

**THE FINANCE COMMISSION  
OF THE CITY OF BOSTON: A  
CHRONOLOGY OF THE  
BOSTON PUBLIC SCHOOLS**

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649198870

The finance commission of the City of Boston: A chronology of the Boston public schools by  
Various

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# THE FINANCE COMMISSION

OF THE

## CITY OF BOSTON

A CHRONOLOGY OF THE BOSTON PUBLIC SCHOOLS



CITY OF BOSTON  
PRINTING DEPARTMENT  
1912

11. C.

UNIVERSITY OF  
BOSTON

## NOTE.

This chronology originally was prepared for the Boston Finance Commission by George A. O. Ernst to assist in the preparation by the commission of its report upon the Boston Public Schools.

It contains a reference to all statutes, whether general or special, which affect the Boston schools; and to a variety of matters which show how the schools have developed. It goes into greater detail as to the work of the last six years than as to that of the early years because the present situation in the schools is the real purpose of the study, and the past is chiefly of value as it explains the present. Enough, however, is given to show the line of growth and the fact that there is hardly one of the great accomplishments of the present which has not proved its worth through a long persistent struggle.

Thus the unification of the school system, foreshadowed in 1830 by Chief Justice Shaw in his attempt to do away with the grotesque "double headed system"; urged by Horace Mann soon after the establishment of the State Board of Education in 1837; bitterly resisted for many years by members of the School Committee, of the Primary School Committee and of the teaching force, is now almost universally accepted, and even its critics would be unwilling to go back to the old days of decentralization.

Many subjects opposed at first as fads, frills and fancies have through their worth obtained permanent places in the school system. Drawing, "permitted" in 1827, an "ornamental branch" in 1848, "compulsory" in 1870, is the foundation stone of our industrial schools. Sewing was taught as early as 1818, but in 1876 an opinion was obtained from the City Solicitor that spending the city's money for the purpose was illegal.

It, however, met such a popular need that it was at once legalized by the Legislature. Physical training, first recognized officially in 1833, has had to fight its way to full recognition, and in some of its forms is still regarded as a "fad" or "frill."

The much discussed change from nine to eight grades in the elementary schools has sometimes been said to have been imported from a western city together with the present superintendent. As a matter of fact it had been favorably considered much earlier. In 1894 the experiment of parallel courses of seven and nine years (four and six years in the grammar schools) was tried. In 1900, two years before the present superintendent came to Boston as a supervisor, the School Committee, after a careful report and upon the favorable recommendation of the Board of Supervisors, instructed that Board to prepare a revised course of study providing for eight grades instead of nine. It was, however, not adopted until 1906.

The great wrong to teachers and pupils of excessively large classes has long been felt. In 1880 (when the standard class was 56) it was pointed out that there were sometimes 70 pupils in a class, and the duty of the School Committee to reduce the number was forcibly urged; but not until 1900 (a delay of 20 years) was the standard reduced from 56 to 50. In 1906 this vital problem was taken up seriously, and the quota of pupils to teachers has since been steadily reduced to 44, and there are plans for a further reduction.

These are typical instances of what may be found in the chronology, and show the purpose for which it was made, and the manner in which it is to be used.

## A CHRONOLOGY OF THE BOSTON PUBLIC SCHOOLS.

*Abbreviations:* W. A.—Wightman's Annals of the Primary Schools.  
S. D.—School Document. S. M.—School Minutes.

- 1635.—Latin School, for boys only, established as the first public school in Boston. This was a year before the foundation of Harvard College and more than three years before that institution was opened. (S. D. 3 of 1905, p. 56.) It is probable that the elementary as well as the higher branches of education were taught, but its main purpose soon became the fitting of young men for college. (W. A., p. 1; S. D. 18 of 1888, p. 52; S. D. 3 of 1903, p. 9.)
- 1641.—The town voted that "Deare Island shall be improved for the maintainance of a Free Schoole for the Towne" and in 1649 Long and Spectacle Islands were leased, the rental to be for the use of the school. (W. A., p. 2.)
- 1642.—Selectmen required by law to "have a vigilant eye over their brethren and neighbors; to see that none of them shall suffer so much barbarism in any of their families as not to endeavor to teach their children and apprentices so much learning as may enable them perfectly to read the English tongue and obtain a knowledge of the capital laws." (Laws and Liberties, p. 16; S. D. 25 of 1880, p. 3.)
- 1647.—Every township of 50 householders required to appoint a teacher of children "to write and read," and of 100 householders to "set up a grammar schoole the master thereof being able to instruct youth so farr as they may be fitted for the university." (S. D. 25 of 1880, p. 4.)
- 1682.—Schools established under vote at town meeting held December 18, 1682, "for the teachinge of children to write and Cypher" under writing masters (S. D. 18 of 1888, p. 34), open to boys only; "the beginning of the common schools in Boston." (S. D. 3 of 1903, p. 14.)
- 1683.—Every town of 500 families or householders required to "set up and maintain two grammar schools and two writing schools." (Colonial Laws, p. 305.)
- 1692.—Province Laws require towns of 50 householders to provide "a schoolmaster to teach children and youth to read and write," and of 100 householders a grammar school to be conducted by a "discreet person of good conversation well instructed in the tongues." (Prov. Laws, 1692-93, Chap. 26.)
- 1701.—Grammar masters to be approved by ministers by certificate under their hands. (Prov. Laws 1701-2, Chap. 10.)



- 1740.— Grammar masters as distinguished from writing masters appointed in Boston to teach reading, grammar, geography and other higher studies, beginning the "double-headed system" of divided authority between writing masters and grammar masters. The children in each school were divided into two parts, the one attending in the forenoon in the grammar master's room, which was usually upstairs, and in the afternoon in the writing master's room, which was usually downstairs; while the other part attended in the reverse order. (S. D. 3 of 1903, p. 15.)
- 1751.— A committee reported to the town that "the charge of supporting the several Publick Schools amounted the last year to more than one-third part of the whole sum drawn for by the selectmen." (S. D. 18 of 1888, p. 37.)
- 1762.— The town voted that the treasurer be directed to borrow 1,500 pounds for the payment of the schoolmasters' salaries then due (S. D. 18 of 1888, p. 38), an early instance of the payment of current expenses from loans.
- 1789.— Every town or district of 50, 100 or 150 householders required to provide schoolmasters of good morals for varying school terms "to teach children to read & write & to instruct them in the english language as well as in arithmetic, orthography and decent behavior," and of 200 families or householders to provide "a grammar schoolmaster of good morals well instructed in the latin, greek and english languages," no youth to be sent to such schools, without permission from the Selectmen, "unless they shall have learned in some other school or in some other way to read the english language by spelling the same." (Acts of 1789, Chap. 19.)  
School Committee chosen, consisting of Selectmen and one member from each ward. (W. A., p. 7; S. D. 18 of 1888, p. 7.)
- Girls first admitted to the Boston public schools, but only from 20th April to 20th October in each year. "This was doubtless because many of the boys had work to do in the summer season, and so left room in the schools for the girls." (S. D. 3 of 1903, p. 14.) There was a thorough reorganization of the school system; the age limit of admission to the reading and writing schools was fixed at seven, pupils to be allowed to continue until the age of fourteen. (S. D. 18 of 1888, p. 39.)
- 1793.— Franklin medals to boys only first awarded, though dated 1792. (W. A., p. 8.)
- 1812.— Appropriation "towards maintaining a school for African children." Prior to this time, colored children who so desired attended white schools. (City Doc. 23 of 1846, p. 15.)
- 1816.— Sunday schools (private) first established in Boston, the object being to teach children to read and write as well as to give religious instruction. This brought out the fact that a large proportion of children could neither read nor write, and to them therefore under the law of 1789, quoted above, the doors of the

public schools were shut. This was one of the causes which led to the establishment of primary schools. (W. A., p. 12; S. D. 18 of 1888, p. 13.)

1818.—Primary schools first established in Boston although opposed by the Selectmen and School Committee (W. A., p. 35), for children between four and seven years of age under a Primary School Committee of 36 members appointed by, but with authority independent of, the regular School Committee (W. A., p. 72); the origin of the distinction long recognized between primary and grammar schools (S. D. 3 of 1902, p. 45) which was not until 1906 wholly abandoned. (S. D. 9 of 1906, p. 28.) In these schools the girls were taught knitting or sewing. (W. A., p. 44.)

1820.—First "intermediate school" established for illiterate children over seven years of age, who were too old to be admitted to the primary schools, and under the law of 1789, because of their illiteracy, could not be admitted to the grammar schools. Investigation showed that there were a large number of such children. (W. A., p. 53.)

1821.—English Classical (now High) School established for boys who were to be prepared not for the university but for various mercantile and mechanical pursuits. In later years it has become important as a fitting school for the higher institutions, like the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and Harvard College. (S. D. 3 of 1903, pp. 39, 42.)

City medals for girls instituted as an offset to the Franklin medals for boys; abolished in 1847; restored in 1848; but finally given up, and diplomas substituted. (S. D. 18 of 1888, p. 42.)

1822.—Under the city charter a school committee established consisting of the Mayor, aldermen and one member elected from each ward, 25 members in all. (Acts of 1821, Chap. 110.)

1826.—High School for Girls established, but the number of girls applying was so great that it was given up in 1828; in other words, it was too successful. (S. D. 18 of 1888, p. 47; S. D. 3 of 1903, p. 43.)

Text-books required by law to be furnished to pupils "at such prices as merely to reimburse to the town the expense of procuring the same"; free to those unable to pay. Teachers must obtain from School Committee a certificate of fitness to instruct. (Acts of 1825-26, Chap. 170.)

1827.—In addition to studies previously required, towns of 500 families required to provide a master competent to teach history of the United States, book-keeping by single entry, geometry, surveying and algebra, and where there were 4,000 inhabitants general history, rhetoric and logic. No books to be used or purchased "calculated to favor any particular religious sect or tenet." Provision as to teachers' certificate of qualifications. (Acts of 1826-27, Chap. 143.)

- 1827.— Drawing introduced as a "permitted" subject in the English High School. (S. D. 3 of 1903, p. 97.)
- 1828.— High School for Girls discontinued, but girls admitted to grammar and writing schools throughout the year. (S. D. 18 of 1888, p. 48.)
- 1830.— "Infant Schools," forerunners of the kindergarten, having been established by private societies and individuals, were considered adversely by the Primary School Committee. (W. A., p. 123; S. D. 3 of 1903, p. 30.)  
 Chief Justice Shaw, then a member of the School Committee, attacked the "double-headed system" and urged the "single-headed system" (the supremacy of the grammar masters), but without immediate effect, the change (although tried in 1836 in two schools) not being permanently adopted until 1847. "With all the sound arguments of reason and experience on its side, a campaign of no less than seventeen years was necessary to bring its merit into general recognition. Like many another school reform it was seen to be inimical to what the school-masters (*i. e.*, the writing masters) were pleased to regard as their vested rights and interests." (S. D. 3 of 1903, p. 16.)  
 Chief Justice Shaw also advocated, but more successfully, the education of the sexes in separate school buildings. This is the origin of separate schools in the older parts of Boston. (S. D. 3 of 1903, p. 18.)  
 Attempt to introduce music as a regular study in the public schools. (S. D. 15 of 1888, p. 3.)
- 1833.— Interesting exhibition of conservatism in resisting introduction into the primary schools of books, maps, globes, or anything outside the established curriculum, the Board refusing not on sanitary grounds but from pure conservatism a request of a member to introduce experimentally at his own expense a black-board, slates and pencils. (W. A., p. 136 *et seq.*) Public sentiment was strongly in favor of the innovations and the Board later provided slates and pencils. (W. A., p. 149.) Black-boards were also subsequently provided, and there was a gradual increase in educational helps. (S. D. 3 of 1903, p. 30.)  
 First official action as to physical education in primary schools. (S. D. 22 of 1891, p. 26; W. A., p. 149.)  
 Children over eight years of age admitted into the grammar schools, although not qualified by their attainments, provided their parents or guardians obtained permission of the sub-committee in charge. (W. A., p. 148.)
- 1834.— Act reorganizing School Committee to consist of Mayor and twenty members elected at large, ten each year for two years (Acts of 1834, Chap. 158), not accepted by the people.
- 1835.— School Committee reorganized, to consist of Mayor, president of Common Council, and two members elected from each ward, 26 members in all. (Acts of 1835, Chap. 128.)