report of the Board of Directors of the Public Schools of the First District of New Orleans, for the Year ending June 30, 1856.

⁷⁴ Ibid. Note: Philadelphia and Cincinnati did not employ male assistant teachers.

⁷⁵ Peterson, 58.

teachers' salaries that this period remains the only time in its history that New Orleans schools paid their teachers higher than other areas of the nation.⁷⁶

A clear preference for female teachers emerges from the reports of the municipalities of New Orleans. In 1843 females accounted for sixteen of the Second Municipality's twenty teachers, and in 1854 it employed fifty-one female teachers and only fourteen males.⁷⁷ The directors noted that they decided to hire mostly females "after mature deliberation," since women proved "better adapted to instruct young scholars, by their quicker perceptions; their instinctive fondness for, and tact in communicating knowledge; greater patience and more gentleness than the males."⁷⁸ Despite such declarations, the pecuniary interest in employing women rather than men must be acknowledged, since female teachers received less compensation than males. Using 1856 as an example, male high school principal teachers received \$1,800 compared to \$1,200 paid to female principal teachers.⁷⁹ These figures are included in Table 3 below.

⁷⁶ Thelma Welch, "Salary Policies for Teachers in New Orleans Public Schools, 1841-1941," (unpublished master's thesis, Tulane University, 1942), 17; cited in Peterson, 58.

⁷⁷ Second Annual Report of the Council of Municipality Number Two, 17; "Report of the Second District of New Orleans," included in the "State Superintendent of Education Report," *Louisiana Legislative Documents*, 1854, 95.

⁷⁸ [First] Annual Reports of the Council of Municipality Number Two. . . , 10; see also "Report of the State Superintendent of Public Education," *Louisiana Legislative Documents*, 1847, 10.

⁷⁹ Annual Report of the Board of Directors of the Public Schools of the First District of New Orleans, for the Year ending June 30, 1856.

Table 2.3: Salaries Paid to Public School Teachers in the First District of New Orleans, 1856⁸⁰

	Male Teachers		Female Teachers	
High School	Principal Teacher	\$1,800	Principal Teacher	\$1,200
	Assistant Teacher	\$1,500	Assistant Teacher	\$1,050
	French Teacher	\$700	French Teacher	\$600
Grammar School	Principal Teacher	\$1,320	Principal Teacher	\$1,000
	Assistant Teacher	\$1,000	Assistant Teacher	\$800

Teachers in New Orleans public schools consistently earned the praise of school administrators, whose assessments typically noted “the teachers attached to the 3rd District Public Schools are ornaments, well deserving the confidence which has been placed in them. Their general character is beyond reproach, their qualifications as teachers unsurpassed.”⁸¹ All available appraisals regarding teachers in the city’s public school remain unflinchingly positive, repeatedly noting their diligence, attentiveness and faithfulness.⁸² The school directors thoroughly examined all teaching applicants, claiming that “no teacher is employed in the schools, not in the Primary department even, who is not thoroughly versed in spelling, reading, grammar, geography, arithmetic and history of the United States; in order to ascertain this, every applicant for employment as teacher is required to undergo a rigid examination in all these branches.”⁸³ School directors in New Orleans not only expected their teachers to demonstrate academic

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ “Report of the State Superintendent of Education,” *Louisiana Legislative Documents*, 1859, 89.

⁸² For typical comments on the qualifications of teachers, See reports of the municipalities, included in “Report of the State Superintendent of Education,” *Louisiana Legislative Documents*, 1854, 92-97; *ibid.*, 1858, 96-102; *ibid.*, 1859, 84-91; *ibid.*, 1861, 41-49.

⁸³ “Report of the State Superintendent of Education,” *Louisiana Legislative Documents*, 1859, 91.

achievement, but also to exemplify morality and virtue as well as employing only the best methods of instruction so that “teachers and scholars are thus rendered attentive to their duties, and thereby ensures greatest good to greatest number, with the smallest means.”⁸⁴

As the schools continued to grow and increase in popularity, so did the number of teachers in New Orleans. After only one year the board of directors claimed that it received an abundance of teaching applications, noting that “more numerous applications for situations have afforded more unlimited choice, and enabled the Council to appoint none but those experienced in teaching, and of a high standard in literary acquirements.”⁸⁵ Regardless of the number of applicants, school administrators wanted to train their own instructors. The legislature continually received requests which insisted that the state should prepare its own inhabitants as instructors rather than importing teachers from other areas.⁸⁶ Accordingly, in 1858 the legislature authorized the establishment of a normal school to train teachers in New Orleans.⁸⁷ The city added a normal department to its girls' high school which accommodated thirty-seven students the first year and sixty-two in 1859.⁸⁸ Proudly reporting that its graduates moved on to teach within New Orleans as well as across the state and beyond, the directors of the normal department claimed “the growth and prosperity of the school during the past year, has been a source of gratification to those friends who hailed its first organization with pleasure, and who have faithfully continued to watch over its interests.”⁸⁹ In 1858, J. G.

⁸⁴ [First] Annual Report of the Council of Municipality Number Two. . .,” 8; “Second Annual Report of the Council of Municipality Number Two, 21.

⁸⁵ Second Annual Report of the Council of Municipality Number Two, 17.

⁸⁶ See for example “Report of the State Superintendent of Education,” *Louisiana Legislative Documents*, 1857, 12; *ibid.*, 1856, 10.

⁸⁷ “Report of the State Superintendent of Education,” *Louisiana Legislative Documents*, 1858, 9.

⁸⁸ “Report of the Normal School,” included in “Report of the State Superintendent of Education,” *Louisiana Legislative Documents*, 1859, 101.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

Parham, Jr., Superintendent of the Fourth District, reported that “nearly one-half of the teachers have been educated entirely and solely in the High Schools of the First and Fourth Districts of this city.”⁹⁰

Significantly, the public schools operating in New Orleans remained completely free to all students. Up to 1841, the term “public” school simply connoted its support through some sort of state aid. The requirement for such aid depended on the school’s admission of a certain number of indigent children without charge, while the rest of the students paid tuition. Numerous officials advocated a system of public education that would provide instruction free of charge to all students. The repeated suggestions of Governor A. B. Roman throughout the 1830s warned the legislature that despite the money appropriated, little good had been affected due to “the odious distinction which it establishes between the children of the rich and those of the poor.”⁹¹ He explained that the method of forcing schools to admit pauper students while the rest paid tuition created this distinction, noting that “the project of educating the indigent class gratuitously in schools open for the children of the opulent, who pay for their instruction, is an illusion, in a country where the first ideas imbibed by man are those of liberty and equality, and where a great number of persons will forego for their children the advantages of privilege, which appears to them to induce them, if accepted, to the level of those who live on charity and alms.”⁹²

In contrast to this previous method of admitting poor children gratuitously, the public schools established in New Orleans after 1841 remained completely free to all

⁹⁰ “Annual Report of the Treasurer of the Parish of Orleans, Fourth District, to the State Superintendent,” included in “Report of the State Superintendent of Public Education,” *Louisiana Legislative Documents*, 1858, 102.

⁹¹ *Louisiana Senate Journal*, First Session, 1833, 4.

⁹² *Ibid.*, Second Session, 1833, 2.

children, the first example of free schools in the state. The board of directors praised the free system, insisting that it produced impressive results and that rich and poor students sat side by side without any distinction among them, so that “it teaches the one as well as informs the other that adventitious wealth confers no superiority over the less fortunate competitor when engaged in the intellectual contest.”⁹³ Not only were students exempted from tuition, but the schools also provided stationery and books for its students so that no one would be deprived of the benefits of education because of financial limitations.⁹⁴ School administrators in New Orleans argued that although some citizens believed that the poor should stay ignorant, such opinions contradicted the egalitarian ideals upon which the nation was founded.⁹⁵ They maintained that the responsibility to educate all citizens rested with the state and that it should do so free of charge since the nation’s system of government demands that “the masses must be intelligent and virtuous; such only will make good members of society, and being able to comprehend their whole duty, will be able and willing to perform it.”⁹⁶

Although some feared that free schools would cater only to the less fortunate segments of society, ensuring a situation where the rich continued to attend expensive private schools and only the destitute attended public schools, this fear proved unfounded in New Orleans. The directors of the Second Municipality schools boasted in their first report that “for coming as many of the children do from opulent and influential citizens, who before confided their education to the private schools, it affords the most conclusive evidence, not only that the prejudices against public schools in general, have yielded and

⁹³ [First] Annual Report of the Council of Municipality Number Two. . . , 11.

⁹⁴ Report of the Board of Directors of the Public Schools of the Second Municipality, 1848.

⁹⁵ Second Annual Report of the Council of Municipality Number Two, 25.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*; [First] Annual Report of the Council of Municipality Number Two. . . , 12.

been overcome, but that these public schools, in their judgment, afford better opportunities for their children acquiring a good practical education than the private ones.”⁹⁷ The schools soon gained the support of the community so that by 1844 the directors boasted that two-thirds of its population attended public schools and that the condition and character of the schools therefore remained a “matter of deep concernment to every good citizen.”⁹⁸ The directors proudly acknowledged the local support that the program garnered, claiming that “the schools have greatly increased in usefulness, and have become so firmly riveted in the affections and feelings of the people, that they are no longer regarded as experimental, or their permanency considered as questionable.”⁹⁹

The New Orleans community, although originally opposed to supporting a free school system, soon embraced the public schools of the city. Referring to the public schools as “a system which finds an advocate in every child, a protector in every parent, and a friend in every citizen,” district directors repeatedly emphasized their value to the community.¹⁰⁰ Intent on extending the avenues of learning as far as possible, public school administrators instituted community programs that ingratiated larger and larger segments of the city’s population to the public school system. The school system established both a public library which housed over twelve thousand volumes by 1861 as well a lyceum series offered to the New Orleans community, which the directors hoped would “extend to the many the inappreciable advantages of knowledge, - which, hitherto,

⁹⁷ [First] Annual Report of the Council of Municipality Number Two. . . , 6.

⁹⁸ Second Annual Report of the Council of Municipality Number Two, 24.

⁹⁹ Third Annual Report of the Council of Municipality Number Two, 34.

¹⁰⁰ Report of the Board of Directors of the Public Schools of the Second Municipality, 1848.

have been confined to the favored few.”¹⁰¹ Such community programs helped rally more and more supporters to the cause of public education in New Orleans.

Not only did New Orleans officials provide schools, libraries, and lecture series to the public, but they even made provisions for those young residents who lacked the freedom to attend school during the day. Seeking to educate all the city’s youth, even those who could not enjoy the luxury of education in the regular public schools because of their occupations, all districts of the city operated night schools by the 1850s.

Although the Second District opened its night school to only males, the other districts made their schools available to young adults of both sexes who worked during the day. Night schools usually operated for three hours an evening, five days a week, for five to seven months a year rather than the standard ten month term of day schools.¹⁰² In 1854 three night schools in the city enrolled 411 pupils and by 1859 this number more than doubled in just one night school, with attendance climbing to 849 students.¹⁰³ While the operation of night schools may not seem like a significant contribution upon first consideration, such an undertaking reveals the determination of city officials. The provision for night schools suggests that those in charge of New Orleans school system remained truly committed to educating the entire population, even those ordinarily beyond the reach of public schools.

The extraordinary local supervision provided by the board of directors contributed significantly to the system’s success. These men, appointed by the city council, took an

¹⁰¹ Third Annual Report of the Council of Municipality Number Two, 34; Report of the Board of Directors of the Public Schools of the Second Municipality, 1848; [First] Annual Report of the Council of Municipality Number Two. . . , 10; “Report of the State Superintendent of Education,” *Louisiana Legislative Documents*, 1861, 42.

¹⁰² “Report of the State Superintendent of Education,” *Louisiana Legislative Documents*, 1854, 96; *ibid.*, 1861, 47.

¹⁰³ “Report of the State Superintendent of Education,” *Louisiana Legislative Documents*, 1854, 92, 95, 97; *ibid.*, 1859, 84.

active interest in the public schools that would remain unparalleled elsewhere in the state throughout the antebellum period. The board actively communicated with the teachers, closely examining all applicants for employment and meeting with all teachers semi-monthly “for mutual conversation, discussion and improvement.”¹⁰⁴ The school board reported that these meetings proved very helpful to the teachers who benefited by sharing experiences, and that the meetings also contributed to uniformity throughout the various public schools.¹⁰⁵ The directors suggested improvements to teachers and administrators and advocated on their behalf to the city council and the state legislature. The school board even provided subscriptions to an education journal for all its employees and planned to institute a teachers’ association which they explained would serve “as important means of exciting and maintaining the spirit of improvement in education.”¹⁰⁶

In addition to their advocacy for teachers, school directors made themselves a constant presence at the public schools of the city, requiring members to visit each school on a regular basis to check on its proceedings, regulations, classes, and teachers.¹⁰⁷ School directors visited classrooms, evaluated teachers, and attended annual exams of students, suggesting that parents and guardians do the same. Their constant presence as well as their palpable interest certainly made an impression upon both students and teachers, as well as the entire community, one observer noting, “few cities in the Union, if any, have more energetic, more vigilant, or more able Directors of Public Schools than

¹⁰⁴ [First] Annual Report of the Council of Municipality Number Two. . . , 10.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁶ Second Annual Report of the Council of Municipality Number Two, 18; Reinders, 186.

¹⁰⁷ [First] Annual Report of the Council of Municipality Number Two. . . , 11.

New Orleans.”¹⁰⁸ Having such dedicated local administrators granted the public schools an instant level of credibility and went far in contributing to their success and popularity.

Prominent figures in the New Orleans community became members of the city’s school board. Samuel J. Peters, “a leading merchant and political figure,” served the schools of the Second Municipality, and visited Horace Mann in Massachusetts for advice on how to set up the public school system initially.¹⁰⁹ Many influential politicians sat on this section’s school board, such as Joshua Baldwin, a former police court judge who was one of the original petitioners who asked the legislature to establish the public school system of the city, and who served as president of the Second Municipality’s school board for eight years.¹¹⁰ In the Third Municipality, the Council elected one citizen and one alderman from each ward to serve on its school board, while the mayor served on the board of the First Municipality.¹¹¹ The service of established community leaders helped to bolster the reputation of the schools and reveals the importance which they attributed to public education.

School administrators constantly praised the behavior and achievements of public school students in New Orleans. In 1843 the school directors initiated the practice of awarding books and medals for excellent behavior and exceptional scholastic improvement but discontinued the practice of giving prizes the following year, insisting that pupils needed no rewards to induce excellence. They explained that the students’ “natural desire to be outdone, excites a sufficiently keen and wholesome emulation.”¹¹² Pupils did not need to be rewarded materially for their achievements, but sought to learn

¹⁰⁸ “Report of the State Superintendent of Education,” *Louisiana Legislative Documents*, 1857, 6.

¹⁰⁹ Reinders, 183.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*; Peterson, 110-111.

¹¹¹ Peterson, 73, 209.

¹¹² Second Annual Report of the Council of Municipality Number Two, 22.

because of their, “love of knowledge and pleasure and advantages consequent upon its acquisition.”¹¹³

Aside from the exceptional local administration, one of the most important reasons for the success of the New Orleans public school system, especially when compared with public schools in the rest of Louisiana, remained the large amount of financing that came from the city itself. Although all public schools as well as a number of private schools meeting state requirements received quarterly appropriations from the state, these funds remained far from adequate to support any standard school system; as a result New Orleans added significantly to this amount through local means. At the time the 1841 act passed, the Second Municipality ordered the excess fees of the harbor master to be applied to the public education fund while the First Municipality established a twenty-five cent tax on each \$1,000 of real property to go to the benefit of the public schools.¹¹⁴ The Third Municipality levied a ten dollar tax per night on all social balls, the proceeds of which would go to the public school fund. Such a creative tax on a socially active city like New Orleans ensured revenue, raising \$2,500 in the first six months.¹¹⁵ According to the secretary of state, in 1843 the Second Municipality raised \$11,000 to add to the state appropriation of only \$2,300.¹¹⁶ School directors from New Orleans constantly lobbied for more money from the state, noting the drastic discrepancy in the cost to run the schools and the amount of state appropriations. In 1842 expenditures for public schools in the Second Municipality totaled \$13,300 of which the state provided only \$2,300. Costs of maintaining and expanding the schools increased each year to

¹¹³ Ibid.

¹¹⁴ Peterson, 49, 196.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 98.

¹¹⁶ “Report of the Secretary of State on the Public Education of Louisiana,” *Louisiana Legislative Documents*, 1843, VI.

\$21,000 in 1843 and \$26,000 in 1844, while the annual state appropriation remained only \$2,300.¹¹⁷ The large difference between these sums highlights the necessity of local taxation. New Orleans, through the perseverance of its school directors, procured the additional funds needed to run its schools. Wealthy benefactors bequeathed large sums to the city's public education fund as the city council continued to increase the amount appropriated to support the schools. In 1861 the Second District reported its annual appropriation from the city equaled \$70,512, to which the city council added an additional \$10,000 that year to build a new school-house.¹¹⁸ School administrators noted that financing public schools indeed drained much of the city's treasury, but that the cost was "promptly and cheerfully sustained by the people," who approved of incurring such expense in order to educate their children.¹¹⁹

School administrators regularly reminded both the city council and the state legislature of the financial efficiency of New Orleans public schools compared to private schools in the area.¹²⁰ In 1844 Second Municipality officials estimated it cost the school system \$1.47 for a student to attend public school for one month, including books and stationery. In contrast, the cost of private schools in the city averaged \$5.00 per child each month excluding supplies.¹²¹ In 1844, 1,574 students attended public schools for the

¹¹⁷ Third Annual Report of the Council of Municipality Number Two, 38; Second Annual Report of the Council of Municipality Number Two, 20.

¹¹⁸ "Annual Report of the Treasurer of the Parish of Orleans, Second District, to the State Superintendent," included in "Report of the State Superintendent of Education," *Louisiana Legislative Documents*, 1861, 44.

¹¹⁹ Third Annual Report of the Council of Municipality Number Two, 34.

¹²⁰ [First] Annual Report of the Council of Municipality Number Two, . . . , 14; Second Annual Report of the Council of Municipality Number Two, 19-20; Third Annual Report of the Council of Municipality Number Two, 34.

¹²¹ Third Annual Report of the Council of Municipality Number Two, 34.

cost of \$27,870. If the same number of children attended private schools the cost would have reached \$75,552, according to the calculations of the school directors.¹²²

While public schools certainly cost less to maintain than private schools, New Orleans public school directors constantly lobbied both the city and the state for more money. If the state allotted more money to support public schools, administrators argued, more students could be accommodated and attendance would increase. School directors suggested methods to increase the allotment from the state without raising the tax burden, such as changing the basis of the state appropriation from the number of taxable inhabitants to the number of pupils attending the schools, ensuring a larger appropriation for the city.¹²³ Administrators in New Orleans constantly reminded the legislature how many more students they educated than other parishes but how state appropriations failed to reflect this fact. In 1844, for example, East Baton Rouge Parish educated 118 children free of charge and received \$800 from the state. The Second District of New Orleans alone educated 1,574 children that year and received only \$2,300 from the state, providing \$26,000 from its own treasury.¹²⁴ While New Orleans did receive a larger appropriation than East Baton Rouge, about three times as much, it educated considerably more students, more than thirteen times as many. Administrators in New Orleans felt that their impressive enrollment figures should be rewarded through larger appropriations, but the state continued to allot funds based on the number of inhabitants rather than the number of students actually attending school. These numbers are included in Table 3 below to highlight the case of New Orleans.

¹²² Ibid.

¹²³ Second Annual Report of the Council of Municipality Number Two, 24.

¹²⁴ Third Annual Report of the Council of Municipality Number Two, 38.

Table 2.4: Number of Students Taught and State Appropriations to Several Parishes, 1844¹²⁵

Parish	Amount of State Appropriation	# of Students Educated	Amount Appropriated per Student
St. Bernard	\$500	14	\$35.71
Caldwell	\$512	15	\$34.13
St. James	\$800	35	\$22.86
Ascension	\$600	49	\$12.24
Pointe Coupee	\$800	68	\$11.76
Jefferson	\$800	70	\$11.43
West Baton Rouge	\$520	46	\$11.30
Natchitoches	\$800	77	\$10.39
East Baton Rouge	\$800	118	\$6.78
Rapides	\$800	124	\$6.45
Carroll	\$800	127	\$6.30
Lafayette	\$800	164	\$4.88
Ouachita	\$800	175	\$4.57
Average of above	\$717.85	83	\$13.75
Second Municipality of New Orleans	\$2,300	1,574	\$1.46

In another attempt to procure more financing, school directors suggested taking money from other programs funded by the state, such as prisons. Emphasizing the benefits of public education, the school directors insisted that funding public schools proved a better use of revenue than spending money on “aged criminals, whose condition is the frequent accompaniment, if not almost the necessary consequence of ignorance.”¹²⁶ While most of these proposals remained unimplemented, the creative suggestions and constant agitation by New Orleans school administrators highlight the insufficiency of state funding. While the city’s school board continually requested larger appropriations from the state, in the absence of such increases the city took it upon itself to provide the additional funding needed to support the free school system. Had New Orleans failed to

¹²⁵ Third Annual Report of the Council of Municipality Number Two, 38.

¹²⁶ [First] Annual Report of the Council of Municipality Number Two. . . , 14.

provide additional revenue to support its public schools, the success of its schools surely would have been threatened.

Although legislators claimed to be supporters of public education, the pitifully low amount of state appropriations reveals the limits of their dedication. Year after year the funding provided by the state to support the public education system proved inadequate, so that those areas that depended upon legislative appropriations to run its schools continually found themselves without money to pay its teachers, rent school-houses, or heat classrooms. Aside from insufficient financial provisions, state legislators did not take an active interest in the administration of the public schools. Neglecting to procure local administrators, failing to institute regulations, or provide necessary enforcement, the state left the public education system to languish. Fortunately, New Orleans compensated for the state's incompetence. The New Orleans city council took on the responsibility of financing its public schools as well as appointing local administrators who actively and consistently administered the system. While New Orleans overcame the inadequacies of state initiative, the rest of Louisiana was not so fortunate.

“She wields the two mighty levers that move the world- commerce and education- and by her enlightened liberality in the cause of universal education, no less than by her energy and success in commercial pursuits, she deservedly takes the first rank among all the cities of the South,” a beaming state official noted of New Orleans public school system.¹²⁷ Throughout the state as well as throughout the nation, many took notice of the city's flourishing free schools.¹²⁸ Not only instituting successful grade schools but also

¹²⁷ “Report of the State Superintendent of Public Education,” *Louisiana Legislative Documents*, 1864, 19.

¹²⁸ Reinders, 190; Devore and Logsdon, 22, 23.

night schools, a normal department, an extensive public library as well public lyceum and lecture series, the New Orleans school system rapidly became one of the major accomplishments of the city. The system offered a powerful and promising example to the rest of the state. Yet just as New Orleans' achievement quickly became fully apparent, the failure of public schools in the rural parishes would become entirely undeniable.

Chapter Three

Unforeseen Challenges: Public Education in Rural Louisiana

While public education progressed at a dramatic pace in the urban center of New Orleans, the rest of Louisiana also began efforts to provide schooling for its children. In the rural parishes the inadequacies of state provisions and legislative guidance incapacitated the education system in its early phases and continued to haunt public schools throughout the antebellum period. Leaders in many areas would find the insufficiency of state law too great to overcome, as the frequent alterations made by the legislature actually hindered the public school system of the state. Rather than providing much needed support in the form of funding, suggestions, and strict policies, lawmakers continued to neglect the public education system mandated in the organic law of the state. Despite constant pleas from local officials asking that the discrepancies and inadequacies of the education statutes be rectified, legislators directed their attention elsewhere, leaving the public school system in rural Louisiana to languish in sad comparison with the condition of New Orleans schools. In 1851 when an East Feliciana Parish official reported that no public schools were operating in his parish, he explained, “the public mind in this parish, is alive to the interest of education. But I am very sorry to say that the system of free schools in our State is accomplishing little for the education of the masses.”¹

“Let us begin at the beginning, provide for the education of those who are too poor to purchase it for themselves,” Governor Thomas B. Robertson instructed the Senate

¹ “Report of the State Superintendent of Education,” *Louisiana Legislative Documents*, 1851, 21.

in 1823.² State officials as well as most of Louisiana's residents during the years following statehood believed that private institutions alone could adequately accommodate the educational needs of Louisiana's youth.³ Legislators assumed that families with the financial ability to do so would pay for their children to attend private schools, so that only the less wealthy inhabitants needed assistance from the state. Based on this assumption, the Louisiana legislature chose to fund private institutions for much of the antebellum period rather than instituting a completely public system of schools. Evading the cost of building school-houses for public use or employing administrators to oversee the schools, state officials instead relied on the private sector to provide instruction to the children of Louisiana.

The state officially instituted its support of private institutions one year before its acceptance into the Union; in 1811 the territorial legislature passed an act granting state aid to private schools on the condition that each school admit a certain number of poor students free of charge.⁴ The legislature appropriated to each county a one-time supplement of \$2,000 to build or purchase school-houses in addition to an annual stipend of five hundred dollars, an amount the legislature increased to six hundred dollars in 1819 and to eight hundred dollars in 1821.⁵ Although the state trumpeted its generous support

² *Louisiana Senate Journal*, First Session, 1823, 7.

³ C. W. Hilton, Donald E. Shipp, and J. Berton Gremillion, *The Development of Public Education in Louisiana* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University, 1965), 9; T. H. Harris, *The Story of Public Education in Louisiana* (New Orleans: by the author, 1924), 7; Proceedings of the Centennial Symposium, College of Education, Louisiana State University, The Progress of Public Education in Louisiana During the Past One Hundred Years; Public Education Today, Plans and Hopes for the Future, (Baton Rouge: Bureau of Educational Materials and Research, College of Education, 1960), 7.

⁴ Raleigh A. Suarez, "Chronicle of a Failure: Public Education in Antebellum Louisiana," *Louisiana History*, XII (1971), 112; James William Mobley, *The Academy Movement in Louisiana* (n.p., reprinted from *The Louisiana Historical Quarterly*, 1947), 9.

⁵ Mobley, 9. Note: counties were the largest territorial unit at this time, composed of parishes.

of education, referring to “the appropriations so liberally made every year for our primary schools,” the inadequacy of these measures soon became glaringly apparent.⁶

In 1819 the state required police juries to supervise any state-aided schools in their parishes and in 1821 required the juries to appoint a board of trustees to oversee the schools.⁷ Responding to the suggestions of the governor, in 1833 the legislature conferred the additional title of state superintendent of education upon the secretary of state, who was required to report annually to the legislature on the condition of schools across the state.⁸ Although the legislature expected to learn the status of education from these reports as well as the secretary’s suggestions for improvement, this officer often proved incapable of providing any useful information on school conditions. Relying only on reports from local school administrators, the secretary of state often found himself without the required statements from parishes, leaving him very little information to relay to the legislature. In 1834 twenty-one of thirty-two parishes reported to the secretary of state, but this number dropped to fourteen in 1835, and only eleven parish officials reported in 1836, which the secretary of state claimed “renders it impossible to present any thing like a general view of the condition of the schools throughout the State.”⁹

Louisiana employed this system of education into the 1840s. Legislators bragged about their generous support of education, one official claiming that “there is not a state in the Union in which such liberal provisions have been made to bring instruction home

⁶ *Louisiana Senate Journal*, First Session, 1835, 7.

⁷ Suarez, 112-113.

⁸ *Louisiana Senate Journal*, First Session, 1833, 4; John B. Robson, *Education in Louisiana* (Natchitoches, LA: Northwestern State College, 1957), 1; Suarez, 114; Hilton et. al., 9-10; Harris, 9.

⁹ *Louisiana Senate Journal*, Second Session, 1834, 38; *ibid.*, First Session, 1835, 25; *ibid.*, Second Session, 1836, 33.

to the people.”¹⁰ Despite such comments, the condition of public education throughout the state during these years proved entirely unacceptable. Though certain residents benefited, looking at the condition of the schools and the opinions of most residents reveals that the school system during this time may have brought considerably more harm than good, since its inefficiency and failures prejudiced much of Louisiana’s population against public schools. When the legislature finally instituted a new public education system in 1847, the first state superintendent of education reported, “the law was received with suspicion, as the handmaid of its birth,” while parish officials related that many inhabitants distrusted public education, explaining “there is a powerful opposition to the system in this Parish.”¹¹

The state allocated education appropriations to the individual police juries who disbursed the funds accordingly. This funding could be used by the parishes to organize their own schools over which the governing council of the parish could exert administrative control or the money could be used to support private schools.¹² The state offered no guidelines on what kind of schools should be funded or how they should be established, and few parishes made the necessary arrangements to organize their own schools. Most parishes chose to use the state appropriation to fund private schools already established. Where more than one school existed, the institutions that met state requirements shared the appropriations to that parish, usually based on the number of children attending. The bulk of the money appropriated from the state during this period

¹⁰ Ibid., First Session, 1839, 32; for comments about Louisiana’s generous support of education, see also *ibid.*, Second Session, 1833, 2; *ibid.*, First Session, 1835, 7; “Report of the Secretary of State on Public Education,” *ibid.*, First Session, 1835, 38; *ibid.*, Second Session, 1842, 4.

¹¹ “Report of the State Superintendent of Public Education,” *Louisiana Legislative Documents*, 1849, 13, 30.

¹² Suarez, 115.

went to support private institutions rather than schools run by the parishes.¹³ In 1835 the state allotted parish schools less than \$50,000 while it granted private institutions over \$125,000.¹⁴

Whether run by the parishes or by private entrepreneurs, schools during this period charged tuition. Most families paid for the instruction of their children, though the legislature mandated the admittance of poor students free of charge as a requirement in order to receive state funding, which supplemented the tuition paid by most students. Due to this stipulation, a clear distinction emerged between paying students and “pauper” pupils who attended free of charge. Though legislators considered this requirement their most significant contribution to education, ensuring that poor children would enjoy the benefits of education, they greatly misjudged its impact on the population. Governor Andrè Bienvenu Roman repeatedly insisted that “the radical vice of our system consisted in the odious distinction which it establishes between the children of the rich and those of the poor.”¹⁵ He explained to the legislature that “a great number of persons will forego for their children the advantages of privilege, which appears to them to induce them, if accepted, to the level of those who live on charity and alms.”¹⁶ Most parents refused to accept the label of pauper by sending their children to school without paying tuition. As one official explained in 1841, “one of the principal causes of the want of success attendant on our system of primary instruction is, in my opinion, to be attributed to the great repugnance felt by many families to send their children at the public expense to

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ *Louisiana Senate Journal*, First Session, 1833, 4.

¹⁶ Ibid., Second Session, 1833, 2.

school where there are other pupils whose parents pay for their education.”¹⁷ The negative distinction applied to free instruction would continue to haunt the state in its later efforts to organize a more effective school system.

Aside from the problems arising from the distinction between paying and free students, the number of children attending school supported by state appropriations remained extremely low. In 1833, 1,175 students in Louisiana received education free of cost through state aid in twenty-one parishes.¹⁸ The number of students receiving a free education differed from six in Carroll Parish to one hundred fifty-two in East Baton Rouge Parish. Compensating for the parishes that did not report, the secretary of state estimated that in 1833 1,500 students received instruction freely through state appropriations out of about 12,000 boys of school age, supported by \$30,449.77 allocated from the state.¹⁹ Enrollment remained low among both paying and free students as most parents did not send their children to school with any regularity. In 1836, Claiborne Parish supported seven schools which enrolled one hundred thirty students, only twenty-eight of whom paid no tuition, while an estimated two hundred fifty children of school-age resided in that parish who did not attend any school throughout the course of the year.²⁰

Many factors hampered school attendance during this period. As Governor Roman continually reminded the legislature, many families refused to accept a label of

¹⁷ Ibid., Second Session, 1842, 4.

¹⁸ Ibid., Second Session, 1833, 38-39. There were thirty-two parishes in Louisiana at this time, but only twenty-seven reported school conditions to the secretary of state.

¹⁹ Ibid., 39.

²⁰ “Report of the Secretary of State on Public Education,” *Louisiana Senate Journal*, Second Session, 1836, 34.

pauperism by educating their children at the expense of the state.²¹ In addition, many families did not consider the education of their children a priority, having not attended school themselves. One state official explained, “parents do not appear to feel sufficiently the importance of the inestimable advantages to be gained by securing to their children the blessings of a good education. This indifference, in some instances, may arise from the fact, that many have been so unfortunate as not to have received any education themselves, or that their condition requires the employment of their time and efforts to gain the means of subsistence.”²² Added to the disinclination of many parents, the availability of schools remained a problem throughout the state. While the state offered money to parishes to help support schools, many parishes remained without institutions of learning or housed so few that only a fraction of its residents could be accommodated. In Pointe Coupee Parish where fifty-eight children attended four schools, leaving two hundred fifty children with no instruction, a local official reported, “the extent of the parish being so great, it renders it impossible to a great number of children to attend the schools that are now established; the funds allowed to the parish, being insufficient to encourage the establishment of a greater number.- This explains the reason why a greater number of children remain without the benefits of public education.”²³

In addition to the dearth of schools, the funding available from the state proved far from sufficient to aid all the children who needed financial assistance to offset the cost of tuition. In 1842 the secretary of state reported that “indigent children are in such

²¹ *Louisiana Senate Journal*, First Session, 1833, 4; *ibid.*, Second Session, 1833, 2; *ibid.*, Second Session, 1842, 4.

²² “Report of the State Superintendent of Education,” *Louisiana Legislative Documents*, 1854, 8.

²³ “Report of the Secretary of State on Public Education,” *Louisiana Senate Journal*, First Session, 1841, 53.

numbers in some parishes that many are without any education, and the funds furnished by the State are not sufficient or properly distributed.”²⁴ One parish explained that out of eight hundred children of school age, “not less than three hundred are indigent and orphans, and proper subjects to receive the benefit of the school funds, but the board intend to reject in the future a great number of poor children that have heretofore been paid for out of the public school funds.”²⁵ The state superintendent explained that of the many school-age children in the state, “a large proportion . . . are without the means of education.”²⁶ It quickly became clear to all interested parties that the state system of educational funding proved completely inadequate to accommodate all the needy children in Louisiana.

While schools remained beyond reach for many Louisiana residents, the available instruction often failed to prove its worth. Reporting on school conditions in Plaquemines Parish in 1840, one administrator noted “the children in the public schools of this parish have made but very little progress; the system must be a bad one, and ought to be changed.”²⁷ A St. Helena official admitted that “our schools are very imperfect, and will require much vigilance to organize properly.”²⁸ Most concurred with the secretary of state when he commented that “it is apparent that the standard of attainments of the pupils is not so high as it ought to be.”²⁹

The regularity with which schools operated also left much to be desired. Many private schools remained in operation for only a few years, like most parish schools

²⁴ Ibid., Second Session, 1842, 48.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid., Second Session, 1833, 39.

²⁷ *Louisiana Senate Journal*, First Session, 1841, 53.

²⁸ Ibid., Second Session, 1833, 2.

²⁹ “Report of the Secretary of State on Public Education,” *ibid.*, 39.

which functioned sporadically, when a teacher remained available and then only while the state funds lasted, which typically amounted to about three months a year. Some of the difficulties involved in operating an academy can be surmised from the example of Montpelier Academy in St. Helena Parish. A legislative act incorporated the Academy in 1833, and the state supported it financially in accord with its instruction of indigent pupils, the rest of the students paying tuition. In 1834 St. Helena Parish gave its old court house to the school. The trustees certified to the state that the Academy instructed twenty-five indigent children free of cost, so that they could draw the \$625 allotted by the legislature to the parish to support education. Although the school got off to a prosperous start, a prolonged court battle began in 1837 between two different sets of trustees for the Academy, both claiming administrative control over the school. Accordingly, the state treasurer refused to allot the school its state appropriation. With two different boards of trustees operating on behalf of the school, it quickly collapsed into chaos. The fraudulent board was accused of seizing funds, obstructing the actions of the legitimate board, stealing and destroying property and records, and abducting pauper students, the steward, and a teacher.³⁰ With such pandemonium surrounding the school administration, the effectiveness of the Academy certainly remains doubtful.

While the state parceled out funds to support education, it did little else to ensure the efficiency of the system and exerted no control over the organization or administration of the schools. Other than the provision of admitting indigent students in order to receive state aid, the legislature mandated no requirements and offered no guidance on how the schools should be organized and conducted. As a state official

³⁰ Montpelier Academy Papers, 1833-1840, Louisiana and Lower Mississippi Valley Collections, LSU Libraries, Louisiana State University, Baton Rouge, LA.

remarked, “the providing of funds for education is an indispensable means for attaining the end; but it is not education. The wisest system that can be devised, cannot be executed without human agency.”³¹ For twenty-two years the legislature employed no state officer to supervise education. When the legislature finally added the title of state superintendent of education to the position of secretary of state in 1833, his duties remained “primarily clerical. He was given no supervisory authority.”³² This lack of state supervision meant that the schools could function however the teacher saw fit, no matter how imperfect their methods may have been. Not only could the schools operate as they pleased, but the legislature had no idea what the schools might be doing. The failure of parish administrators to submit reports as well as the inability of the secretary of state to acquire this information by any other means left the state with no effective knowledge of how the schools that it funded operated.

The lack of accountability of institutions receiving state aid represented a major flaw in the system of state funding. Although the legislature required all schools, academies, and colleges to submit reports each year to the secretary of state, administrators rarely fulfilled this requirement, though the schools continued to receive state appropriations. One official explained, “a very large sum is annually expended without any very exact accountability . . . The present mode of supporting schools is very objectionable upon this score.”³³ In 1839 Governor Roman insisted that despite the money apportioned to support education, the state could not even find out what good had come from it, noting “we cannot even obtain complete returns, showing the condition of

³¹ “Report of the State Superintendent of Education,” *Louisiana Legislative Documents*, 1854, 8.

³² Suarez, 114.

³³ “Report of the Secretary of State on Public Education,” *Louisiana Senate Journal*, First Session, 1841, 49.

the schools; we know, however, that they are attended by only a very small portion of the children of a proper age to receive instruction.”³⁴ Considering that the state could not learn the conditions of the schools that it funded, one official commented to the Senate, “the absence of all information on this important subject should convince you of how much abuse a system is susceptible, where large sums are disbursed without the Legislature being able to judge of the extent of the benefits which the mass of the people derive from it.”³⁵ While the state continued to dole out money to support education, it knew little about how the schools used the funds or if they produced any substantive results.

Though state officers received proportionately little information from the parishes, the areas that did submit reports revealed objectionable school conditions in much of the state. In 1842 one parish reported, “our public schools are in a very poor condition and need the interposition of the State.”³⁶ Many districts echoed this sentiment; one official informed the legislature that “there are bitter complaints against our own public schools; it seems that for several years they have been most wretchedly kept, and a notorious abuse.”³⁷ Another parish officer explained in 1842 that, “since 1822, public schools have been established in this parish and we are unable to designate one who has been benefited by it.”³⁸

The various governors of Louisiana during the 1830s continually criticized the system of public education. Governor Jacques Duprè noted in 1831 that despite the

³⁴ *Louisiana Senate Journal*, First Session, 1839, 32.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, Second Session, 1842, 4.

³⁶ “Report of the Secretary of State on Public Education,” *Louisiana Senate Journal*, Second Session, 1842, 48.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ *Ibid.*

\$50,000 state appropriation, very little action had been taken to advance public education. Many parishes, he asserted, neglected to open schools even though they received state monies for that purpose.³⁹ This criticism is echoed by Duprè's successor, Governor Roman, who recommended the abolition of the entire system. An 1836 legislative committee on education agreed with this opinion, concluding that the existing school provisions proved completely useless.⁴⁰ Governor Roman lamented that the state appropriated \$354,012 for education between 1818 and 1831, and that in 1834 this outlay yielded the pitiful enrollment of 1,500 students throughout the state.⁴¹ He reported to the legislature that "the plan in which these schools are established ought to be changed; since, notwithstanding the liberal appropriations of the legislature, they are far from producing the advantageous results expected from them."⁴² In 1835 the secretary of state reported that "the object of the legislature, which is, the extension of the benefits of education to all classes, is not attained . . . the best interests of the state require a change of the present system."⁴³ In 1842 one official went so far as to suggest to the legislature that all appropriations to parish schools in the state could be withdrawn without harming education in Louisiana.⁴⁴

Clearly, the education system employed by the state proved completely unsuccessful by the 1840s. It would be hard to imagine that the system could have functioned less efficiently than it did during these years, yet the legislature enacted new measures in 1842 that caused the school system to deteriorate even further. Upon the

³⁹ Dabney, 363.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Harris, 10.

⁴² *Louisiana Senate Journal*, Second Session, 1833, 2.

⁴³ Ibid., First Session, 1835, 25.

⁴⁴ "Report of the Secretary of State on Public Education," *Louisiana Senate Journal*, Second Session, 1842, 48.

unfortunate advice of state officials, the legislature required a certain amount of funding to be raised by the parish in order to receive state aid.⁴⁵ Secretary of State George A. Eustis explained that “the material advantage of this plan is, that it creates a direct interest in the judicious expenditure of the money, for more care will be taken in the disbursement of that which is raised directly from the people of each parish.”⁴⁶ In concurrence, the legislature in 1842 began granting state appropriations to parish schools based on the amount raised by local taxation; the state granted two dollars for every one dollar collected in the parish, not to exceed a state disbursement of \$800 per parish.⁴⁷ Though it remains reasonable that the state government wanted local residents to actively support the school system, the inability of parishes to raise the necessary funds further hindered educational development in the state. The superintendent of education explained to the legislature that although supporting schools through parish taxes remained highly desirable, such a measure “would likely be to throw a greater burthen [*sic*] upon some of the parishes, which, strong in minor population, are weak in resources, and therefore least able to bear its pressure.”⁴⁸ He also feared that residents would object to such a scheme, noting “the unwillingness. . . of the people, in the unprovided state of the school fund, to be taxed for the maintenance of their schools.”⁴⁹ Despite such unflattering assessments of the likelihood of parish taxation, this requirement became state law in 1842.

Besides placing a larger burden on the unprepared and unwilling parishes, the state legislature in 1842 also suspended appropriations to most of the private academies

⁴⁵ Ibid., Second Session, 1833, 40; Suarez, 115-116.

⁴⁶ Ibid., Second Session, 1833, 40.

⁴⁷ Suarez, 115-116.

⁴⁸ “Report of the State Superintendent of Public Education,” *Louisiana Legislative Documents*, 1847, 7.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 9.

and colleges that it had previously supported.⁵⁰ Though some schools received a three year extension, most private schools were stripped of the state aid that had supported them for years, forcing many institutions to close.⁵¹ As one official noted in 1842, “under the present system of Public Education it is impossible to make good scholars, nor even to receive a common education,” while the secretary of state conceded in 1844 that “there seems to be many defects in the present system.”⁵² Two years later, the harsh assessment of public schools by Secretary of State Charles Gayarré echoed throughout the state. He proclaimed, “the system of Public Education adopted in this state has proved a complete abortion from its birth day. The reports I allude to form a well concatenated chain of indictments against the present establishment of our Parish Schools.”⁵³ Gayarré concluded, “it must be inferred that, on the part of the Administrators at least, a lamentable indifference exists with regard to public education.”⁵⁴

But just as continued decline seemed inevitable, hope arrived in the form of a new, reform constitution. The 1845 Constitution democratized Louisiana’s political system, curbing the power of wealthy legislators, taking steps to prevent common abuses of office, protecting civil liberties, and granting a much larger segment of the state’s population the right to vote and seek office by abrogating property qualifications.⁵⁵ As one historian explains, the “the new constitution fulfilled the democratic aspirations of the vast majority of Louisianians.”⁵⁶ In addition to the reforms of state law, the new

⁵⁰ Suarez, 116; Mobley, 13.

⁵¹ Suarez, 116.

⁵² “Report of the Secretary of State on Public Education,” *Louisiana Senate Journal*, Second Session, 1842, 48; “Report of the Secretary of State on Public Education,” *Louisiana Legislative Documents*, 1844, VI.

⁵³ Report of Secretary of State on Public Education,” *Louisiana Senate Journal*, 1846, 56.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 56.

⁵⁵ Samuel C. Hyde, Jr., *Pistols and Politics: The Dilemma of Democracy in Louisiana’s Florida Parishes, 1810-1899* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1996), 58.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 59.

constitution also mandated free public education for the entire state, a step that conscientious officials had been urging for decades.⁵⁷ Many reveled in the promises offered by the new constitutional requirements. Isaac Johnson, elected governor in 1846, characterized such optimism when he expounded, “that provision of the new Constitution, which adopts the Free Public School System, is destined, under judicious legislation, to become a principle of light to the people, which, like the burning bush on Horeb, will burn and consume not: It is the dawning of a new and happy era in the history of Louisiana- *there must be Free Public Schools- sayeth the Constitution.*”⁵⁸

In order to fulfill its constitutional obligation, the Louisiana legislature passed a free school act on May 3, 1847 in order “to establish Free Public Schools in the State of Louisiana.”⁵⁹ The law established an entirely new administration to manage the public schools, headed by a state superintendent to be appointed by the governor. The statute also mandated a superintendent for each parish to be elected by the voters. Funding for the new system was derived from a mill and poll tax as well as proceeds from the sale of specified tracts of land. The law explicitly intended for all white inhabitants between the ages of six and sixteen to attend school free of charge, while those older than sixteen but under the age of twenty-one could attend for at least two years. The police juries were directed to divide their parishes into school districts, and each parish received an appropriation from the state based on the number of school-age children residing therein.⁶⁰

⁵⁷ Richard Loucks, An exposition of the laws of Louisiana, relating to free public schools (Baton Rouge: Printed at the Office of the *Delta*, 1847), 1; Hyde, 59; *Louisiana Senate Journal*, First Session, 1846, 12.

⁵⁸ *Louisiana Senate Journal*, First Session, 1846, 12.

⁵⁹ Loucks, 1.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 13.

This act finally instituted wholly public free schools in Louisiana. Since no students were meant to pay tuition, no distinction between them based on wealth would occur. State officers rejoiced in this provision, feeling certain that the democratic equality newly pronounced in the constitution would soon be exhibited in public schools across the state. Most officials felt that the problems inherent in the old system had been abolished, noting that “there can no longer a pretext exist for that vague, vacillating and improvident Legislation, which has, heretofore, disgraced our Statute Books on the subject.”⁶¹ The legislature believed the new system of public education, fostered and maintained by the state, would work toward the benefit of all of Louisiana’s inhabitants. As the state superintendent remarked in his first annual report to the legislature, “there is, in the great mass of our rural population, a yearning after the day, when they will have an opportunity of redeeming their children from the blighting touch of ignorance, which has been heretofore laid upon them and which even now threatens the expectancy of State.”⁶²

The office of state superintendent served as a much needed addition to the school system. Unlike the previous post which simply added a few requirements to the secretary of state’s responsibilities, the new officer dedicated the entire year to the management of the school system. The law required the state superintendent to apportion school funds to each parish, receive reports from local officials, visit schools during the course of the year, and report annually to the legislature on school conditions.⁶³ Governors enjoyed the prerogative of appointing the state superintendent, and most executives selected experienced educational professionals. Alexander Dimitry, a long-time member of the

⁶¹ *Louisiana Senate Journal*, First Session, 1846, 12.

⁶² “Report of the State Superintendent of Public Education,” *Louisiana Legislative Documents*, 1847, 12.

⁶³ Loucks, 7-9.

school board of the Third Municipality of New Orleans, held the post first.⁶⁴ Since New Orleans public schools were prospering during this time, Dimitry's acquaintance with its system would prove beneficial to the new state program. The appointment of a New Orleans school official to this significant post heralded hope for the state, for if the successful methods instituted in New Orleans could be extended to the rest of Louisiana, the state would be able to boast one of the most efficient public school systems in the nation. Unfortunately, such hopes would remain unrealized in many parts of the state throughout the antebellum period.

The axis through which the school system functioned centered on the working relationship between Dimitry and the corresponding parish superintendents. As specified in the 1847 statute, each parish elected a superintendent to oversee their local schools and handle all administrative tasks. The parish superintendent maintained public education funds and dispensed them throughout the parish to the various school districts. All correspondence, legal, financial, and otherwise, between the state office and the locale went through the parish superintendent. In addition, the law expected this officer to examine and certify teachers to be employed by the public schools.⁶⁵

Under this legislation which lasted until 1852, public schools began to operate throughout the state. Conditions differed from parish to parish, with some areas instituting successful schools that served large numbers of children while other locales had trouble procuring accommodations, finding teachers, and attracting students. But despite the obstacles faced in many parishes, no one could deny that the new system of education represented a dramatic improvement from the previous system funded by the

⁶⁴ "Report of the State Superintendent of Public Education," *Louisiana Legislative Documents*, 1847, 12.

⁶⁵ Loucks, 9-12.

state. Even where officials found opposition and pessimism among residents, all remained hopeful that the new system would soon win converts to its cause and that education in the rest of the state would soon progress in the same successful manner initiated in New Orleans.⁶⁶ As Superintendent Dimitry described his visits to the various parishes throughout the state, “in many an humble cabin, whilst suggesting bright hopes for the future, he has been made the depository of many a bitter regret for the past. In the course of his inspection he has encountered many a doubt to satisfy, many an opposition to subdue, and many a prejudice to overcome; but he has also been cheered by the manifestations of zeal and indications of support.”⁶⁷

Public education progressed slowly at first; in 1848, one year after the passage of the free public school act police juries in only nineteen parishes had organized school districts. Out of 49,048 children in the state between six and sixteen years of age, 2,160, or 4.4 percent, attended seventy-eight public schools established throughout the state.⁶⁸ By 1849, however, 704 public schools operated for an average of six months a year, though in different parishes the length of school terms ranged from four to eleven months.⁶⁹ In 1849 enrollment in reporting parishes climbed to 16,217 students, amounting to fifty-six percent of the school age population.⁷⁰ Clearly public schools were finally beginning to make progress in the rural parishes of the state. As the Assumption Parish superintendent explained in 1851, “the general condition of the schools is good and improving. Many who were indifferent on the subject of public

⁶⁶ For an example of hopeful parish superintendents, see the various parish reports attached to the “Report of the State Superintendent of Education,” *Louisiana Legislative Documents*, 1851, 6-48.

⁶⁷ “Report of the State Superintendent of Education,” *Louisiana Legislative Documents*, 1847, 12.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 1848, 5.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 1849, 15.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 2.

education, are becoming more zealous, and the desire to have their children educated is becoming general. Much good has been effected during my administration, and the schools being well organized, their progress must be onward.”⁷¹ The following table includes attendance figures for the parishes that submitted information to the state superintendent of education, excluding Orleans and Jefferson Parishes.

Table 3.1: Number of Children Attending Public Schools in Louisiana⁷²

Year	# of Parishes Reporting	# of Schools	# of Reported Children Attending School	# of Reported Children Not Attending School	Percent of Reported Children Attending School
1848	19	78	2,160	46,888	4.4%
1849	37	704	16,217	12,724	56%
1851	45	683	22,100	18,295	55%

Noting the insufficiency of the previous school system, one parish superintendent reported, “before, the parish had no more than three or four stunted schools, which hardly could stand the ground.”⁷³ He went on to explain that the new school system produced, “a very satisfactory result, very. It must rejoice the friends of Free Public Schools; it is a triumph for those who have faith in the doctrine of progress; it will cheer up the hearts of those who have little faith in it, and are despondent.”⁷⁴

While public education began to advance in the rural parishes, the elected officials responsible for its fiscal health soon reversed themselves. In 1852 legislators saddled the state with a much more restrictive constitution, resembling the stringent 1812

⁷¹ Ibid., 1851, 7.

⁷² Ibid., 1848, 5; *ibid.*, 1849, 2; *ibid.*, 1851, 6-48.

⁷³ Ibid., 1851, 11.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

document more than the democratic 1845 Constitution.⁷⁵ While liberal factions in the state had made impressive reforms through the 1845 document, in 1852 wealthy planters sought to reassert their control through the new constitution which changed the apportionment of legislative seats.⁷⁶ Allowing monopolies and granting the wealthy parishes dominance of the legislature, the new constitution reveals the mood of state officials at that time.⁷⁷ Thus it is not surprising that significant alterations to the school law also came in 1852, and they brought irreversible damage to public education in the state. That year, the legislature cut the salary of the state superintendent by two-thirds, from the generous amount of \$3,000 annually to a mere \$1,000, and also relieved him of the duty of visiting individual parishes.⁷⁸ Even more appalling to public school proponents, the legislature abolished the office of parish superintendent, claiming that the meager \$300 annual salary cost the state too much.⁷⁹ With this provision, the legislature recalled the most effective education officer functioning on behalf of the school system, and hope for public education in the state soon dissipated. In addition, lawmakers replaced the parish superintendents with unpaid boards of district directors, whose apathy and ineptness would soon prove almost entirely detrimental to the school system. The legislature burdened the parish treasurer with the additional duty of obtaining information from the school directors and reporting annually to the legislature, a task which few treasurers accomplished satisfactorily.⁸⁰

⁷⁵ Hyde, 70.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Suarez, 117-118.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

These adjustments generated a passionate outcry from public school proponents. As State Superintendent Robert Carter Nicholas explained to the legislature in 1852, “the Act of the last session brought great confusion and embarrassment upon the whole system. Abolishing the office of Parish Superintendent and requiring the duties hitherto performed by him to devolve on the District Directors, at once removed the most efficient agents through which this office operated, and substituted others entirely unknown to it.”⁸¹ In 1853 Nicholas’s successor as state superintendent, J.N. Carrigan, informed the legislature that “the frequent and radical change in the laws governing our public school system has created great embarrassment in every quarter; and the Act of 1853 [1852] threw the whole system into confusion, by suddenly abolishing the office of the only responsible agent from whom full and accurate info could be obtained.”⁸² As historian Raleigh Suarez observed, “these changes were disastrous in the more isolated parishes but were harmful everywhere. The abolition of the office of parish superintendent threw parish systems into confusion.”⁸³

As the schools began to function under the adjustments of 1852, many parishes reported unhappily back to the legislature. One parish superintendent complained to the legislature that he had not even heard of the abolition of his own office. Explaining that the auditor refused to release his parish’s funds so that no money could be drawn to support the schools, he requested information about the abolition of his post, noting “I would be very glad indeed if you would inform me upon the subject, let me know at what time it is considered that I went out of office.”⁸⁴ He also went on to condemn the

⁸¹ “Report of the State Superintendent of Public Education,” *Louisiana Legislative Documents*, 1852, 3.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 1853, 3.

⁸³ Suarez, 118.

⁸⁴ “Report of the State Superintendent of Public Education,” *Louisiana Legislative Documents*, 1852, 14.

legislature's actions, adding "I want it distinctly understood, however, that I do not recognize the power of the Legislature to abolish an office when the individual filling it has been duly and constitutionally elected by the people, and has himself complied with all the requirements of the law creating such an office."⁸⁵

The adjustments of 1852 retarded public education which had been progressing under the original statutes of 1847. One scholar explained that because of the alterations, "in some instances where half the children of educable age had attended public school in the years before 1852, less than a third attended in 1858. For example, in one parish where there were thirteen public school-houses in 1851, there were only three in 1860."⁸⁶ As the education system continued to operate under these provisions in the decade leading up to the Civil War, the public school system exhibited several serious problems that hampered its effectiveness throughout the state.

Organizationally, the public education system as it functioned under the adjustments of 1852 suffered considerably from insufficient local supervision. The abolition of parish superintendents continued to haunt Louisiana's school system as district directors elected in their place failed to fulfill their responsibilities to the school system. Year after year parish and state officials urged the legislature to reestablish the office of parish superintendent.⁸⁷ As the state superintendent noted in 1857, "abolition of the office of Parish Superintendent, I have no hesitation in saying, was a great mistake."⁸⁸ The unpaid school directors rarely attended to the duties which the legislature expected of

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Suarez, 118.

⁸⁷ Re-establishing the office of parish superintendent is explicitly suggested in the following "Reports of the State Superintendent of Public Education," included in *Louisiana Legislative Documents*, 1853, 3, 7; *ibid.*, 1854, 9, 79, 101; *ibid.*, 1856, 52; *ibid.*, 1857, 5.

⁸⁸ "Report of the State Superintendent of Public Education," *Louisiana Legislative Documents*, 1857, 5.

them. Not a year passed that local officers across the state did not complain of the negligence of school directors. The treasurer of Terrebonne Parish explained in 1858, “the system of district directors is, in my opinion, a clumsy, impracticable and useless arrangement, frequently the source of much discord between the teacher and the people. The directors are frequently incompetent and illiterate; they are always elected without regard to their qualifications, and when a proper person is chosen it is purely the result of a lucky accident.”⁸⁹

In 1854 the state superintendent noticed “a serious defect in our school system—the want of a more efficient, general and local supervision, without which, the system can never be made harmonious in all its proportions.”⁹⁰ Local officials complained about the difficulty in getting capable residents to serve in the unpaid position of school director. In 1857 one parish treasurer reported, “it is almost impossible to get a competent man to act as a School Director. Those who are qualified are seldom selected,” a sentiment echoed in other parishes of the state.⁹¹ Because of the difficulties in filling the office of school director, incompetent officers often assumed the post, leading to many complaints about the discharge of their duties. One official explained that “in some districts, the directors are totally incapable of performing this duty, for the very potent reason that they themselves do not know how to read or write.”⁹² The treasurer of Vermillion Parish concurred, complaining to the state superintendent “it will appear to your honor how difficult it is to arrive at a report that would enable you to come to some conclusion upon the amount of benefit rendered in this parish by the

⁸⁹ Ibid., 1858, 57.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 1854, 7.

⁹¹ Ibid., 1857, 44; see also *ibid.*, 1858, 44.

⁹² Ibid., 1854, 5.

Public School system, if you could only see who we have for directors; one half of whom make their crosses to their signatures.”⁹³

While the general apathy of directors who did not attend to their duties resonated year after year, many other grievances about these officers appeared. Most directors failed to visit the schools or directly observe their functioning just as they neglected the important duty of examining teachers for employment. In 1857 one parish treasurer reported, “the Directors uneducated, and consequently incompetent to judge of the acquirements of applicants.”⁹⁴ Another reporter explained that “I cannot say that our schools are in a flourishing condition, which is mainly to be attributed to the indifference and penuriousness of the Directors, who, in the selection of Teachers, do not always chose men possessing capacities and moral worth, but often employ ignorant Teachers, at the lowest price, for the sake of economy.”⁹⁵ Apparently, the men elected as school directors often manifested no concern for the school system. One official lamented, “it is impossible to keep selfish men out of the directory, and so long as they are allowed the latitude they now have, there are many children, entitled to and actually in need of public benefits, who will never receive any, and the design of the law will be entirely defeated.”⁹⁶

Many observers placed the fault for the inadequacies of the school system entirely on the school directors. An 1854 report commented, “the cause of the schools not being in a flourishing condition is attributed to the indifference and penuriousness of the

⁹³ Ibid., 1857, 102.

⁹⁴ Ibid., 89.

⁹⁵ Ibid., 1856, 99.

⁹⁶ Ibid., 1854, 63.

directors.”⁹⁷ In Carroll Parish in the northeastern portion of the state, one official sadly remarked, “it is very difficult to obtain the services of competent Directors. Those of the community, that are competent, are unwilling to devote their attention to the subject, consequently the amount of good accomplished is much less.”⁹⁸ Another official explained, “I believe it is next to impossible, to reason the directors generally into a sense of duty. Whenever they have discharged their duties punctually, the good results have been very manifest, and show that the directors are very important officers, in making a proper application of the money. The fact is in consequence of the incorrigible negligence of Directors in the country, the system with us is not generally a good one.”⁹⁹ The consensus that many of the failures of the school system could be directly attributed to the incompetence of local school directors echoed throughout the state.¹⁰⁰

All of the duties previously incumbent upon the parish superintendents did not devolve to the district directors. Management of the school fund as well as the responsibility of reporting school conditions to the state superintendent fell to parish treasurers. Although many such officers discharged these duties, they did so only with great difficulty and without the compensation that would have allowed them to do so more effectively. In 1854 a report from St. Mary Parish explained, “a Parish Treasurer who desires the success of the system and wishes to Report correctly, must, under the present management necessarily devote much of his time and labor to details entirely *de hors* his official duties and which was never intended by the Legislature to be imposed on

⁹⁷ Ibid., 113.

⁹⁸ Ibid., 1851, 18; see also the comments of the De Soto Parish treasurer, *ibid.*, 19.

⁹⁹ Ibid., 29.

¹⁰⁰ For complaints concerning public school directors, see “Report of the State Superintendent of Public Education,” *Louisiana Legislative Documents*, 1853, 16; *ibid.*, 1854, 63, 68, 79, 88, 113, 115, 117, 120, 124; *ibid.*, 1855, 20, 23, 31, 41, 47, 52; *ibid.*, 1856, 20, 52, 54, 56, 64, 71, 83, 96, 99, 103; *ibid.*, 1857, 33, 41, 44, 79, 89, 92, 94, 98, 101, 103, 107; *ibid.*, 1958, 35, 38, 44, 57; *ibid.*, 13, 62, 74, 103.

him. As things now stand the Treasurer, beside the *duties* of his office is emphatically the Clerk of every District in this Parish, at least so it is in the Parish of St. Mary,” a sentiment that a Franklin Parish officer echoed several years later.¹⁰¹ In 1854 the state superintendent objected to the way in which parish treasurers performed their duties, arguing, “the system of appointing Parish Treasurers, as the depositaries of the School funds, is a complete failure, and objectionable in every point of view. As will be seen by their reports, many of them are extremely illiterate. Many of them are appointed by the Police Jury without any regard to their qualifications, but because they can give the required bond and security.”¹⁰²

As a result of the inadequate local supervision, incompetent teachers often filled posts in the public schools of the state. The state superintendent reported in 1854 that “the scarcity of well qualified teachers is felt in every portion of the State.”¹⁰³ Local officials echoed this sentiment, one officer noting that “it is a melancholy fact, that incompetent teachers have been employed in many cases,” while another commented about the teachers in his parish that “in reference to their qualifications, I have to admit, that in most cases they are not good, and are not at all qualified to teach.”¹⁰⁴

One of the obstacles preventing the employment of competent teachers rested with the poor reputation borne by school instructors. In 1857 the state superintendent explained that “the present system, under which the position of teacher, instead of being put, at all events, on a level with that of members of other professions, is sunk so low that

¹⁰¹ “Report of the State Superintendent of Public Education,” *Louisiana Legislative Documents*, 1854, 120; *ibid.*, 1857, 52.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 1854, 4.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 8.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 79, 68.

as clerk, daily laborer, or almost any of the less responsible occupations.”¹⁰⁵ An Iberville Parish official reported that “the qualifications of our Teachers are generally good, but they meet with no encouragement! In fact, are looked upon as an inferior sort of being of little sensibility, and not justly entitled to the regards of society. Under the circumstances, it is but reasonable to presume that Teachers are somewhat indifferent as to the manner in which they perform their duties.”¹⁰⁶ The poor reputation suffered by school teachers meant that the number and types of people willing to join the profession remained limited. As residents continued to complain about the incompetence of school teachers, the low reputations that they suffered in their communities did little to attract more competent or educated scholars to the field.

The meager salaries received by public school teachers during this period also served to discourage competent instructors from the profession. Alexander Dimitry commented in 1849 that “the teacher of our public schools must be reduced to straight necessity, indeed, to be willing to toil for the mockery of a compensation, which our deficient means award to his services.”¹⁰⁷ Not only did the amount paid to public school teachers remain pitifully low in the rural parishes of Louisiana, but often teachers did not get paid at all. Many parishes “find it very difficult to employ a teacher of public schools, under the present system, on account of the great difficulty and expense of getting their pay from Baton Rouge,” one local officer complained.¹⁰⁸ As the Ascension Parish treasurer explained in 1852, it proved “impossible for us to ascertain, with any precision, what amount of money would accrue to our district during a specified period of

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 1857, 9.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 55.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 1849, 7.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 1852, 12.

time, and therefore impossible to engage a teacher for the balance of the scholastic year, all teachers being reluctant to labor under the uncertainties attending the very irregular appointments now made.”¹⁰⁹ Many parishes expressed the same uncertainty about what the amount of their state appropriation would be. Consequently, parishes contracted teachers based only on an estimate of the state appropriation. When their actual appropriation fell below their expectations, as it often did, many schools had already promised their teachers more money than was available, leaving the parish in debt. One district in St. Charles Parish contracted a teacher for \$600, though the district had only \$378.93 in its school fund.¹¹⁰ In Lafayette Parish a local officer reported to the legislature, “unfortunately the expenses of the parish exceed its receipts, which will injure the otherwise bright prospects of the schools in our parish. Such I believe is the case throughout the State, and it is to be hoped that the next Legislature will, in their wisdom, devise some way of healing that sore in our public school system, which if not done, will ultimately so prostrate it, that it will become odious perhaps, to the good people of this parish, and of the State.”¹¹¹ The state superintendent concurred, and in 1856 asked the state legislature to ameliorate the problem, noting “from letters received from teachers complaining of not being paid, and inquiring the amount of money paid to Treasurers, &c., it is to be feared that the teacher, in too many instances, is kept out of his limited wages, for some time after the entire year.”¹¹²

Due in part to the inadequate salary, many young men embarked on teaching out of necessity and often only temporarily as they prepared for a more lucrative permanent

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 10.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 1857, 83.

¹¹¹ Ibid., 1851, 27; see also *ibid.*, 1854, 51.

¹¹² Ibid., 1856, 10.

career. One state official observed, “where there are so many avenues open to more profitable employment for young men of talent and education, the inducements to enter into the laborious profession of teaching, are by no means of a powerful nature. The consequence is, that perhaps a majority of those employed, have engaged in it as a temporary occupation; as preparatory to the study of law or medicine, or as is often the case merely to hibernate among us for a few months, and at the approach of summer, return to the hills and valleys of their northern homes.”¹¹³

Unfortunately many teachers sought out positions in the public schools of rural Louisiana for reasons other than the educational advancement of the state’s youth. A Catahoula official explained that “soon as it is known that a little money is coming to a district, a three months’ school is commenced, and taught by some one who is desirous of making a few dimes, it matters not much whether he is capable or not, so he gets the money.”¹¹⁴ A Caldwell official lamented, “in some Districts the people are swindled out of their money by some shrewd teachers, through the negligence or ignorance of the Directors.”¹¹⁵ Whether the so-called instructor hailed from a nearby community or from other regions of the nation, many unfortunate parishes allotted their educational finances to any available instructor, regardless of his qualifications. As an embittered local official observed, many of their teachers “proved unworthy of the trust reposed in them, but who are still retained for the want of better.”¹¹⁶

The failure of district directors to properly examine applicants, unfavorable reputation of school teachers, and low compensation all contributed to the chronic

¹¹³ Ibid., 1854, 8.

¹¹⁴ Ibid., 1856, 22.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 1859, 22.

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 1851, 30.

incompetence haunting public schools in rural Louisiana. Though efficient and capable teachers certainly appeared; they were not the norm. Many school observers lamented the inadequacies of public school instructors. As one official concluded, “the teachers are generally utterly incompetent, and it cannot be otherwise, while the pittance now paid to teachers will scarcely raise them above absolute want. The consequences are they are unfit for their duties, and schools throughout the parish are open for but a small fraction of the year. As far as the Parish of St Mary is concerned, the system is in a perfectly demoralized condition.”¹¹⁷

Another problem hampering the effectiveness of Louisiana’s public school system involved the chronic inadequacy of school-houses. The first state superintendent of education stressed the importance of adequate accommodations, noting “the question of school-houses is intimately connected with the success of the schools themselves; and in many of the States in which popular education thrives most, so important is this matter deemed, that no distribution of school-money is allowed, until evidence is adduced that the school-house has been permanently located.”¹¹⁸ Though the original state appropriations included an allocation intended to fund the building or purchase of school-houses, due to the scarcity of funds make-shift accommodations often served as school rooms throughout the state. In 1849 Louisiana maintained 649 school-houses, described as log cabins or ordinary frame houses.¹¹⁹ One official commented on the accommodations, explaining, “some having been previously used as school-houses, and repaired for occupancy, at the commencement of the schools; others erected to meet the immediate requirements of the district, with scarcely sufficient means, either in money or

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 95.

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 1848, 6.

¹¹⁹ Ibid., 1849, 2.

materials to make them all that comfortable school-houses should be.”¹²⁰ Lack of funds kept many schools in what were temporary accommodations. In 1857 an Iberville Parish official explained, “we have no school-houses, in the proper acceptance of the term. The schools are generally taught in dingy, rickety, half roofless sheds or shanties, that a planter of ordinary capacity for managing affairs would not allow his negroes to inhabit. I myself have taught schools for months in an appology [*sic*] for a school-house, through the cracks and holes of which I could easily throw a good sized urchin of sixteen years.”¹²¹ Certainly the inadequate accommodations did not help attract students or instructors to public schools. As the state superintendent bemoaned in 1857, “it is as futile to expect the mind of teachers or pupils to keep or acquire a proper tone and elasticity, when cribbed and bedabbled in dirt, dilapidation and discomfort, as to expect misery in any shape to contribute to happiness, enjoyment and gaiety. . . a ruinous log-cabin by the road-side, or in the woods, without an inclosure [*sic*], with a slab door, with small apertures without even a shutter, far less any sashes or glazing serving as windows, without chimney or fire-place, lacking maps and black-boards, and other necessities for teaching, is no exaggerated picture of a large portion of our school-houses, is but too well-known; and if our public school system is to be improved, this must be one of the points at one to be attended to.”¹²²

The problems surrounding teachers and school-houses stemmed in part from the same cause - lack of money. The provision that proceeds from sales of certain tracts of land would supplement the school fund generated little money, so that the state funded public education through a mill and poll tax assessed by each parish. The parish paid the

¹²⁰ Ibid.

¹²¹ Ibid., 1857, 55.

¹²² Ibid., 16-17.

necessary amount to the state office, which then redistributed it based on the number of children of school-age residing in each parish. In every instance, the amount of state appropriations allocated for education purposes proved completely insufficient to fund adequate public schools. As early as 1849 State Superintendent Dimitry warned the legislature, “thus, with an insufficient mill tax, and an unreliable poll tax, we are placed before an increased and increasing number of children, clamoring for the means of education.”¹²³ In 1854 a Ouachita Parish official explained that “the schools in our Parish are not in so flourishing condition as desirable, on account of the limited school fund, and consequent short duration of Schools. We have more teachers than we can accommodate with schools.”¹²⁴ Repeatedly parish officials explained to the legislature that the lack of funds hindered the operation of schools in their districts. The treasurer of Plaquemines Parish reported in 1855 that the state “allowance would not support either school for one month in the year,” while Avoyelles Parish officials explained that “the public funds have not been sufficient to enable the Directors to employ teachers.”¹²⁵

The inadequacy of state funding most often resulted in the suspension of the school until additional funds were forthcoming. According to one Caldwell official, “the manner in which teachers are employed, which is generally done by the Directors giving them from \$25 to \$50 per month to teach as long as the fund will last.”¹²⁶ As explained by the treasurer of Avoyelles Parish, “generally, as long as a district has a sufficient school funds, its school works; when the funds are exhausted, the school stops, until a

¹²³ Ibid., 1849, 4.

¹²⁴ Ibid., 1854, 130.

¹²⁵ Ibid., 1855, 41; *ibid.*, 1856, 40.

¹²⁶ Ibid., 1854, 63; see also *ibid.*, 1857, 53.

new supply comes to call it again into activity.”¹²⁷ To sustain the operation of schools, many parishes accepted private contributions or raised local funds in order to pay teachers for the remainder of the year. In 1854 a Plaquemines Parish official suggested tripling the amount of the state appropriation, noting that that its school system, “without the generous aid derived from personal contribution, would remain sadly inoperative in most of the School Districts.”¹²⁸ As one official succinctly concluded, “were all the districts in the parish to rely wholly upon the Public School Fund, the condition of our schools would be deplorable.”¹²⁹

Regrettably, due in part to the inadequacy of state funding which the inhabitants were taxed to provide, many residents began to view the public school system as onerous rather than beneficial. An official from Plaquemines Parish explained that the apathetic nature of parents in his parish was directly related to the insufficient amount of state funding, which “would not support a school for more than one month, and that in most all the Districts the schools are supported more by private subscription than by public funds.”¹³⁰ Concordia Parish residents registered similar complaints, noting that state appropriations supported public schools for only a few months despite the large amounts they paid into the state fund.¹³¹ That residents paid what they felt to be considerable amounts into the school fund but their parish did not receive a sufficient apportionment of that fund to sustain its schools did much to turn public sentiment against the education system.¹³² An 1859 report bitterly declared, “the defects I believe exist in the general

¹²⁷ Ibid., 1851, 8.

¹²⁸ Ibid., 1854, 101.

¹²⁹ Ibid., 1858, 46.

¹³⁰ Ibid., 1856, 83.

¹³¹ Ibid., 62.

¹³² Ibid., 1849, 10; *ibid.*, 1851, 28, 41; *ibid.*, 1856, 21, 83; *ibid.*, 1857, 93, *ibid.*, 1858, 95; *ibid.*, 1859, 7, 64, 1849, 10; *ibid.*, 1851, 28, 41; *ibid.*, 1856, 21, 83; *ibid.*, 1857, 93, *ibid.*, 1858, 95; *ibid.*, 1859, 7, 64.

apathy of the people, brought about in a great measure *in this parish*, by the utter inadequacy of the amount of money appropriated compared with the amount collected in the parish.”¹³³ Such sentiment resonated throughout the state, as an official from Livingston Parish commented, “the funds apportioned to this parish will hardly keep a school three months, and parents think they are oppressed, that they have to pay their taxes and receive no benefit of any importance from it; what their children learn in one school, they forget before there is another school in operation. One thing is certain, this system of apportionment has reduced the number of schools materially, and retarded the progress of education.”¹³⁴

In 1856, Parish Treasurer Oscar Arroyo of Plaquemines exasperatedly explained that his parish annually collected six to seven thousand dollars of school tax but received an apportionment of “hardly. . . fifteen hundred dollars.”¹³⁵ Superintendent Dimitry explained to the legislature in 1849 that twelve parishes paid nearly two-thirds of the school tax but received less than one-third of it back as their state appropriation.¹³⁶ He commented that it “is not only onerous in many of the parishes which contribute most largely to the fund, but that it is subversive also of the best interests of education . . . the principle of apportionment has actually *prostrated* the effort of the school agents.”¹³⁷ St. Mary Parish officials complained that they received only one-fourth of the amount that they paid into the fund as their state apportionment.¹³⁸ As succinctly summed up by an official from planter dominated St. James Parish in southeastern Louisiana, “much apathy

¹³³ “Report of the State Superintendent of Education,” *Louisiana Legislative Documents*, 1849, 10; *ibid.*, 1851, 28, 41; *ibid.*, 1856, 21, 83; *ibid.*, 1857, 93, *ibid.*, 1858, 95; *ibid.*, 1859, 7, 64., 1859, 64.

¹³⁴ “Report of the State Superintendent of Education,” *Louisiana Legislative Documents*, 1851, 27.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, 1856, 83.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, 1849, 10.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, 1857, 94.

is shown by the inhabitants of St. James, for our schools, as now organized. The repeated taxes with which the people are constantly harassed, and the small portion of our school taxes which is used for the benefit of the Parish, is a subject of daily complaint.”¹³⁹ This sentiment echoed in parishes across the state such as voiced in Concordia and Catahoula Parishes in 1856, who commented that the public school system met with stringent opposition because of the inequity of state appropriations.¹⁴⁰

While the basis of appropriation angered many parishes, others aired grievances concerning the accuracy of the assessments upon which their appropriations depended. The state relied on parish assessors to provide an account of the number of school age children residing within each parish annually, and the state superintendent then apportioned funds accordingly. While the state office often failed to receive the required assessments, many parishes complained that their assessors reported the number of children inaccurately, robbing the district of deserved and much needed funding. As one exasperated official complained, “negligence on the part of the Assessor . . . baffled all my exertions.”¹⁴¹ Rapides Parish suffered from inaccurate assessments, as it complained to the state superintendent, “the amount received in this parish for this year’s disbursement is much less than we are entitled to. The number of children reported by the Assessor for last year was only 1260, exhibiting an apparent decrease of 461.”¹⁴² Despite the apparent error in enumeration, “the Legislature paid no heed to it, and the parish consequently loses five thousand dollars of school money for the two years,” the Rapides Parish treasurer reported. Similar complaints came from parishes across the

¹³⁹ Ibid., 41.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., 1849, 10; *ibid.*, 1851, 28, 41; *ibid.*, 1856, 21, 22, 83; *ibid.*, 1857, 93, *ibid.*, 1858, 95; *ibid.*, 1859, 7, 64.

¹⁴¹ “Report of the State Superintendent of Education,” *Louisiana Legislative Documents*, 1853, 16.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, 28.

state; in 1851 Avoyelles Parish officials explained that their parish housed over fifteen hundred children though the assessment reported only 989.¹⁴³ In 1856 Franklin Parish officials reported that the assessor left three hundred children out of the enumeration, while St. Tammany Parish officials reported in 1857, “through the negligence of the Assessor, the enumeration of children taken this year will fall short 450 or 500 of the real number entitled to the benefit of Public Schools in this parish.”¹⁴⁴ Some of these discrepancies undoubtedly resulted from human error, for the researcher’s own study has uncovered such mistakes, but the apathy of local officials and the lack of oversight also bears responsibility for inaccurate assessments. Affected parishes pleaded with the legislature for aid, begging, “cannot you remedy this, as it works great injustice to our parish?”¹⁴⁵ Clearly, inaccuracy in assessments and the consequent disproportionate allocation of funds provided yet another reason for dissatisfaction with the system.

Though the funding from the state proved insufficient in every instance to support adequate public schools, the legislature did not intend for the money it allocated to remain the only funds supporting the education system. The legislature originally expected parishes to add to the state appropriations through local taxation, even though the parishes failed to levy local taxes under the previous system. Not surprisingly, such local financing failed to materialize, as Alexander Dimitry explained to the state’s elected officials, “the fears entertained that this tax would be of but secondary avail for the purposes of Education, have been so far realized.”¹⁴⁶ One parish official summed up the

¹⁴³ Ibid., 1851, 9.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., 1856, 68; *ibid.*, 1857, 96.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., 1856, 68; see also *ibid.*, 1858, 38, in which a Union parish official comments “I hear a great deal of grumbling from different portions of the parish about the Assessor having failed to take census of the educable children, correctly.”

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., 1848, 7.

situation in his annual report, explaining “in short, take the Free Public School system as a whole, it does not - here, at least - work well. It supposes that in each School District the citizens shall tax themselves, and thus establish a school; and that they shall be *aided* therein from the State School Fund. But how does the matter operate here? It is thus: the people rely wholly upon the State, instead of relying mainly upon themselves. Not a tax has ever been laid in any district, that I have ever heard of.”¹⁴⁷ Those parishes that relied only on the state appropriations operated schools for an average of three months a year, while parishes that added to the state fund either through taxes or voluntary contributions managed to keep their schools running longer and more successfully. An illustrative example of the workings and failures of the school system can be drawn from East Feliciana Parish. In 1851 the parish’s last assessment had been taken three years earlier that showed 676 children of school age, but the official commented that that number had increased since then, noting “more since, the assessor ran away.”¹⁴⁸ In 1851 no public school operated to accommodate the parish’s more than six hundred children though the parish maintained sixteen school-houses, but a local official explained, “be not surprised at this, for at present, for one of the quarters of the present year, 11 cents pro rata was apportioned to this parish.”¹⁴⁹ This situation offers a clear example of the impossibility of operating public schools using only the funding provided by the state. Samuel Bard, state superintendent of education in 1857, presented a lengthy list of suggestions to the legislature concerning the improvement of public education, including ideas on how to attain more competent teachers and the need for stricter supervision from both the state and the locale, after which he concluded, “to carry out the suggestions I have made, will

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., 1857, 63-64.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., 1851, 20.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid.

require a considerable increase of the school fund. This is a necessity of the case of which I have not been unmindful; and I am fully prepared to say that if it be estimated necessary to raise the apportionment for each child to three times its present amount, it ought to be done, to accomplish such indispensable objects.”¹⁵⁰ Although local and state officials emphasized the inadequacies of state funding and pleaded with the legislature year after year to increase the appropriations in order to facilitate public education, year after year the state’s elected officials refused to do so.

Because of the insufficiency of state funding, parishes devised different methods to supplement their school fund in order to establish public education. Additional support usually took the form of local taxation or voluntary contribution. Parishes faced with insufficient funding from the state gratefully accepted personal donations to assist in running the schools. These contributions came in different forms; many residents donated buildings to be used as school rooms, provided money to rent classrooms, or offered their time, materials, and labor to help build school-houses. Others provided supplies such as fuel, furniture, and stationery, or contributed funds to prolong the length of the school term or to pay a teacher when the amount for which he was contracted did not materialize. In 1851 fifteen parish officials explicitly mentioned voluntary contributions as a means to pay for or procure schools in their parishes.¹⁵¹ As the Plaquemines Parish superintendent explained that year, “besides the sum accruing from the State (which is here too small to keep up the schools) I have obtained in each district, small voluntary contributions which will for the present keep them in operation. In several instances these contributions have been received from persons who are not

¹⁵⁰ Ibid., 1857, 18.

¹⁵¹ Ibid., 1851, 6-48.

parents, but who have been prompted to this course by a sincere and praiseworthy desire to advance the cause of education.”¹⁵²

In other parishes, officials attempted to levy local taxes in order to supplement the state appropriation. Nineteen parishes levied local taxes in 1851, when Ascension Parish officials reported \$5,916.50 raised through local taxes and Avoyelles Parish reported \$4,133.37. Some of the district taxes raised much less, so that the amount collected through taxation ranged from one hundred seventy two dollars to more than five thousand dollars, equaling a total of \$29,598.92 in fifteen parishes during 1851.¹⁵³ Yet even these diverse and sometimes disappointing results proved more successful than the failed attempts at local taxation experienced in some areas. As the parish superintendent for Pointe Coupee recounted, “the directors in the district where I lived, levied a tax to build a school-house. Some of the planters refused to pay, a suit was the consequence. The directors lost.”¹⁵⁴ Similarly, St. Tammany Parish officials reported that in 1849 their district tried to collect a local tax for school purposes but many refused to pay, “and as the law is rather vague with regard to the manner of assessing the tax, the directors did not like to attempt to enforce the collection, but have relied upon voluntary contributions.”¹⁵⁵ While inhabitants paid both a mill and poll tax assessed by the state which benefited the school fund, many refused to pay more, defeating efforts at local taxation. As an official from St. Helena explained, “our schools have not advanced as well as they should have done, owing to the fact that the citizens have been divided- all

¹⁵² Ibid., 32.

¹⁵³ Ibid., 6-48.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid., 30.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid., 37.

think because it is a public thing that they are to labor under no disadvantage whatever.”¹⁵⁶

Besides contributing additional resources, the way in which parishes employed the funding appropriated from the state often differed drastically. As already mentioned, some parishes used the state allotment to run their schools for as long as the fund allowed, which most often amounted to about three months each year. In contrast, rather than supporting free public schools for such a short period, other parishes used the state funds to pay the tuition of private schools. These parishes employed appropriations from the state to offset the cost of tuition for residents, but schools still charged tuition, meaning the state provision for “free schools,” outlined in the Constitution of 1845, was ceasing to function in many parishes. Local officers from one parish reported, “the public money is either applied for a stated length of time, where all can attend free, or each scholar is allowed to draw his pro-rata share of the public money as part payment of his tuition.”¹⁵⁷ In 1861 a Bossier Parish official elucidated, “most of our schools partake in some measure of both public and private character, the teachers being employed by the Directors, and the public funds paid to him, and the remainder paid by private subscription. Tuition ranges from \$2.50 to \$5.00 per month, owing to the grade of school and of the branches taught.”¹⁵⁸ Since the state funding proved insufficient to support satisfactory public schools, in 1858 an official from De Soto Parish explained that in his parish, “strictly speaking there are but very few public schools in this parish. . . . the people of the district generally employ one or more teachers as they may require, to suit the convenience of the particular neighborhood, and at the termination of the school or

¹⁵⁶ Ibid., 41.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid., 1857, 35.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid., 1861, 14.

schools, the Directors divide the funds of the district, proportionately with the number of scholars in the district and the number taught by each teacher respectively, reserving such amount as may be due those who did not attend.”¹⁵⁹ This official believed that his parish had found the most productive use of the state appropriations, explaining “this arrangement seems much more satisfactory, as by this means all the children receive a benefit from the public fund, which is not the case as in some districts, where the Directors employ a teacher to teach a public school, and the whole fund of the district is consumed in paying him, when, perhaps, not half the children of the district are in reach of the school, and do not attend.”¹⁶⁰ Many parishes echoed this arrangement of employing the state appropriations for public schools to offset the cost of private schools in their areas, as in Union Parish where “nearly all the schools are made up in part by private subscription.”¹⁶¹

As the sectional debate heated up and war loomed, Louisiana education was experiencing a confluence of both private and public schools. In the years preceding secession, more and more parishes reported that their schools were sustained through private payments - charging tuition. Louisiana’s provisions for free public schools, mandated in the 1845 Constitution, had failed in many portions of the state. Legislative provisions for public education repeatedly proved insufficient to operate adequate free schools in Louisiana, and the alterations made to the original 1847 law hindered educational development in the state. As certain conscientious local officials attempted to overcome the inadequacies of legislative aid and guidance, state lawmakers continued

¹⁵⁹ Ibid., 1858, 20.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid.

¹⁶¹ Ibid., 1859, 74; see also *ibid.*, 22.

to ignore the problems plaguing the public education system and most schools across the state deteriorated further in the years leading up to the Civil War.

Chapter Four

Missed Opportunities: A Comparison of the Public School Systems of New Orleans and the Rest of Louisiana

Public education in New Orleans differed drastically from the rest of Louisiana. While the Crescent City instituted successful and popular free public schools that catered to a large segment of its population, public schools in most of the rest of Louisiana languished, struggling to offer instruction for even a fraction of the year. Though many differences existed between metropolitan New Orleans and the rural areas that made up the rest of the state, those dissimilarities do not account for the disparate conditions of public schools. Many factors posed obstacles to public education and without the centralized guidance needed to standardize and regulate school systems across the state, an authority that only the legislature commanded, public education in Louisiana languished throughout the antebellum period.

Throughout the 1850s, Louisiana's provision for free public schools, mandated by the 1845 Constitution, went unrealized in parish after parish. In many areas conscientious local citizens attempted to overcome the obstacles encountered in establishing a public school system and some succeeded. In 1858, for example, 59 percent of school age children attended twenty-seven public schools in Sabine Parish, where local officials explained, "the *present* school system is '*intensely*' popular with us."¹ But in most of the state, the public school system proved inadequate to provide education for the majority of Louisiana's children. State Superintendent William I.

¹ "Report of the State Superintendent of Education," *Louisiana Legislative Documents*, 1858, 30.

Hamilton admitted as much by 1859, beginning his annual report to the legislature, “our system is very defective in nearly every essential particular.”² That year a reported 43,252 children of school age resided in Louisiana excluding New Orleans; of that number 14,844 - only 34 percent - attended public schools. More children attended public schools in the city of New Orleans in 1859 than attended the various public schools across Louisiana, though the city housed almost ten thousand fewer children than the rest of the state. The same year, out of 34,581 reported children of school age, 17,419 children regularly attended public schools in the Crescent City, a 50 percent attendance rate.³

Patterns of settlement contributed in part to the drastic differences in attendance between New Orleans and the rest of the state. Inhabitants and state officials both failed to find a creative solution to the obstacle posed by sparsely populated rural areas. Where schools did exist, the distance from homes often prohibited many children from attending.⁴ Because the availability of both teachers and funds remained so miserably below the need, residents and school administrators enjoyed few options to overcome this problem. Unlike the metropolitan area of New Orleans, where inhabitants resided in a relatively confined space, families in the rest of Louisiana seldom lived within a reasonable distance from one another, so instituting a school at a central location that could serve a majority of the population remained problematic. As the treasurer of Plaquemines Parish explained to the state superintendent in 1856, “our School Districts, owing to the extent of the parish, and its being sparsely inhabited, embrace an average of

² Ibid., 1859, 4.

³ Ibid., 3-95.

⁴ Ibid., 1847, 9; *ibid.*, 1851, 22, 35, 36; *ibid.*, 1853, 7; *ibid.*, 1854, 68; *ibid.*, 1855, 20, 41; *ibid.*, 1856, 83, 90, 103; *ibid.*, 1858, 20.

25 or 30 miles each, and by that unfortunate circumstance a large number of children are denied the privilege of attending school.”⁵ This contrasted with New Orleans, where despite the many private academies and tutors available, public schools attracted residents from throughout the area. The Second Municipality’s school board proudly boasted that a number of families even moved into the city just to gain access to its public schools.⁶ Though education officials called attention to the problems posed by sparsely settled rural areas, the legislature neglected to address this issue, offering no suggestions or solutions and leaving local areas to deal with this obstacle haphazardly and unsuccessfully.⁷

Another issue that education proponents confronted stemmed directly from the legislature - inadequate state funding. How different areas dealt with this obstacle, and the resources available to them, contributed to the disparate conditions of public schools in New Orleans versus the rest of Louisiana. In both the Crescent City and rural Louisiana, state appropriations for public education proved far from adequate to run public schools, suggesting that education remained a low priority for state lawmakers. A Plaquemines Parish official reported, “the amount allowed by the State is not adequate to that necessary for the education of the youth,” and the parish superintendent of East Feliciana explained, “the fund provided by law is entirely inadequate to pay more than one fifth of the expenses of tuition for one year.”⁸ New Orleans officials also complained about the inadequacy of state funding, noting, “the future prospects of our schools, in a

⁵ Ibid., 1856, 83.

⁶ Second Annual Report, Council of Municipality Number Two, (New Orleans: printed at the office of the Commercial Bulletin, 1844), 25.

⁷ “Report of the State Superintendent of Education,” *Louisiana Legislative Documents*, 1847, 9; *ibid.*, 1851, 22, 35, 36; *ibid.*, 1853, 7; *ibid.*, 1854, 68; *ibid.*, 1855, 20, 41; *ibid.*, 1856, 83, 90, 103; *ibid.*, 1858, 20.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 1858, 81; *ibid.*, 1851, 21.

pecuniary point of view, are unfavorably and discouraging. The municipality being greatly embarrassed, will, with great difficulty find means to pay rents, furnish books and stationary, defray incidental expenses and complete the amount necessary to pay teachers' salaries, which the State appropriations do not meet in full."⁹ Because allocations from the legislature proved inadequate, residents in both New Orleans and parishes across the state voiced complaints about the basis of the state allocation, lobbying to alter the basis of distribution so that their area would receive a bigger share. The primary complaint from New Orleans residents and officials centered on the need to adjust the formula for determining the level of state support. Specifically, reformers urged that state appropriations should be based on the number of students receiving instruction rather than the number of children of school age.¹⁰ Because New Orleans educated considerably more children in public schools than the rest of the state, such an alteration certainly would have benefited the city. Parishes throughout the state also offered suggestions on changing the basis of appropriation. The main grievance voiced by rural officials centered on the inequality of state appropriations in relation to the amount paid into the public school fund. The state taxed parishes for public education per inhabitant, but then disbursed the money based on the number of school age children residing in the parish, meaning many parishes that contributed heavily to the school fund received only a portion of that money back in return. Therefore, when the state allocation proved too small to run the public schools, local residents demanded that the money they themselves paid into the fund be allotted to their own parish.¹¹ The state legislature

⁹ Ibid., 1851, 25.

¹⁰ *Second Annual Report, Council of Municipality Number Two*, 20-21.

¹¹ Report of the State Superintendent of Education," *Louisiana Legislative Documents*, 1849, 10; *ibid.*, 1851, 28, 41; *ibid.*, 1856, 21, 83; *ibid.*, 1857, 93, *ibid.*, 1858, 95; *ibid.*, 1859, 7, 64.

earned vehement disapproval by both the amount and basis of its appropriations. New Orleans enjoyed the means to augment the small amounts of state appropriations, but no other area in Louisiana enjoyed such financial resources.

Schools across Louisiana dealt with the inadequacy of state funding in a variety of ways. The city of New Orleans greatly supplemented the paltry amount from the state with large allocations from the city council. In 1844 New Orleans' Second Municipality spent \$21,000 on its public schools, with only \$2,300 coming from the state fund.¹² Likewise, public schools in rural Louisiana also depended on extra income in order to remain in operation. Most often schools across the state benefited from donations contributed by local inhabitants in order to maintain their schools.¹³ Some areas also levied additional taxes on their residents in order to augment their education fund.¹⁴ When rural parishes added a local tax to support their schools, they most often levied a one time charge that went to a specific purpose, usually building a school-house. But relatively few parishes chose to increase taxation, as the state superintendent explained to the legislature in 1849, "it appears from reports filed that some of the directors have evinced a great repugnance to levy taxes on the property of their neighbors to build school-houses."¹⁵ Most frequently, local residents contributed their help to the public schools voluntarily, by providing supplies such as fuel or stationery, donating furniture or a building, or helping to build a school-house. An exasperated state official complained of the dilapidated condition of school-houses across the state, but concluded that their

¹² Second Annual Report, Council of Municipality Number Two, 20.

¹³ See pp. 82 above.

¹⁴ See pp. 82-83 above.

¹⁵ "Report of the State Superintendent of Education," *Louisiana Legislative Documents*, 1849, 9.

condition came as no surprise considering the “sum so satirically small,” spent on them.¹⁶ He explained that “while there are not fewer than 800 school-houses, only \$3,034 dollars is stated to have been expended in building, improving, repairing and furnishing them, during the past year, or considerably less than \$4 each on an average.”¹⁷ But the superintendent failed to acknowledge the considerable amounts donated to build and maintain school-houses, in both supplies and labor, with no notice taken of the worth of such contributions. In 1851 over half of the reporting parishes relied on voluntary donations to help support their public schools, suggesting that legislative appropriations conflicted with the needs and desires of residents.¹⁸

In addition to taxes and donations, many school districts resorted to more certain means of supplementing state aid - they charged tuition. As early as 1852, parish reports reveal that some schools established as “free public schools,” based on the 1847 Act charged tuition.¹⁹ Morehouse Parish officials, for example, explained that “the amount received for past year falls far short of paying for the schooling, which is made up by the patrons of the school.”²⁰ In another area, the parish treasurer explained that his district maintained one public school which operated for ten months and charged pupils from \$2.00 to \$3.50 depending on the courses taken.²¹ Charging tuition remained an unexplored option for New Orleans public schools. When funds fell short, which they typically did, school officials looked to the city council and to private contributions to sustain the system, but the schools remained free. As the 1850s progressed, more and

¹⁶ Ibid., 1857, 17.

¹⁷ Ibid., 16.

¹⁸ Ibid., 1851, 6-48.

¹⁹ Ibid., 1852, 19.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid., 20.

more parishes reported that their public schools, established as free schools, charged the students in order to remain in operation. In 1855, a Plaquemines Parish official explained, “there are but four schools in this parish, none of them being properly public schools; they are supported by private subscription, and receive pro rata allowance as collateral aid, as the said allowance would not support either school for one month in the year.”²² Such sentiment echoed throughout the state. Two years later, Benjamin Fort of Bossier Parish reported, “all the schools of the parish I believe, are private as well as public.”²³ Governor Alexander Mouton commented to the legislature after the passage of the 1845 Constitution that “experience in other States, as well as in this City, prove the Free School System, to be the only efficient one, all others have been vastly expensive and of very little utility,” but by the 1850s this provision was already being disregarded throughout the state.²⁴ Louisiana’s free public school system effectively stopped functioning in many parts of the state as rural areas struggled with the requirements of state law but the inadequacies of state funding.

The insufficiency of legislative appropriations impacted Louisiana’s public school system in a variety of ways, revealing itself in dilapidated school-houses, incompetent teachers, and limited instruction. Throughout the antebellum period, Louisiana had too few public schools to serve all the state’s youth. In 1855 a Plaquemines Parish official reported only four public schools in his parish, though the parish maintained nine distinct school districts, and the districts extended, “from eighteen to twenty miles in length, with an average number of fifteen to twenty children in each district.”²⁵ The amount of state

²² Ibid., 1855, 41.

²³ Ibid., 1857, 35.

²⁴ *Louisiana Senate Journal*, First Session, 1846, 4.

²⁵ “Report of the State Superintendent of Education,” *Louisiana Legislative Documents*, 1855, 41.

funding proved so inadequate that Washington Parish officials could not even support two schools simultaneously and faced the sad dilemma of choosing to fund one school a year. In 1852 parish officials explained “there are only two school-houses in our district, and we have agreed to give all the public funds coming to our district to support this school this year, and the other school-house is to have next year’s funds to support a school.”²⁶ In addition to the absence of enough schools to accommodate all of Louisiana’s children, the existing schools also operated for minimal amounts of time. On average, most public schools operated for only three months a year because the shortage of funds precluded a longer school year.²⁷ In contrast, New Orleans public schools operated on a ten month school term, with holidays twice a year.²⁸ Though three months of instruction each year proved better than none, such limited education with such long hiatuses certainly impeded the academic achievements of public school students outside of New Orleans. With too few public schools and limited instruction, the legislature still did not respond to such disappointing complaints, ignoring the inadequacies of the system which they themselves created.

In addition to the problems posed by the limited length of school terms and the scarcity of schools, instruction available to rural students in existing public institutions lagged far behind that offered by New Orleans public schools. After establishing successful elementary schools, the city in 1843 opened its first public high school, which offered a wide range of advanced courses.²⁹ By the 1850s, city officials proudly boasted

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 1852, 33.

²⁷ This conclusion was drawn by examining “Reports of the State Superintendent of Education,” *Louisiana Legislative Documents*, 1847-1861.

²⁸ See pp. 28 above.

²⁹ *Second Annual Report, Council of Municipality Number Two*, 18; Alma H. Peterson, “A Historical Survey of the Administration of Education in New Orleans, 1718-1851” (PhD dissertation, Louisiana State University, 1962), 152.

that their public high schools trained accomplished scholars who often themselves became teachers in local schools.³⁰ In contrast, the instruction available in public schools in the rest of the state remained rudimentary. As late as 1857 only four parishes reported maintaining any public high school.³¹ The instruction offered in rural public schools most often consisted of reading, writing, and arithmetic, with some schools also offering geography, grammar, and history.³² As a Morehouse Parish official explained in his annual report of 1859, “the public schools of our parish are not improving as the society and wealth demands, and the consequence is, many of the children are sent to other States to get even an English education.”³³ Despite such disappointing reports, the legislature never instituted regulations or standards for courses taught, materials used, or procedures followed. Without any state regulations or guidelines, the quality of public schools across the state remained inconsistent and inferior.

Incompetent teachers who often ran state-supported institutions contributed to the poor instruction available in public schools in rural Louisiana. Once parish officials overcame the difficulty encountered in finding instructors to employ in rural schools, these teachers often proved completely unqualified. Such incompetence may be attributed to the failure of local administrators to screen applicants properly, the unfavorable reputation endured by school teachers, as well as the pitiful sums available with which to pay instructors.³⁴ Year after year the legislature heard disappointing reports on the ability of teachers in public schools across the state, but continued to do

³⁰ “Annual Report of the Treasurer of the Parish of Orleans, Fourth District, to the State Superintendent,” included in “Report of the State Superintendent of Education,” *Louisiana Legislative Documents*, 1858, 102.

³¹ Reports of the Parish Treasurers, included in “Report of the State Superintendent of Education,” *Louisiana Legislative Documents*, 1857, 27-112.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ “Report of the State Superintendent of Education,” *Louisiana Legislative Documents*, 1859, 93.

³⁴ See pp. 70-74 above.

nothing. “As regards to the qualifications of teachers it is not good, for some of them can scarcely write their own name,” a Bienville Parish official remarked in 1857; the same year another local officer commented, “generally the teachers are scholastically bad, and morally worse.”³⁵ Given such disappointing assessments of public school teachers who often maintained complete control over their respective schools, it is not surprising that the quality of instruction available in Louisiana’s public schools fell far below expectations. Yet the legislature never enacted any provisions to ensure the competency of public school instructors. Leaving parishes to employ any candidate regardless of qualifications, legislators offered no guidelines to ensure quality in Louisiana’s public schools.

In contrast to the unflattering evaluation of teachers in rural Louisiana, instructors in New Orleans public schools earned constant praise from both city and state officials. City administrators typically reported to the state superintendent that their teachers proved “capable, faithful and attentive,” and explained that “the moral and intellectual qualifications of the teachers, and the general character and condition of the schools, justify the confidence and affection of the community.”³⁶ Every year New Orleans school administrators praised the teachers employed in public schools for their intellectual ability and dedication. New Orleans school board members explained in their very first report the care and consideration that went into choosing instructors to employ in public schools, carefully examining applicants on a wide range of subjects, but state lawmakers did not follow this example and chose not to enact such requirements for the state as a whole, so that many parishes continued to employ instructors without even a

³⁵ “Report of the State Superintendent of Education,” *Louisiana Legislative Documents*, 1857, 33, 89.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 1858, 102; *ibid.*, 1859, 85; see also *ibid.*, 1858, 96-102; *ibid.*, 1859, 84-91.

perfunctory examination of their abilities, often hiring teachers with no qualifications or capacity.³⁷

Though the incompetence of public school instructors in rural Louisiana proved unacceptable, as one parish official explained to the legislature, “the teachers are as qualified as can be expected, when their salaries are not much more than the hire of steamboat deckhands.”³⁸ In addition to the damage caused by the lack of minimal teaching requirements, inadequate funding also hindered competent instruction in the state’s public schools. Teachers in most of Louisiana received pitiful sums for their efforts, contributing to their scarcity in rural areas; many instructors willing to work for such low wages proved worth little more than the small sum they received. In 1855 a St. Bernard official explained that “the Teachers employed in our Parish in the public Schools, with a few honorable exceptions, are all men of ordinary talents, such as we may expect to have for the amount of money which is actually paid to them in compensation for their services.”³⁹ According to the treasurer of Sabine Parish, “as a general thing the qualifications of the public teachers are quite indifferent. We have a large parish sparsely populated, and the consequence is that the number of children to each District is quite small, and do not hold out sufficient inducements in the way of pay to attract men more liberally educated.”⁴⁰ In comparison with the salaries paid to New Orleans school teachers, instructors in the rural parishes suffered from depressed wages. In the first year

³⁷ [First] Annual Reports of the Council of Municipality Number Two, of the city of New Orleans, on the Condition of its Public Schools, (New Orleans: Printed at the Office of the *Picayune*, 1845), 9-10. For disappointing reports of public school teachers throughout the state, see “Report of the State Superintendent of Public Education,” *Louisiana Legislative Documents*, 1848, 6; *ibid.*, 1849, 2, 7; *ibid.*, 1851, 5, 16, 17, 23, 30, 37; *ibid.*, 1854, 8-9, 56, 68, 79, 113; *ibid.*, 1855, 20, 35, 41, 52; *ibid.*, 1856, 11, 22, 52, 56, 90, 96, 99, 101, 103; *ibid.*, 1857, 8-10, 33, 55, 89, 94; *ibid.*, 1858, 6, 11, 28, 68, 89, 95; *ibid.*, 1859, 10, 22, 37, 62, 65.

³⁸ “Report of the State Superintendent of Education,” *Louisiana Legislative Documents*, 1858, 28.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 1855, 44.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 1856, 90.

of its operations, the lowest paid instructors in New Orleans public schools, female assistant teachers, received a salary of five hundred dollars, which increased to six hundred dollars by the next decade.⁴¹ In contrast, public school teachers in the rest of the state received between seventy and one hundred twenty dollars to teach school for three months, with instructors receiving an average of ninety-five dollars per quarter.⁴² Such a salary may have proved sufficient if the schools functioned all year, but since most schools only operated for three months, teachers in rural Louisiana could expect ninety-five dollars as their income. The fact that teachers received so little compensation for their efforts certainly discouraged qualified instructors from seeking jobs in rural Louisiana. As a St. Mary Parish official reported to the legislature, “the teachers are generally utterly incompetent, and it cannot be otherwise, while the pittance now paid to teachers will scarcely raise them above absolute want. The consequences are they are unfit for their duties, and schools throughout the parish are open for but a small fraction of the year. As far as the Parish of St Mary is concerned, the system is in a perfectly demoralized condition.”⁴³

In addition to unqualified instructors, the accommodations available to public schools in New Orleans compared to schools in the rest of Louisiana also revealed drastic disparities between the systems. The New Orleans city council continually made large appropriations to the school board in order to procure adequate buildings to house its schools. In the first year of its operations, the Second Municipality maintained “four

⁴¹ [First] *Annual Report of the Council of Municipality Number Two*. . . , 13; “Report of the State Superintendent of Public Education,” *Louisiana Legislative Documents*, 1854, 92-97.

⁴² “Report of the State Superintendent of Public Education,” *Louisiana Legislative Documents*, 1852, 9-35.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 95.

large and commodious houses,” and began building a fifth structure.⁴⁴ In 1844 the municipality reported spending nine thousand dollars to build another new school-house and four years later expended \$78,000 to build or purchase five more buildings.⁴⁵ In contrast to the large structures obtained by the city of New Orleans to house its public schools, institutions in the rest of the state operated in whatever shelter might be available, most provided or built by the voluntary contribution of local residents and often inadequate. Many complaints concerning the poor conditions of rural school-houses filed into the state superintendent’s office. In 1857 the state superintendent explained to the legislature that the “condition of the school-houses themselves is, in the great majority of cases, a great reproach.”⁴⁶ A. F. Osborn, a Franklin Parish official, reported in 1856 that “our places of instruction are, with few exceptions, common log-houses, scantily furnished; locations are deemed almost universally inappropriate;” a sentiment echoed across the state.⁴⁷ As one state official concluded in 1857, “the school-houses existing are quite unfit for the purposes to which they are ostensibly devoted.”⁴⁸ Like their negligence in instituting regulations for teachers in public schools, legislators also set no minimal requirements for school-houses to meet. Even receiving reports that noted, “the schools are generally taught in dingy, rickety, half roofless sheds or shanties,” stirred no action from the legislature, and since such accommodations violated no legislative provision the students continued in substandard buildings, attempting to

⁴⁴ [First] Annual Reports of the Council of Municipality Number Two. . . , 7.

⁴⁵ Third Annual Report of the Council of Municipality Number Two, (New Orleans: printed at the office of the Commercial Bulletin, 1844), 35; Report of the Board of Directors of the Public Schools of the Second Municipality (New Orleans: Die Glocke Office, 1848), 4.

⁴⁶ “Report of the State Superintendent of Public Education,” *Louisiana Legislative Documents*, 1857, 16.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 1856, 69.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 1857, 4.

concentrate on lessons in a school-house that provided little protection from the elements with an instructor who himself may have been illiterate.⁴⁹

Offering no solutions for how school boards should deal with sparsely settled rural areas, the legislature also failed to institute requirements of either schools, teachers, or administrators. Substandard and insufficient buildings, incompetent and unqualified teachers, and apathetic and illiterate administrators continued to characterize the public school system. In addition, politicians inadequately funded a system already beset with difficulties, further hampering the chances for success. Yet some areas of rural Louisiana as well as New Orleans managed to overcome these obstacles. In 1858, Assumption Parish officials reported that “the public schools of this parish are kept in good condition,” while a Bossier resident reported, “in many of the Districts the schools are prosperous.”⁵⁰ In absence of effective guidance and regulation from the legislature, the single most important issue determining the success of public schools in a given parish depended on the quality of local administration. In New Orleans the school boards actively administered and supervised the public schools of the city. Rather than just handing out funds, school administrators met with teachers, visited schools, and attended annual exams of students. A committee of administrators carefully examined all teaching applicants and tested their ability and knowledge before hiring, ensuring that the instruction offered in the city’s public schools remained exceptional. The school board also decided how the schools would function, determining what classes would be taught, when the school term would commence and end, and where school would be held, carefully procuring school-houses in which to conduct classes. During the year,

⁴⁹ Ibid., 33, 55.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 1858, 71; *ibid.*, 1859, 11.

supervisors continued to monitor the progress of the public schools and took an active part in their administration.⁵¹ New Orleans city officials established the necessary urban government institutions in order to administer and supervise its schools. In the absence of such municipal institutions, rural Louisiana depended upon the legislature to provide the supporting framework, but the state's elected officials failed to do so.

In the absence of state institutions, local administration proved to be the key to overcoming the inefficiencies of state guidance and operating competent public schools. Where public schools did succeed in rural Louisiana those areas, like New Orleans, boasted of competent and dedicated local administrators. In 1855 when De Soto Parish officials reported that "the cause of education is in a good condition in our parish," they also explained that the police jury regularly appointed school directors who then carefully interviewed all teaching applicants.⁵² In 1857, the parish treasurer of Avoyelles proudly commented, "in regard to the condition of the Free Public Schools in the parish, I can truly state that great improvement has been effected since my last report, and our schools are now filled with competent and efficient teachers. This is to be attributed to a desire on the part of the Directors generally to obtain men of capacity, and also from the effect of some ordinances of the Police Jury relative to Public Schools."⁵³ Where competent administrators ran public schools, the public education system worked.

Given the importance of local administration to the success of public schools, it remains surprising that the legislature took no action to institute standards or regulations for the officials who supervised the system. Reports continually flowed into the legislature noting the incompetence of local administration and often blaming the school

⁵¹ See pp. 37-38 above.

⁵² "Report of the State Superintendent of Public Education," *Louisiana Legislative Documents*, 1855, 25.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 1857, 30.

supervisors for the problems of the system, yet state lawmakers neglected to address this tremendous hindrance to public education in the state.⁵⁴ In parish after parish, administrators proved completely unconcerned with the functioning of the school system. After the legislature abolished the office of parish superintendent in 1852, an official widely regarded as “the only responsible agent” of public schools, local supervision fell to an unpaid board of district directors.⁵⁵ In most areas these directors quickly became regarded as incompetent administrators and apathetic agents of the public school system. Year after year parish officials attributed the chronic problems that plagued their schools to the district directors, like the Catahoula Parish officer who blamed the poor condition of the schools on “the entire neglect of most of the School Directors to perform their duty. They never visit and examine into the condition of their respective schools.”⁵⁶ Years later another official explained, “the school directors take no interest in the discharge of the duties of their offices.”⁵⁷ Such failures of local administration helped to condemn Louisiana’s public school system in the years leading up to the Civil War. State education officials acknowledged the necessity of competent local administrators for the system to succeed as early as 1851, explaining to the legislature “where the Parish has been favored with a zealous and able Superintendent . . . the schools seem to be attended with the greatest benefit,” but the state’s elected officials still took no steps to ensure

⁵⁴ For complaints concerning public school administrators, see “Report of the State Superintendent of Public Education,” *Louisiana Legislative Documents*, 1853, 16; *ibid.*, 1854, 63, 68, 79, 88, 113, 115, 117, 120, 124; *ibid.*, 1855, 20, 23, 31, 41, 47, 52; *ibid.*, 1856, 20, 52, 54, 56, 64, 71, 83, 96, 99, 103; *ibid.*, 1857, 33, 41, 44, 79, 89, 92, 94, 98, 101, 103, 107; *ibid.*, 1958, 35, 38, 44, 57; *ibid.*, 13, 62, 74, 103.

⁵⁵ “Report of the State Superintendent of Education,” *Louisiana Legislative Documents*, 1853, 3; see also pp 63-70 above.

⁵⁶ “Report of the State Superintendent of Public Education,” *Louisiana Legislative Documents*, 1857, 44; for more disparaging comments on public school administrators see also “Report of the State Superintendent of Public Education,” *Louisiana Legislative Documents*, 1853, 16; *ibid.*, 1854, 63, 68, 79, 88, 113, 115, 117, 120, 124; *ibid.*, 1855, 20, 23, 31, 41, 47, 52; *ibid.*, 1856, 20, 52, 54, 56, 64, 71, 83, 96, 99, 103; *ibid.*, 1857, 33, 41, 44, 79, 89, 92, 94, 98, 101, 103, 107; *ibid.*, 1958, 35, 38, 44, 57; *ibid.*, 13, 62, 74, 103.

⁵⁷ “Report of the State Superintendent of Education,” *Louisiana Legislative Documents*, 1855, 41.

competent administration.⁵⁸ Few parishes in Louisiana could boast of efficient local supervisors, unlike New Orleans where observers continued to praise the conscientious administrators of its public schools, commenting, “few cities in the Union, if any, have more energetic, more vigilant, or more able Directors of Public Schools than New Orleans; yet there, where, if anywhere, with a Board of Directors for each of the four districts into which the city is divided, the necessity for local superintendence might be expected to be ignored, there are four superintendents- one for each district.”⁵⁹ In contrast, the rest of the state continued to suffer from incompetent administration, as the state superintendent reported to the legislature, “the complaint of the negligence of local officers in the performance of their duties has been uniform throughout;” a grievance that lawmakers ignored.⁶⁰

Ultimately the burden of establishing quality control guidelines for education rested with the legislature. Though the success of Louisiana’s public school system greatly depended on local supervision, the only way to ensure competent administrators throughout the state required legislative action, a responsibility state lawmakers shunned. Aside from providing inadequate sums of money, legislators did little else to support the school system. As the state superintendent chided in 1854, “the providing of funds for education is an indispensable means for attaining the end; but it is not education. The wisest system that can be devised, cannot be executed without human agency.”⁶¹ But legislators provided little guidance for rural areas attempting to comply with state laws in establishing schools and made no requirements in order to ensure the proper functioning

⁵⁸ Ibid., 1851, 3.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 1857, 6.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 1854, 9.

⁶¹ Ibid., 8.

of the system. The state's elected officials offered no solutions to the problems of sparse rural settlements, refused to increase the paltry amount of state funding, made no suggestions for how or where schools should be organized, and set no regulations or standards for such basic concerns as the quality of school-houses, the literacy of teachers, the courses of instruction offered, or the length of school term. The state made no requirements of local administrators who directly controlled the schools, not even mandating that the supervisors themselves be literate, much less requiring them to visit schools or interview teaching applicants. As the St. Landry Parish treasurer reported, "the Directors uneducated, and consequently incompetent to judge of the acquirements of applicants, and are regardless of their social standing and moral character."⁶² One state official insisted that in order for the public school system to function effectively, "a rigorous and vigilant central influence must be brought to bear upon it, in order to insure [*sic*] concert of purpose and of action throughout the various members of the system," but state officers offered no such guidance.⁶³

Indeed, rather than helping to correct the inadequacies of the system, most observers agreed that the actions of the legislature only served to further hamper public education in Louisiana. In 1856, one education official commented, "our Public Schools are some ten years old, and the laws governing them have been changed and altered to but little purpose, if not with decided detriment."⁶⁴ Most officials familiar with the school system noted "the inadequacy of the law," or as an official from Winn Parish explained, "the school law, as carried out here, is all a humbug."⁶⁵ Local officers

⁶² Ibid., 1857, 89; see also *ibid.*, 1855, 52; *ibid.*, 1856, 20, 21; *ibid.*, 1857, 102.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 1853, 5.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 1856, 4.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 4; *ibid.*, 1858, 44.

continually pleaded with the legislature to adjust the failings of the school law, but state lawmakers did little to address their grievances.⁶⁶ Parish officials as well as state superintendents made numerous suggestions, such as stiffer requirements for assessors and parish treasurers, increased funding, altering the basis for the distribution of funds, requiring school boards to examine teaching applicants, mandating that at least two of three school directors be literate, and many more. Aside from suggestions, local officials pointed out contradictory sections of the law, such as those that referred to collection of taxes, drawing interest on school lands, and the payment of teachers, and asked the legislature to clarify discrepancies. But most often officials asked the legislature to address issues not mentioned in the school law, such as requiring school directors to visit schools and examine teachers, and allowing the police jury to appoint directors in areas where none had been elected.⁶⁷ But to these pleas the legislature did not respond. As one disgusted local official commented, “the present condition of the Public Schools of this parish calls loudly upon the legislature for some revision and modification of the present system. If the members of that body would only devote one-half of their time which is consumed in useless and idle discussions upon party issues, and devote the same to the examination of the Public School system, the system would ere long be improved, and the children of the State thereby benefited.”⁶⁸ But state officials did not address the problems of Louisiana’s public education system. Their negligence in making the necessary adjustments to the school law and their failure to institute specific requirements

⁶⁶ Ibid., 1858, 4; see also *ibid.*, 1856, 3-16; *ibid.*, 1857, 3-21; *ibid.*, 1859, 3-6.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 1853, 3-8; *ibid.*, 1854, 8-9, 63, 68, 69, 79, 88, 101, 113, 117, 120, 130; *ibid.*, 1855, 4-5, 31, 35, 41, 44, 47, 51-52; *ibid.*, 1856, 3-11, 52, 54, 56, 64; *ibid.*, 1857, 3-21.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 1857, 44.

and guidelines for local administrators reveals the apathy that state legislators exhibited in regard to public education.

Few Louisiana legislators publicly admitted their disregard for education, but their actions clearly reveal their disinterest in providing public schools for the children of the state. One historian attempting to explain the problems haunting public education in Louisiana, commented, “their apathy was chiefly responsible for the failure of free schools in Louisiana before the Civil War. . . But they did not scruple to appropriate public money for private institutions at their own plantations.”⁶⁹ The state superintendent of education in 1864 provided a synopsis of the school system of the antebellum period, concluding that “the whole plan was admirably adapted to hurt the feelings of the poor and pamper the pride of the rich - the slaveholders. They, we have no doubt, were quite satisfied with the system.”⁷⁰ An interested party reported to the state superintendent that “members of the Legislature, composed of rich men only, always made laws *in order to prevent the light to spread over the poor*. The funds for the schools were few and badly appropriated.”⁷¹ Legislators, like planters across the South who paid for the private education of their children, took little interest in the success of the public schools of the state. Though mandated in the 1845 Constitution and unanimously endorsed, the lack of concern for the collapsing system of public education clearly reveals the attitude of the state’s elected officials.

Without the necessary provisions put in place by state lawmakers requiring local school administrators to attend to their jobs in an effective manner, Louisiana’s public

⁶⁹ Roger W. Shugg, *Origins of Class Struggle in Louisiana: A Social History of White Farmers and Laborers during Slavery and After, 1840-1875* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University, 1939), 74.

⁷⁰ “Report of the State Superintendent of Education,” *Louisiana Legislative Documents*, 1864, 6.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 10-11.

education system deteriorated in the decade leading up to the Civil War. Rather than suggesting solutions to the problems encountered in rural areas of Louisiana, such as sparsely settled regions, inadequate school-houses, and incompetent teachers, the legislature ignored such problems and continued to fund inadequately an inefficient school system. Comments by local officials reveal that rather than assisting languishing school districts, state legislators altered the school law in ways that often caused more problems, such as their abolition of the office of parish superintendent in 1852. Although in some cases efficient local supervision could overcome the obstacles facing rural education, without central guidance most areas of the state would continue to house failing public schools. State administrators could have used New Orleans' successful school laws to formulate regulations for the rest of the state, instituting requirements, such as committees to certify teachers before employment, and offering guidelines to establish schools, but legislators continued to neglect public education. Without a more aggressive centralized control of the system and without stringent requirements that would combat the apathy and indifference of many school administrators, public education in Louisiana fell far short in comparison with New Orleans school system. As the state superintendent fatalistically remarked to the legislature less than a decade before the outbreak of war, "you may extend your fields of sugar and cotton- erect your palatial mansions- establish manufactories- construct your magnificent floating palaces, expend millions for railroads, and accumulate illimitable wealth, but if you neglect to educate the people, you are but making a richer prize for some bold and crafty Cataline, some Santa Anna, or Louis Napoleon, who may ultimately, be hailed as a welcome deliverer from anarchy and confusion."⁷²

⁷² Ibid., 1853, 8.

Conclusion

“Oh, educate! educate! educate the people! and come what may come, we shall have nothing to fear,” State Superintendent Samuel Bard pleaded to Louisiana’s legislature in 1857.¹ As the sectional controversy that eventually led to secession heated up, officials across the state begged lawmakers to address the educational needs of the state. For “it is only by a general diffusion of knowledge, educating all the people that we can ever expect to take a proud stand, and maintain our title to honor, in that galaxy of States which should be respected for moral, intellectual and religious worth,” one official proclaimed.² Despite the impressive free school system instituted in New Orleans, few other areas of the state could claim successful public schools. Though many differences existed between metropolitan New Orleans and the rural areas of the rest of Louisiana, what ultimately led to the success or failure of a local school system can be inferred from their diverse examples.

The most obvious factor hindering the success of public education in antebellum Louisiana remained the inadequacy of state funding. Though the legislature appropriated funds each year based on the number of children of school age, this money fell far short of what was needed to run enough schools to reach all the state’s youth for more than a fraction of the year. Many different strategies arose to supplement state allocations, including donations, additional taxes, and charging tuition, but inadequate funding would continue to haunt public education in the decades leading up to the Civil War. While New Orleans city council appropriated additional funds to augment the state distribution,

¹ “Report of the State Superintendent of Education,” *Louisiana Legislative Documents*, 1857, 21.

² *Ibid.*, 1856, 16.

public education in rural Louisiana remained hindered by the paltry amounts of state funding.

The New Orleans public school system, organized by leaders in the American quarter of town in 1841, offered a brilliant example to the legislature in organizing the statewide system six years later. Not only standing as one of the most successful school systems in the South, New Orleans schools also attracted praise from across the nation. Offering valuable instruction to children in the city free of charge, New Orleans schools maintained very high standards in academics and accommodations, as well as offering resources to the entire community, such as libraries, lectures, and night schools. When Governor Isaac Johnson appointed a former New Orleans school board member as the first state superintendent, hopes ran high that the state would imitate the Crescent City's successful free public school system, but soon it became clear that much more guidance was needed than what one state education official could offer. When the legislature inaugurated the free public school system in 1847, it offered little in the way of procedure or organization. Requiring schools in each parish yet offering pitiful sums for their support, the legislature instituted few regulations or means of institutional support. Local administrators faced many obstacles when attempting to organize public schools, hampered not only by the absence of guidance from the legislature but often finding legislative provisions themselves a hindrance. Contradictory sections of the law left room for dispute and gave officials little leverage or authority, as illustrated by the case of residents who sued Pointe Coupee Parish for passing a tax to build a school-house, a suit the parish lost. But aside from the obstacles that competent local administrators faced, most parishes did not enjoy the services of conscientious officials, burdened

instead by completely incompetent and apathetic local school directors. Where even the most diligent officials confronted difficult obstacles, less able administrators stood little chance in establishing public schools without the needed guidance from the legislature.

Ultimately, the burden of establishing a successful school system rested with the legislature. The incompetence of administrators and teachers, the inadequacy of school-houses and supplies, and the substandard instruction and education that characterized public schools across the state could only be combated on a statewide scale by legislative action, but lawmakers continued to ignore these problems. Reports continually filed into the state superintendent's office bitterly recounting the disappointing conditions of schools across the state and passionately asking the legislature for some sort of guidance or assistance, but elected officials ignored these pleas. As the state superintendent began his annual report to the legislature in 1856, he boldly declared his position, "the imperfections of the present School Law are too glaring not to have been seen and felt by each of you."³ Yet state lawmakers continued to do nothing.

The inaction that characterized the legislature in regard to education suggests providing education for all of Louisiana's children remained a low priority for the state's elected officials, despite its mandate in the Constitution and despite its local support. As early as 1849 Superintendent Alexander Dimitry explained to the legislature, "the people want the schools- they have shown that they want them, by sending their children to them- and by sending their children, they have helped to prove that the schools may be established and maintained."⁴ Just a few years later a local official pleaded with the legislature, "the system is defective- well, a rich field for your talents, a profound subject

³ Ibid., 4.

⁴ Ibid., 1848, 13.

for your investigation. Improve, pray, don't destroy. When we cannot ride in a carriage, we ride on horseback; if we have no horse, let us walk; but because we walk lame, for God's sake don't cut off our legs!"⁵ By the end of the antebellum period, residents revealed not only disillusionment with the inaction of the legislature in regard to public education, but also discontent. As a Catahoula official explained to the legislature, "there is general dissatisfaction with our present public school system, and a large majority of the citizens of this parish would much prefer to see the same entirely abolished."⁶ The legislature continued to ignore the pleas and complaints from constituents in regard to public education, leaving Louisiana with one of the most prosperous public school systems in New Orleans, as well as one of the most disappointing systems in the rest of the state.

⁵ Ibid., 1851, 13.

⁶ Ibid., 1858, 68; see also *ibid.*, 1856, 21; *ibid.*, 1851, 27.

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