

Archibald Murphey proposes a system of public education

COMMENTARY AND SIDEBAR NOTES BY L. MAREN WOOD

Report of Archibald Murphey to the North Carolina Senate, November 27, 1817.
Reprinted in Charles L. Coon, *The Beginnings of Public Education in North Carolina; A Documentary History, 1790–1840*, Volume I (Raleigh: Edwards & Broughton, 1908), pp. 128–144.

As you read...

A SYSTEM OF PUBLIC EDUCATION

For the first part of the nineteenth century, the North Carolina legislature did not officially consider the subject of public education. Various governors urged the legislature to take up the issue, but with no success.

In 1815 a joint committee on education was formed, with members of the two houses of the General Assembly. That committee, led by Senator Archibald Murphey of Orange County, produced two reports, in 1816 and 1817. The second report laid out a complete plan for public education. A statewide commission would oversee the schools. Schools would be built and teachers paid with a combination of state and local funds. Three levels were proposed: primary schools, like present-day elementary schools; academies, like today's middle or high schools; and the University of North Carolina.

Soon after the committee read its report, on December 16, 1817, Murphey introduced a bill to put his recommendations into effect. The bill passed its first reading in each house of the Assembly, but a bill had to pass three readings to become law, and it never received another reading. It would be twenty-three years before North Carolina would have a system of free public education.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

- What were the main subjects Murphey thought should be taught at each level?
- What did he believe was the purpose of an education? Consider both his arguments at the end of the report and the curriculum he outlines.
- Why did he believe it was important for the state to make education available to everyone?

The organization of schools.

In arranging the system of schools, your committee have endeavored to make the progress of education natural and regular; beginning with primary schools, in which the first rudiments of learning are taught, and proceeding to academies, in which youth are to be instructed in languages, ancient and modern history, mathematics and other branches of science, preparatory to entering into the University, in which instruction is to be given in all the higher branches of the sciences and the principles of the useful arts....

THE PRIMARY SCHOOLS.

1. That each county in this State be divided into two or more townships; and that one or more primary schools be established in each township, provided a lot of ground not less than four acres and a sufficient house erected thereon, be provided and vested¹ in the board of public instruction. And that every incorporated town in the State containing more than one hundred families, shall be divided into wards. Such town containing less than one hundred families shall be considered as forming only one ward. Each ward upon conveying to the board of public instruction a lot of ground of the value of two hundred and fifty dollars, shall be entitled to the benefits and privileges of a primary school.
2. The Court of Pleas and Quarter sessions² shall annually elect for each township in their respective counties, five persons as trustees of the primary schools to be established in such county, who shall have power to fix the scites of the primary schools to be established thereon, superintend and manage the same, make rules for their government, appoint trustees, appoint teachers, and remove them at pleasure. They shall select such children residing in their township, whose parents are unable to pay for their schooling, who shall be taught at the said schools for three years without charge. They shall report to the board of public instruction, the rules which they may adopt for the government of said schools, and shall annually report to the said board the state of the schools, the number and conduct of the pupils educated at the public expense, such books, stationery and other implements for learning, as may be necessary....
4. The teacher of each primary school shall receive a salary of one hundred dollars, to be paid out of the fund for public instruction.

This plan for establishing primary schools is simple, and can easily be carried into execution. It divides the expenses of these schools between the public and those individuals for whose immediate benefit they are established; it secures a regular stipend to the teachers, and yet holds out inducements to them to be active and faithful in their calling; and it enables every neighborhood, whether the number of its inhabitants be few or many, to have a primary school, at the cheap price of a small lot of ground, and a house erected thereon, sufficient for the purpose of the school. Were these schools in full operation in every section of the State, even in the present state of our population, more than fifteen thousand children would annually be taught in them. These schools would be to the rich a convenience, and to the poor, a blessing.

ACADEMIES.

After children shall have gone through the course of studies prescribed for the primary schools, those of them who are to be further advanced in education, will be placed in the Academies, where they will be instructed in languages, ancient and modern history, mathematics and other branches of science preparatory to their entering into the University. The Academies shall be located in different districts of the State for the convenience of the people, and the expenses of purchasing suitable sites and erecting thereon the necessary buildings, shall be divided between the public at large and the several districts. Private liberality has of late erected many small Academies in the State, which deserve the consideration and patronage of the Legislature. From the benefits which have accrued to the public from these small Academies, we may form an opinion of the good which would flow from larger institutions of the same sort, if regularly located throughout the State, and aided with suitable funds. The state of learning among us will never become respectable until we have such regular Academical institutions....

[The committee's] plan simply is, to divide the State into ten academical districts, and that one academy be erected in each; that the State shall advance one-third of the sum required for the erection of necessary buildings, and one-third of the sum to be paid in salaries to professors and teachers, making it their duty to teach poor children free of charge.

The course of study.

1. In the primary schools should be taught reading, writing and arithmetic. A judicious selection of books should from time to time be made by the board of public instruction for the use of small children; books which shall excite their curiosity and improve their moral dispositions. And the board should be empowered to compile and have printed for the use of primary schools, such books as they may think will best subserve the purposes of intellectual and moral instruction. In these books should be contained many of the historical parts of the old and new testament, that children may early be made acquainted with the books which contains the word of truth, and the doctrines of eternal life.
2. In the academies should be taught the Latin, Greek, French and English languages, the higher rules of arithmetic, the six first books of Euclid's elements³, Algebra, Geography, the elements of Astronomy, taught with the use of the Globes, ancient and modern history. The basis of a good education is classical and mathematical knowledge; and no young man ought to be admitted into the university⁴ without such knowledge.

The discipline and government of the schools.

In a republic, the first duty of a citizen is obedience to the law. We acknowledge no sovereign but the law⁵, and from infancy to manhood our children should be taught to bow with reverence to its majesty. In childhood parental authority enforces the first lesson of

obedience; in youth this authority is aided by the municipal law which in manhood wields the entire supremacy. As the political power and the social happiness of a state depend upon the obedience of its citizens, it becomes an object of the first importance to teach youth to reverence the law, and cherish habits of implicit obedience to its authority. Such obedience not only contributes to the strength and tranquility of the state, but also constitutes the basis of good manners, of deference and respect in social intercourse. But in our country, youth generally become acquainted with the freedom of our political institutions, much sooner than with the principles upon which that freedom is bottomed⁶, and by which it is to be preserved; and few learn until experience teaches them in the school of practical life, that true liberty consists not in doing what they please, but in doing that which the law permits. The consequence has been, that riot and disorder have dishonored almost all the colleges and Universities of the Union.

The temples of science have been converted into theatres for acting disgraceful scenes of licentiousness and rebellion. How often has the generous patriot shed tears of regret for such criminal follies of youth? Follies which cast reproach upon learning and bring scandal upon the State. This evil can only be corrected by the moral effects of early education; by instilling into children upon the first dawns of reason, the principles of duty, and by nurturing those principles as reason advances, until obedience to authority shall become a habit of their nature. When this course shall be found ineffectual the arm of the civil power must be stretched forth to its aid.⁷

The discipline of a University may be much aided by the arrangement of the buildings, and the location of the different classes⁸. Each class should live together in separate buildings, and each to be under the special care of its own professors and teachers. A regular system of subordination may in this way be established; each class would have its own character to maintain, and the *Esprit de Corps*⁹ of the classes would influence all their actions. Similar arrangements may in part, be made in the several academies, and the like good effect expected from them.

The amusements of youth may also be made auxiliary to the exactness of discipline. The late president of the United States, Mr. Jefferson, has recommended upon this part of the subject, that through the whole course of instruction at a college or university, at the hours of recreation on certain days, all the students should be taught the manual exercise¹⁰, military evolutions and manoeuvres, should be under a standing organization as a military corps, and with proper officers to train and command them. There can be no doubt that much may be done in this way towards enforcing habits of subordination and strict discipline--it will be the province of the board of public instruction, who have the general superintending care of all the literary institutions of the state, to devise for them systems of discipline and government; and your committee hope that they will discharge their duty with fidelity.

The education of poor children at the public expense.

One of the strongest reasons which we can have for establishing a general plan of public instruction, is the condition of the poor children of our country. Such has always been and

probably always will be the allotment of human life, that the poor will form a large portion of every community; and it is the duty of those who manage the affairs of a state, to extend relief to this unfortunate part of our species in every way in their power.

Providence, in the impartial distribution of its favors, whilst it has denied to the poor many of the comforts of life, has generally bestowed upon them the blessing of intelligent children. Poverty is the school of genius; it is a school in which the active powers of man are developed and disciplined, and in which that moral courage has acquired, which enables him to toil with difficulties, privations and want. From this school generally come forth those men who act the principal parts upon the theatre of life; men who impress a character upon the age in which forms grows up in it. The State should take this school under her special care¹¹, and nurturing the genius which there grows in rich luxuriance, give to it an honorable and profitable direction. Poor children are the peculiar property of the State, and by proper cultivation¹² they will constitute a fund of intellectual and moral worth which will greatly subserve the public interest. Your committee have therefore endeavored to provide for the education of all poor children in the primary schools; they have also provided for the advancement into the academies and university, of such of those children as are most distinguished for genius and give the best assurance of future usefulness. For three years they are to be educated in the primary schools free of charge; the portion of them who shall be selected for further advancement, shall, during the whole course of their future education, be clothed, fed and taught at the public expense. The number of children who are to be thus advanced, will depend upon the state of the fund set apart for public instruction, and your committee think it will be most advisable to leave the number to the discretion of the board, who shall have charge of the fund; and also to leave to them the providing of some just and particular mode of advancing this number from the primary schools to the academies, and from the academies to the university.

On the web

Education and literacy in Edgecombe County, 1810

<http://www.learnnc.org/lp/pages/4345>

In this 1810 letter, Jeremiah Battle of Edgecombe County describes the lack of education in eastern North Carolina and the consequences for society and politics. Includes historical commentary.

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Notes

1. *Vested* means having ownership. The school board will be given the property to own and manage. It won't belong to the town or to individual people, but to the community.
2. The Court of Pleas and Quarter Sessions met at least four times a year (so, "quarter sessions") in each county in North Carolina. These courts heard trials that had to be determined by a jury,

such as assault cases, robbery, and rape. Under Murphey's plan, the justices of the peace who over saw these court proceedings would choose the Board of Trustees.

3. Euclid, a Greek mathematician, lived about 300 BCE. His *Elements* was a textbook on mathematics, especially geometry, that was a standard textbook for more than two thousand years. Even today, high school geometry is based mainly on Euclid's work.
4. Only white men could attend the University of North Carolina. Later in the nineteenth century, women's colleges and colleges for African Americans would be established. The first women were admitted to UNC in 1897, but even then, for several decades, it was much harder for women to gain admittance than it was for men. African American students were not permitted to attend UNC until 1951.
5. A *sovereign* was a supreme ruler, such as a king. Murphey was celebrating the fact that the United States was a republic, a nation ruled by law and not by a monarch. There were not many examples in history of successful republics, and so American leaders worried about how long a Republic could last. They believed that a republic could only be as strong as its citizens, which was one reason why education was so important.

Here, Murphey is saying that children must be taught respect for the law and obedience to it. Later in this paragraph he argues, more generally, that children must also learn the responsibility that comes with their freedom.

6. Grounded or founded.
7. If people are educated but still choose to break the law, then they must be subject to the justice system.
8. A *class* was all the students who were admitted in the same year (just as in present-day high schools and colleges).
9. A Latin phrase meaning "spirit of the group." When *esprit de corps* is present, each individual person will care about the reputation and honor of the group to which he or she belongs.
10. Military drills
11. The state should look after the poor.
12. Here, *cultivation* means improvement or development.

About the author

L. MAREN WOOD

Maren Wood is a research associate with LEARN NC's North Carolina History Digital Textbook Project. She is a Ph.D. candidate in the department of history at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, having received a B.A. from the University of Lethbridge (Alberta, Canada) and an M.A. in British History from Carleton University (Ottawa, Canada). Her dissertation is titled *Dangerous Liaisons: Narratives of Sexual Danger in the Anglo-American North, 1750 to 1820*.