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A Window on Education of the Past: Teaching School in the 19th Century



A classroom at Lakeside school about 1900. The students are dressed up for picture day, showing off their new textbooks.

Bowling Green State University was established in 1910 to serve as a teacher training school. Along with that of Kent State University and a host of church-supported colleges and independent institutes, BGSU's curriculum was a response to a demand for professionally-trained educators for every grade level. This demand had grown over the course of the previous century as society adapted to the Industrial Revolution and to the needs of democratic institutions. Among the manuscripts at the Center for Archival Collections are many letters, diaries, government records, and books which document the state of education throughout that time.

When the Northwest Ordinance was enacted in 1787, it stated that "Religion, morality, and knowledge, being necessary to good government and the happiness of mankind, schools and the means of education shall forever be encouraged." From the very beginning, then, education was important in the development of Ohio. A decentralized system of local schools provided the formal training most Ohio settlers relied on for the basic skills of reading, writing, and arithmetic. Until 1821, most Ohio schools were subscription-based, with students' families paying a tuition-like fee for instruction. Teachers usually had no formal training for the job.

In the 1830s, school reformers such as Horace Mann advocated a higher standard of general education—one whose graded curriculum included the history of our nation and the principles upon which it was founded—freely available to everyone. At the same time, the apprenticeship system began to fade away. Under that system, a tradition that went back hundreds of years, a craftsman would enter into a contract with a child's parents to teach him the skills of his trade, and often to provide basic reading and mathematics training. As employment moved to factories and away from the individual worker, a longer, broader education seemed more likely to provide the child with the flexible skills he would need in the future.

At right, Ridge Street School in Bowling Green as it appeared just after completion in 1888. The building served children for some twenty-five years.

There were no requirements for school attendance, and most students went to school when, and only for as long as, their families deemed it important or convenient. The one-room rural school provided instruction through the eighth grade. Only the professions of law, medicine, and religion called for longer formal education. It was in the cities where the public called for longer, more in-depth education. State law permitted organizations or associations of citizens to band together to establish high schools. Colleges and universities (such as Ohio University in 1804 and Miami University in 1809) were also chartered in this way.

Gradually, the idea of professionalism in teaching began to take hold. In 1825, certification of teachers was required for the first time. By 1850, the county was established as the government unit responsible for certification, and examinations were offered four times a year. Teachers were to be qualified to teach reading, writing, and arithmetic, and their certificate could list other subjects they had qualified for. English and geography were added to the requirements in 1849. While the state required only the "three R's," local schools could offer other subjects, including foreign languages. Thanks to the large number of German immigrants, local schools, for a time, were allowed to teach in the language of their choice. [\[source\]](#)



Researchers can review the county, township, and school district records found in the collections of the CAC, including Board of Education minutes, school examiners' records, teachers' certificates, and financial records. (Holdings vary by locality—select the county and government unit of **your choice** to see exact holdings; county auditor records may include enumerations of school age youth, as well)

Many teachers shared their classroom experiences in letters home or in their diaries. From this early period, some of these manuscripts include those in the Ira Conine Collection (**MS 673**—Ira's fiancée Jennie Bysel taught school during the Civil War), the Annie Stewart Collection (**MMS 1454 transcripts**), and the Aaron and Mary West Collection (**MS 210**—Aaron was a teacher, principal, and administrator in Toledo). There are many others as well. Use the "search manuscripts" command with such words as "teach" or "school" to locate references in online transcriptions on our [website](#).

By 1900, school attendance was compulsory through the eighth grade and teaching was a recognized, respected profession. Our [Education Bibliography](#) lists many manuscript collections that document the progress of these changing attitudes.

Bibliography

[\[source\]](#) Miller, Edward Alanson. **The History of Educational Legislation in Ohio from 1803-1850**. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1920, p. 43.

[CAC Collections](#)

Education Bibliography CAC bibliography of Education-related manuscripts.

Family Bibliography. CAC bibliography of Family-related manuscript collections. Many individuals worked as teachers; some parent and student attitudes toward school may be recorded as well.

Women's Studies Collections CAC bibliography in two parts listing collections with women's perspectives. Many women documented their teacher-training.