

# History of Madison Public Schools: The Early Years

**H**appy 150th birthday Madison Public Schools! From a borrowed room in a citizen's log cabin, to a district of 40 schools and a national reputation for excellence, Madison public education has endured changes in land development, public opinion, funding, local, state, national and world politics, fluctuating enrollments and educational trends.

## Madison — From Marshland to Capital

Before 1836, Wisconsin was part of the Michigan Territory. When Wisconsin became a separate territory in 1836, Henry Dodge was Governor. He held the first meeting of the Legislature in Belmont. One of the first issues to be determined was where to build a capital. Several cities, such as Mineral Point, Milwaukee and Fond du Lac were considered. So how did non-existent Madison get into the running? James Doty, lawyer and politician, along with the Governor of Michigan had purchased 1261 acres of land, had it surveyed and presented the idea of an isthmus city called "Madison", named after President James Madison. Doty proceeded to encourage legislators to choose this non-existent city. Historical reports indicate he distributed warm buffalo robes to legislators who were bunking in cold quarters in Belmont, and promised prime town lots in the new capital. These tactics, along with legislative rivalries and feuds, made Madison a viable compromise.

## CREDITS

The MADISON METROPOLITAN SCHOOL DISTRICT - IN PROFILE is an annual publication informing parents and the community about the District. This eighth edition of IN PROFILE highlights the 1987-88 school year and presents plans for 1988-89.

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Doty was not only responsible for making a non-existent city a territorial capital, but he was also responsible for persuading Blue Mound residents Eben and Rosaline Peck to move to an uninhabited marshland and become the first citizens of Madison. The Pecks realized that the workers building the capitol would need food and entertainment, as would the legislators who would arrive later. They established Pecks Tavern, which was the first inhabited building in Madison and was located on what is now South Butler Street. The tavern was the settlement's center of social life for years. One year later, in 1838, the capitol was close to completion, and Madison had 62 residents and a dozen homes.



Louisa Brayton Sawin  
At Age 69

Wisconsin Historical Society

## Public Education Has Humble Beginning

Public education began in March of 1838, when approximately one dozen students met in the front room of a log cabin home, located on the corner of what is now King and Doty Streets. Their twenty-two year old teacher, Louisa Brayton, earned \$2.00 per week, half of which she had to spend for board. The children sat on wood slab benches, and, with a chair for the teacher, the classroom was considered equipped. The first school term lasted for three months, ending in May 1838.

## The First School

In 1839, Madison's first regular school house was acquired. Located near the corner of East Johnson and Pinckney Streets, the 20' x 18' frame building was in a thicket, accessible only by foot paths. It cost \$70.00, which was raised by private contributions and included crude benches and desks. Enrollment rose to approximately 50 children by 1844, so a mezzanine was added over the front entrance to provide additional space.

In 1845, funded by a new county school tax, a \$1200 brick building was constructed on the corner of Washington and Butler Streets. Sixty students enrolled in the two-room school, but one year later, attendance grew to 100 pupils and once again overcrowding occurred.

## Madison's Growth Produces a Classroom Space Problem

Madison had grown rapidly, beginning as a village in 1846 and receiving city status ten years later in 1856. The school-age population consisted of 1,602 children, yet only 450 attended public schools and 150 attended private schools. That left 1,000 children who were not receiving any formal instruction. There were

problems of irregular attendance and "habitual tardiness" by the students, and teachers were underpaid or not paid at all if village finances were low. The 450 public school children were squeezed into the brick schoolhouse, churches and a carriage factory. With only three or four teachers, the student-teacher ratio was 125:1.

Public concern was growing — Madison had churches, a courthouse, shops, saloons, and a jail — but no common school building large enough to accommodate the fledgling city's youth. This lack of educational facility was viewed as a serious detriment to the future growth of the town. However, too many residents still considered education a frill when approached with the possibility of higher taxes. The result was a scarcity of funds for schools.

## The First Superintendent

The period of "do nothing for education" came to an end with the arrival of twenty-seven year old Damon Kilgore. A native of Massachusetts, Kilgore moved to Madison with his family in April 1854. He had taught in some of the better New England schools.

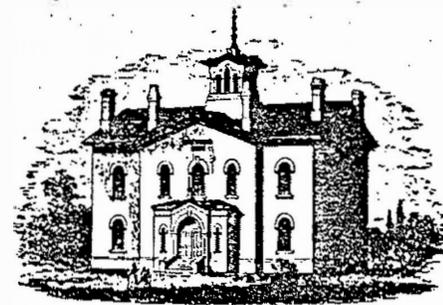
Kilgore was shocked at the low percentage of Madison children attending school and the facilities available for those who did attend. By coincidence, he boarded in a house with the chairman of both the Assembly and Senate committees on education. Kilgore managed to get the legislature to pass a bill creating the Madison Board of Education, and he was soon appointed the first Superintendent of Schools.

## Kilgore Pushes for Improvements (parental involvement, teacher "inservices")

The energetic young superintendent was determined to sell Madison residents on education. He held weekly meetings and led discussions, read essays, gave lectures on school topics, pleaded with parents to visit the school, and credited teachers with having the most responsible job in the world. Discovering that many parents were not particularly interested in their children's education, he brought Horace Mann, "the champion of the public schools," to Madison for a lively lecture on the evils of ignorance. According to Mann, "education is the only remedy against corrupt government."

Kilgore held parents responsible for attendance irregularities and tardiness and criticized the Madison elite for their preference for private schools. He strongly believed in mixing rich and poor, male and female, and representation of various religions and backgrounds.

Every Saturday morning he met with his teachers to improve their instructional methods. Almost all teachers were female, whom Kilgore said were "the only natural and proper educators of the young."



Second Ward School

Wisconsin Historical Society

**Disappointments — and Accomplishments**

Madison desperately needed school buildings, but the governing Board was reluctant to appropriate money. Kilgore ordered modern school desks, but was told by prominent citizens that desks were an extravagance, and wood slabs were good enough. He proposed the addition of four schoolhouses, but only two were begun. School teacher salaries were reduced due to low funds in 1857-58, and the teachers who boarded in Kilgore's home could not pay their rent. This made it impossible for Kilgore to make his mortgage payments, and he, therefore lost his home.

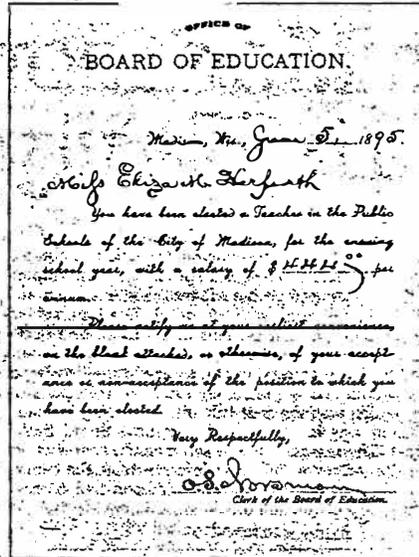
Kilgore kept pushing for more school buildings — and finally succeeded. In 1858, the Board of Education purchased a bankrupt private school on the corner of Wisconsin Avenue and Johnson Street. This building eventually became Madison's Central High School. Damon Kilgore left Madison in 1860 after six frustrating years. In those years, he accomplished the creation of two new elementary schools, a city high school, a graded school system, a staff of trained teachers, and growing support for public education from Madison citizens.

**A "Pause" in Educational Progress — and then Growth**

The Civil War period was not a good one for Madison schools. Superintendents came and went, schools continued to be crowded, and sometimes were even periodically closed for lack of funds.

After the Civil War, public schools began to flourish with stronger financial commitments. Three combination elementary-middle schools were built in the years 1866-70. One of the schools, the Second Ward School, built in 1867, was an architectural delight with cream-colored brick, a tower with a 600-pound bell, Italianate style, and an indoor toilet that could be flushed with cistern water, the newest concept in indoor plumbing. Madisonians had begun to take pride in their public schools and were dissatisfied with high school students still being taught in an older building school, so a new one was built in 1873 at the cost of \$25,000.

By 1876, liberal financial funding resulted in improvements such as: student teacher ratios of 45:1, the addition of art, music and penmanship to the curriculum, increased teacher salaries, and the replacement of slates with pencils and paper.



Teacher Contract from 1895

During 1880-1900, the number of children attending public schools increased by 150 percent. Several schools and school additions were built during this period, and public pride and support for education continued. In 1895, Superintendent R. B. Dudgeon stated in an annual report to the School Board that while the national average of school-age children enrolled in high school was 1 in 53, Madison was 1 in 6.

**At the Turn of the Century, Women's Groups Take on School Improvements**

Starting in 1900, Madison women's groups dedicated themselves to a movement called "modern civic agenda", which brought about a list of improvements during 1900-1920. Some of these improvements included: expansion of kindergarten, starting the PTA movement, annual physical examinations for Madison

students, in-school hot-lunch program, manual and domestic arts programs, cultural-historical names for public school buildings, campaign for Central High School bond referendum (new building completed in 1908), funding the first children's library, free dental clinic for school children, and money raised for playground equipment and adult supervisors.

Eleven new elementary schools and one high school were built during 1900-1920. In 1917, a law was passed by the Wisconsin Legislature making student attendance mandatory. Subsequently, the first truant officer was hired that same year.

**World War I Touches Madison Schools**

Public hysteria and prejudice due to World War I became apparent when a German-born school board member was harshly criticized for his objections to a high school teacher who asked his students to express loyalty to President Wilson and the war effort by standing and reciting the pledge of allegiance to the flag. The board member was defeated in his attempt to retain his board seat in the following election.

Patriotic, loyalty groups also objected to the public schools' instruction of German, the "foe tongue." German was then eliminated at the elementary level, and classes were reduced at the high school.

**The Madison Metropolitan School District Today**

According to one author-researcher, 1920 marked the end of Madison's "formative years". Today the MMSD has a population of over 21,000 students who benefit from a legacy left from citizens who had the foresight to push for educational progress. This edition of IN-PROFILE offers summaries of current issues and programs in today's District.

*The following references were used in the development of The History of Madison Public Schools: The Early Years.*

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# The Classroom Space Crunch

Consumer prices fluctuate, the Dow Jones average rises and falls, political opinion poll percentages shift — and so do birth rates. The baby boom of the 1980's has created an overcrowding problem in Madison elementary schools that has citizen committees, board members, school district officials and city planners all studying possible solutions along with budget considerations. In addition to more children, increased instructional programming, smaller class sizes, four-year old programming, and full-day kindergarten programs also require additional rooms.

During 1987-88, two citizen committees were formed with representatives from each MMSD school.



These citizen committees, working within assumptions established by the Board of Education, generated and analyzed many proposals in looking at the classroom space crunch: re-opening previously closed schools, expanding existing schools, shifting students to other locations by making boundary changes. All the proposals were researched to determine the impact any changes would have on the students and community. Such factors include: individual class size, number of at-risk students enrolled, neighborhood solidarity, transportation, minority ratio/balance, feasibility of remodeling existing buildings and monetary cost.

At the close of the 1987-88 school year, the following proposals had been approved by the school board:

1. Transferring 100 students from the Allied Drive area from Orchard Ridge Elementary to Thoreau Elementary.
2. Remodeling Thoreau Elementary to accommodate the additional students.
3. Transferring about 50 Allis Elementary students from Wedgwood subdivision to Kennedy Elementary and about 14 from Dondee, Tarragon and Buckeye Woods subdivisions to Elvehjem Elementary.
4. Making internal changes (adding partitions) at Lowell, Glendale and Randall elementary schools.
5. Arranging for rooms to be re-opened in the closed Hoyt Elementary for five early childhood

