SCHOOL RECORDS: THE MINNESOTA EXPERIENCE

The Minnesota State Archives Commission was established in 1947, to assume the task of acquiring and preserving records of all state and local government units. With an inadequate staff of only a few people, very little progress was made in the area of local government records. The Archives only sporadically acquired records of rural school districts in Minnesota. In 1975, the State Archives became part of the Division of Archives and Manuscripts of the Minnesota Historical Society, and all government records including those of various unidentified and, unlisted school districts were transferred to the Society's custody. Since that time, the Archives has more seriously addressed the responsibility of preserving local government records. All school district records currently are arranged and listed; and substantial additions of records also have been made to the Archives' holdings. The Division's Government Records Section is responsible for activities relating to the acquisition of all government records. The State Historical Records Advisory Board recently has identified school records as one area that should be addressed more thoroughly.

The Minnesota State Archives currently responds to requests by school district and county officials for appraisal and transfer of school records in their custody. School records and requests for assistance come primarily from existing school districts that were given custody of rural school records in the course of consolidations, and from county officials who received records of county superintendents of schools when those offices were abolished during the period from 1950 to 1971. The county superintendents' records have been entrusted to county auditors,
clerks of district court, county treasurers, and county administrators. In some instances, the independent districts in the county became the custodians of the superintendents' records.

The number of requests for assistance from the Archives has increased significantly in recent years, due in part to the fact that the last school district consolidations took place in 1971. The last groups of students affected by consolidations are no longer of public school age. Hence, there is no real need for the school districts to retain the records. Many school districts simply are running out of space to store records, and have no room to store the increasing volume of active records in their offices because inactive records and old rural school records are filling available vaults and storage rooms. The Minnesota State Archives transfers school records only at the request of the records custodian, or if the safety of the records is in jeopardy.

The care of the records of rural school districts and the county superintendent of schools is not always of concern to their custodians. They are often stored where they are the least amount of trouble, in less than ideal storage situations. In an east central Minnesota county for instance, records were salvaged from the basement of a school that had been ravaged by fire. Badly molded records from the 1860s (written in Swedish), were retrieved from the school district office in another county. The smell emanating from piles of school records at a district office in a central Minnesota county suggested that they once had been housed in a barn. In a county north of the Minneapolis/St. Paul area, records were stored in the basement room of a newer school building. The room, however, was directly below the swimming pool, in a sub-tropical environment hardly
suited to records storage. Records of a county superintendent of schools were removed from the attic of a southern Minnesota county courthouse where pigeon carcasses and excrement, piles of dust, and insulation had to be excavated before the records could be reached. Records have been retrieved from abandoned school houses where scoops were used to get them off the floor; and from chicken coops, granaries, and dugouts in athletic fields.

One can surmise, from the lack of concern that has been given school records over the years, that records of many school districts have simply been lost or destroyed. What remains is a random sample.

The history of the development of the rural school system in Minnesota is key to understanding its records. Education always has been important to Minnesotans, and provisions were made as early as 1849 to establish a corporate school system in every township having five or more families. Laws of 1851 required that county commissioners divide all inhabited portions of the county into smaller school districts. The State Constitution of 1857 emphasized public schools in each township. In 1870, the township school idea was abandoned in favor of common school districts. This meant that larger townships could have more than one school district. **Common school districts,** by law, simply were districts of at least four sections of land with twelve or more pupils attending. Districts varied in shape and size. Despite the law, many school districts were established that had less than the minimum number of pupils, sometimes as few as five or ten. It was not unusual for students who were closer to school houses in adjacent districts to petition to attend an out-of-district school rather than the school in their own district. Each common district school board had three members, and the voters of the district had the power to levy taxes, fix the length of the school term, and determine board member salaries. Common schools
taught "reading, writing, and arithmetic," although they provided a means for various social, non-academic activities as well.

The common school districts proved to be inadequate for cities and larger towns. To accommodate the larger geographic areas, specially chartered districts were set up. Special school districts operated under charters granted by the state legislature and could have from one to seven school board members. The members' powers were determined by the individual charters. Between 1854 and 1860 special districts were established in the cities of St. Paul, West St. Paul, Minneapolis, Rochester, and Cannon Falls. By 1895, fifty special school districts existed. The establishment of special school districts was prohibited after 1892, and legislation in 1949 converted all remaining special districts into independent districts. A number of special districts, however, remain today.

In 1865, the independent school district concept was established. An independent school district had to have a population of at least 500 and include in its boundaries an incorporated town, village, or city. The school board members of the independent districts, rather than the district's voters, set the length of the school term, levied taxes, and determined board member salaries. Although many independent school districts were set up at the outset, common districts still flourished.

Attempts to improve rural school operations and organization resulted in legalizing consolidation in 1901. Consolidation essentially meant that a new consolidated school district could be formed by merging two or more districts of any sort (common, independent, or special), and that the newly created district would receive financial
aid from the state for transportation of resident pupils. The school board members had powers similar to those of the board members in independent school districts. They were also able to select and purchase a school site. Consolidated district guidelines, established in 1927, specified that a consolidated district contain twelve or more sections of land; maintain school term for at least eight months of the year; and have both elementary and high school departments. The size of the districts increased as more students were served by bus. From 1901-1911, only nine consolidated districts were formed. In 1911, the Holmberg Act revised tax laws to provide for the construction of new school buildings, and for more transportation and building aid to the districts. Between 1911 and 1921, 303 consolidations were completed.

In many districts where no high school existed, students, after completing elementary school, were sent to the closest consolidated or independent school district having a high school. Districts receiving these non-resident students were granted special non-resident aid from the state to accommodate them. Consolidation aid, to an extent, benefited newly formed consolidated school districts and consolidated school districts that were absorbing additional common school districts. At some point, however, when a district was receiving a certain amount in non-resident aid, it was no longer an advantage to increase school district territories by further consolidation. After 1922, the state increased support for non-resident student tuition, supplemental aid, and various other special aid packages. With these incentives many school districts did not enlarge their territories. In many cases, funds would be decreased if the school district grew in size, and if more students were
designated as district residents. A larger school district also meant increased costs for teachers, maintenance, administration, and construction, and hence, more taxes. Between 1922 and 1932, only 101 consolidations were completed. Between 1932 and 1940, the number diminished to twenty one.

In 1939, consolidation procedures were formalized. Districts that consolidated after that date were referred to as independent school districts, but had the same parameters as the 1927 guidelines suggested. In order for a consolidation to be effective, a proposed school district plat had to be submitted to the Minnesota Education Department, followed by a district-wide petition and election in all of the districts to be affected.

Several unique types of school districts have also existed in Minnesota. School districts in unorganized territories were found in territories that were not included in any other organized school districts. The unorganized school district board had three members: the chairman of the county board of commissioners, the county superintendent of schools, and the county treasurer. The school board levied taxes for school purposes, set the length of the school term, selected school sites and erected buildings, issued bonds, and determined board member salaries. Eighteen unorganized school districts were still in operation in 1949. Many of these school districts included Indian territories. Numerous joint school districts were formed by merging school districts across county lines.

In 1934, there were 7721 school districts of various types in the state; earlier more than 8000 districts had existed. Only 333 of those districts were consolidated. During the 1930s many educators felt that the complex system was unwieldy and inefficient. A report of the Education
Committee of the Minnesota State Planning Board in 1934 included a recommendation for increased consolidation of school districts for more effective school administration. Various studies and experiments were pursued in several counties by the Minnesota Education Department during the 1930s. In 1937, a reorganization plan based on a fourteen county study emerged. The plan stressed organization within county units for better cooperation and the establishment of larger school units for efficiency of administration and operation; illustrated the advantages to be had with a larger school, such as special education and better assignment of teaching loads; and emphasized the development of a flexible organization to meet changing conditions in education in the future. In 1947, after numerous studies by the Minnesota Education Department, county surveys of educational facilities and services were conducted with the intention of reorganizing school districts in the counties. By 1948, 63 counties had formed committees to conduct the surveys. After the surveys were completed, the counties held elections and voted on the recommendations of the survey committees. One result of the committees, and the elections that followed, was a reduction of the number of school districts from 7518 to 6718 and between 1948 and 1950 an additional 800 school districts merged.

During the 1950s and 1960s, consolidations continued from the impetus created by the survey committees. In the mid-1950s, all school districts in the state were assigned new number designations to correspond to a new state-wide enumeration series. Prior to this time, each county had its own numbering system. It was not unusual for numerous districts throughout the state, but in different counties, to be assigned the same district
number. With the new system, no two school district numbers were the same. Common school districts were abolished legally in 1971. There are currently 436 school districts in Minnesota.

The role of the county superintendent of schools in rural education was to oversee the operations of the various school districts in the county, and the superintendents' functions included examination and licensure of teachers, school inspection, curriculum planning, and planning of school facilities. The office was established in 1851 and abolished in 1971 as school district administration was handled more efficiently by the independent districts.

The thrust of consolidation and reorganization and the creation of larger conglomerate school districts, has been the provision of equal educational opportunities for all Minnesota children attending public schools. It also streamlined school district operation by lowering costs for transportation, building, supplies, and by providing better educational opportunities with a broader tax base. In the words of one educator, reorganization would bring a more dignified status to rural education in Minnesota.

School records in the Minnesota State Archives currently represent 53 counties and 857 common, independent, joint, unorganized, and special districts totaling more than 500 cubic feet. Several sets of records remain in repositories within the Minnesota Regional Research Centers network, and a few others are in the custody of county historical societies.

Once at the State Archives school district records are organized by county and appear under county listings in the Division's finding aids. The sets are further referred to by the earliest discernible district
number. A brief history of district changes through consolidation is given where possible. Townships associated with the school districts are also indicated, and school names are given where possible. The latter often refer to historical figures as in the Lincoln School, Sibley School, and Garfield School; to school locations such as Lake Ida School and Popple Grove School; and to prominent township families, such as Tischer School in Chippewa County, and Klemenhagen School in Renville County. Other schools went by chosen names such as the Busy Bee School, Old Favorite School, and Sunnyside School.

The records themselves consist of various types. Some districts are represented by only one or two series, others have numerous series in various degrees of completeness. They include minutes of the board of education; school censuses listing all school age children in the district; library, textbook, and equipment records; financial records, including clerk's and treasurer's registers of receipts and disbursements, budgets, and audit reports; PTA records and superintendent's files; records of auxiliary organizations such as student council, athletic associations, clubs, and student activity groups; records of Teacher Training Departments; records of the Veteran's On-Farm Training Programs in the 1940s and 1950s; and election records for school board members and for consolidations. The office of the county superintendent of schools also generated a number of records, among them administrative files, family and student censuses, teacher reports on class activities, and teacher certification records; maps, plats, and other records on consolidations, especially records of the school survey committees; class lists, school officer lists, and visitation records on school inspections; programs, bulletins, and newsletters; and records on state aid. Most districts maintained similar records, although the activities reflected
in them are not identical. There seems to be one or more unique series in every set of records transferred to the Minnesota State Archives. One Renville County independent district included records of many student activities including an early girls' athletic association, and a camera club; a Rice County district had early records of a number of student literary societies.

School records offer documentation for various kinds of research pursuits. The school district functioned as a unit of government much like a township, but the location of many early township records in Minnesota is unknown. In the absence of the township records, the school district may serve as the only record of a particular geographic area. The school district board, as a unit of government, functioned as a pure democracy in much the same way as a town meeting. This democracy in action is evident in school board minutes and election records. Genealogy sources in school records include student and family censuses, alumni lists, and payroll registers. Social activities of the area are reflected in PTA scrapbooks; records of the Future Homemakers of America, girls' and boys' athletic associations, high school bands, and literary societies; and yearbooks and student newspapers. Documentation of grass roots education in Minnesota is found in library and textbook records and student records; teacher records that include schedules, course outlines, assignments, and attendance lists; and clerk's and treasurer's books. Architectural and building information is found in school board minutes and equipment records; visitation records that describe the physical condition of rural school facilities; and school survey committee reports. Early
school activity records illustrate the acculturation process; the rural school experience was, for some pupils, their first application of English. These early records also lend themselves to ethnic studies. The names of students, teachers, and board members are indicators of the various nationalities that were represented in the communities.

School board meeting minutes and record books frequently appear among many sets of rural school records that are transferred by school records custodians to the Minnesota State Archives. These records document virtually all academic, financial, and administrative policies and decisions made by school boards in the districts. A record book (1857-1876) of school board and trustee minutes from Rice County School District No. 20 in Millersburgh, documents the following: school board elections, acquisition of land for the school, fund raising for school house construction, determination of school term length, the levying of local taxes, discussion of yearly resolutions requiring parents of school children to haul and prepare wood to heat the school house, the number of students attending school in the district, purchase of insurance for the school house, and the use of the school by various clubs and religious societies on evenings and weekends.

The activities of public education and the public schools in Minnesota have affected the lives of virtually every family in the state, and these activities are illustrated in the records of Minnesota's various school districts. No other record type more clearly outlines the facets of daily life in Minnesota communities. The records of each district indicate the value and importance given education in a community, the amount of community interaction with the school, the type of education
and extra-curricular programs offered its pupils, and its ethnic background. Continuous series of records from school districts over a number of years illustrate how values, educational programs and policies, and the ethnic make-up and structure of communities developed. The records thus will serve the research needs of educators, ethnic and local historians, geographers, planners, students, and of course, genealogists.

To insure the preservation of the records of Minnesota's school districts, the MHS hopes to launch a structured program to educate-school boards and administrators of the value of school records (both non-current and current) in their districts; to gather archival records of rural schools when necessary; and to make the records and information on their existence widely available to the public.