

**THE DEVELOPMENT OF FREE SCHOOLS  
IN THE UNITED STATES AS ILLUSTRATED  
BY CONNECTICUT  
AND MICHIGAN. TEACHERS COLLEGE,  
COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY CONTRIBUTION  
TO EDUCATION, NO. 91**

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The Development of Free Schools in the United States as Illustrated by Connecticut and Michigan. Teachers College, Columbia University Contribution to Education, No. 91 by Arthur Raymond Mead

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**ARTHUR RAYMOND MEAD**

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ARTHUR RAYMOND MEAD, Ph.D.

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1918



DEDICATED  
TO THE  
FREE PUBLIC SCHOOLS  
OF AMERICA

## INTRODUCTION

The typical public school of the United States is a free school. It is free in that it charges no tuition fees to resident pupils. However, it is a matter of common knowledge that in an earlier period tuition was one of the means of school support. This was certainly true of all states east of the Mississippi River, except Maine and Wisconsin, and actually if not legally may have been true of them also. A few states west of the Mississippi used tuition as a means of school support. Striking examples are Iowa, California, and Texas.

As one reviews the educational legislation of the different states, it becomes evident that in the period of 1840-1870 many laws were enacted having as their aim the attainment of schools free from tuition as a means of support. It is also evident that from an early period, children of the poor were not required to pay such fees. To make schools free meant to exempt all children from such charges, and to support the schools entirely by other means, largely by taxation upon property. Laws which aimed to secure this condition were enacted in certain states, as follows: Delaware, 1829; Pennsylvania, 1834, 1848, 1868; Louisiana, 1847; Indiana, 1852; Ohio, 1853; Texas, 1854; Iowa, 1858; West Virginia, 1863; Vermont, 1864; New York and California, 1867; Michigan, 1869; Connecticut, 1868-1870, and New Jersey, 1871. In some cases, the laws left the matter entirely to local option, as for example the law of 1834 in Pennsylvania. In others, no local choice was given. It is also probable that much of the earlier legislation of this type was largely unrealized in actual practice, but the later laws were backed by sufficient sentiment and finances to make the schools practically free.

This development of free schools in the last century consisted not only of changes in the schools themselves, but also of changes in public opinion about the function, the organization, and the administration of the public school. Since our schools depend upon public opinion, the investigation of this evolution to ascertain its causes, tendencies, and results, may help us to understand better the present problems of education in our democracy.



The task of studying intensively this movement in all states concerned is so enormous in extent that it was found impossible of accomplishment except by years of research and study. After a brief preliminary survey of the general movement, it was found desirable to select one or more states and study their history to ascertain how they illustrate this educational evolution. It was thought desirable, also, that the states selected should have a population very largely of the same origin; that at least one of the states should illustrate this development from colonial times; and that the vexing problems involved in religious and sectarian controversies about the public schools should not be present to such a degree as to unduly complicate and obscure the main issues. The two states of Connecticut and Michigan met these conditions, and they were selected for study.

Certain terms used in this study need definition. Tuition, rate-bill, pauper school and poor school, rate-bill school, rate, and free school, are terms which may be confused. Tuition meant the same as it does to-day, money paid by parents, or guardians, of pupils for schooling. Rate-bill was a term used somewhat carelessly, but usually meant a tuition bill with the added feature that if the parents of children were indigent, such parents would be exempted from payment of the tuition fees. This bill was levied upon and collected directly from individuals, but could be collected, if necessary, by seizure and sale of property. Like tuition, a rate-bill was usually charged in proportion to the number of children in attendance and the total number of days of school attended. Pauper school and poor school originally meant schools attended only by children of the poor. In time, these terms came to be applied to a public school using rate-bills as a means of support, if the attendance was composed largely of children unable to attend private schools. A rate-bill school was a public school using rate-bills as a means of support. A rate, in contrast with a rate-bill, was what we call a property tax. A free school was one supported entirely without tuition, or rate-bills. It might be public or private, and might be supported by an endowment, or by taxation and other means of public support. As used in this study, it means a public school supported entirely by taxation and other means of public maintenance.

The sources from which the material for this study has been

drawn are indicated in the Appendices. The chief sources are reports of the state departments of education, school laws, and educational journals. The writer is under obligation to Bryson Library of Teachers College, Hartford Public Library, Library of the University of Michigan, and the United States Bureau of Education for facilities furnished. His chief obligation is to Dr. Paul Monroe, who suggested the study and who has given much help in directing it.

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