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EDUCATIONAL PROGRESS IN NEW MEXICO AND SOME PRESENT PROBLEMS*

Thomas C. Donnelly

The first schools of New Mexico were pioneered by Catholic missionaries. The Spanish government required leaders of military expeditions to take missionaries along with them, and when Coronado made the first conquest of New Mexico in 1540 a number of Franciscan friars accompanied him. When he decided to return to Mexico, two of the religious leaders, Fray Luis de Escalona and Fray Juan de Padilla elected to remain and continue their work of converting the Indians and instructing them in the way of the conquerors. The two men were the first teachers to enter New Mexico. Although the Indians seemed friendly enough while Coronado's troops were in the land, once they were gone the Indians turned upon the priests and murdered them.

When Oñate reconquered New Mexico in 1598, he too brought missionaries with him to establish churches and schools in the pueblos. Several of the schools remained in operation until the revolt of 1680, when the Indians rose against the Spaniards and drove them from the territory. But a few years later the Spanish under De Vargas came back, reconquered the Indians, and re-established their rule. Once more the missionaries resumed their work of organizing churches and schools. In addition to stressing the doctrines of the church, they also taught the Indians the three R's, singing, and vocational work such as shoemaking, tailoring, blacksmithing, carpentry, and kindred crafts.

Despite the efforts of the missionaries, education remained in an extremely backward condition in New Mexico throughout the entire period of Spanish colonial rule. The King of Spain did at one time

*This article is part of a study entitled "The State Educational System," recently issued by the Division of Research of the Department of Government of the University of New Mexico.
issue a decree ordering the establishment of schools in all of the pueblos and settlements under the direction of the Franciscan fathers, but like so many other royal proclamations of the period it went unheeded. The Indians, steeped in centuries of illiteracy and tribal mysticism, were apathetic toward education, and most Spaniards were not interested in seeing them educated. There was constant friction between the clergy, who wanted to treat the Indians kindly, and the officials and settlers, who all too often wanted to enslave them. Another of the many obstacles to progress was the limited knowledge of the Indian languages possessed by the friars.

With the establishment of Mexican independence in 1821, more thought was given to the education of the people. Town councils were required to form primary schools, and a small number of such schools were established in the province of New Mexico. But they were very rudimentary in character and lacking in continuity. Repeated efforts to establish public schools on an adequate basis failed because of lack of revenue. Gregg, one of the earlier writers on New Mexico, gives us a graphic picture of the sad state of education a short time before the end of the Mexican period:

There is no part of the civilized globe, perhaps, where the arts have been so much neglected and the progress of science so successfully impeded as in New Mexico. Reading and writing may fairly be set down as the highest branches of education that are taught in the schools; for those pedants who occasionally pretend to teach arithmetic very seldom understand even the primary rules of the science of numbers. I should perhaps make an exception in favor of those ecclesiastics who have acquired their education abroad. Yet it is a well-known fact that a majority of this privileged class, even, are lamentably deficient in the more important branches of the familiar science.¹

The Mexican government, whatever its good intentions concerning schools, failed to carry them out, and accomplished almost nothing in furthering the educational opportunities of the people. Governor Vigil in 1847 reported to the first New Mexico legislature which met under American rule that there was only one public school in the territory, located at Santa Fe, and it had only one teacher. The population spoke only Spanish, their native tongue, and illiteracy was the common lot of seven eighths of the people. For a woman to be able to read and write, Gregg says, “was considered an indication of very extraordinary talent.”²

¹ Josiah Gregg, Commerce of the Prairies, p. 128.
² Ibid., p. 129.
With American occupation, educational progress began to pick up a little. But at first it was discouragingly slow. The territory was thinly populated and had little wealth, distances were great and transportation poor, and Congress, despite frequent petitions from the people for help in establishing free public schools, ignored its responsibility to extend support. New Mexico was thus left to work out her educational salvation as best she could.

The only important source of outside aid for education in territorial days was the church. Until the close of the Mexican period, the Catholic church had been the only one interested in New Mexico, but with American occupation the Protestant churches began to send missionaries. Several of the denominations established schools and supported them from contributions gathered in the various states. Some of these schools were short lived, but a number have endured. Such institutions as the Menaul School (Presbyterian) and the Harwood Girls School (Methodist) of Albuquerque, and the Allison James School (Presbyterian) of Santa Fe are three examples, among others that might be cited, of effective Protestant educational work which has continued down to the present.

The Catholic churches in New Mexico were transferred from the diocese of Durango, Mexico, to American control in 1851, and one of the truly great characters of New Mexico history, Bishop Lamy, a Frenchman, was sent from Cincinnati, Ohio, to govern the newly created diocese of New Mexico. Willa Cather's famous novel, *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, is founded upon his life and work, and should be read for its interesting descriptions of life in New Mexico during the territorial period. On his arrival in New Mexico, Bishop Lamy found the condition of his churches deplorable, and he set out with zeal to rebuild them. Fortunately he was equal to the difficult task. Also fortunate was his firm belief in education.

The Bishop brought Sisters of Loretto from Kentucky to establish the Loretto Academy for girls at Santa Fe in 1852, and afterwards they founded schools elsewhere in the territory. He also had Christian Brothers come and establish schools for boys. This group started primary schools in many towns and founded St. Michael's College at Santa Fe in 1859. This was the first college in New Mexico. The Bishop's report of 1865 showed the parochial school system was well started, and its influence has spread in the years since.

In addition to the church schools, a few private schools were established in the territory and were in existence for varying lengths of time.
These “pay” schools, as they were called, were as good or as bad as the teachers who taught them, and most of the teachers were ill-trained for their work.

The first law to provide a public tax-supported school system was passed by the territorial legislature in 1856. Because of public hostility the law was repealed in a few months and the taxes collected under it were refunded. Because education in the Spanish colonial and Mexican periods had been left almost entirely to the church, the creation of a public school system apparently was looked upon by the majority of the people as an effort to induce children away from the church. But four years after the repeal of the first law, a new school code was passed. Amendments to the code were added in the years that followed, and the rough outline of the present system of education in the state began to take shape. Support of the schools remained a problem because the legislature was slow in levying taxes and public hostility toward paying school taxes continued. In 1875, Bernalillo County had eighteen public school teachers, with an average salary of $22.22 per month for five and a half months a year, and Santa Fe County had fourteen teachers, their salary averaging $26.18 monthly for ten months. In the entire territory there were 138 schools with 147 teachers. These accomplishments may seem modest today, but measured against the record of earlier years, the trend was significant.

The railroad boom of the eighties which saw railroads built across the state brought an influx of settlers into the territory from the East. These people had been used to good schools for their children, and they helped create much-needed sentiment in favor of a more adequate public school system. In 1886 the New Mexico Educational Association, pledged to improve education, was organized and in 1891, under the stimulus of Governor L. Bradford Prince, an ardent advocate of public schools, the legislature passed a new school code which is generally regarded as the foundation of the modern public school system of the state. The code provided for a superintendent of public instruction, to be appointed by the governor, and established a territorial board of education which was given broad powers over the organization and operation of the entire school system. The code also provided for the issuance of school district bonds to finance the construction of school houses.

Taking due note of the fact that a considerable part of the population still looked upon a public school system as a scheme for training

8 C. E. Hodgin, The Early School Laws of New Mexico, pp. 34-35.
children away from the church and their ancestral traditions, Governor Prince appointed as first territorial superintendent, Amado Chaves, a man Spanish in blood and Catholic in religion. The choice allayed much suspicion, and Chaves evidently proved a capable superintendent, for after Governor Prince retired from office he was reappointed by the next two governors.

The school law of 1891 did not revolutionize education in New Mexico overnight. The minimum school term was three months, and for years afterwards many a district was without a schoolhouse and struggled to maintain a three-months term. Even in Santa Fe, at the beginning of the century, the schools were housed in a rented building. In more than one district the naming of a teacher, the furnishing of wood for the school stove, and the hiring of a janitor were plums to be passed around among politically favored families.

At the end of his first year in office, that is, in 1892, Superintendent Amado Chaves reported that the territory had spent nearly a quarter of a million dollars for schools and that 23,000 pupils had been enrolled. There were more than 500 teachers, with an average salary of about $200 per year. Yet Superintendent Chaves was justly proud of the first year's achievement under the new law. He felt he was on his way.

But look at the increase in the next fifty years. During 1941-42 New Mexico spent almost ten million dollars on public schools alone, exclusive of the amount spent on its eight institutions of higher learning. That was forty times as much as it spent in 1891. There were approximately 131,000 pupils enrolled in the public schools, taught by 4,300 teachers with an average annual salary of $1,200, and school terms had been lengthened to nine months, the national standard. Free textbooks for the elementary and high schools, an active school building program, and increased salaries for teachers, all developments of recent years, are typical of the improvements constantly being made. While New Mexico's educational position in the nation is still low when compared with that of older states, its educational development has been remarkable when considered against its own historical background.

Especially notable has been the increase in the number of colleges.

\[^{4}\] During 1944-1945, 25 per cent of the teachers, principals, and supervisors of New Mexico received salaries up to $1,539.50; the next 25 per cent received from $1,539.50 to $1,720.55; the third 25 per cent from $1,720.55 to $1,981.38; and the fourth 25 per cent received from $1,981.38 up to $3,000 and above. The median salary for the entire state was approximately $1,750.00. New Mexico School Review, January 1945, p. 17. Also, ibid., May 1945, p. 25. The average salary for 4,029 teachers, excluding superintendents and including principals and supervisors, was approximately $2,008 in 1945-1946, according to the state educational budget auditor.
There were no publicly supported institutions of higher learning in the territory before 1889, but in that year the legislature passed the Rodey Act, which provided for the University at Albuquerque, the Agricultural College at Las Cruces, and the School of Mines at Socorro. B. S. Rodey, the sponsor of the act, had favored a single institution at Albuquerque, to be known as the Territorial University and to include an agricultural college and a school of mines, but pressure from the other sections of the territory made it impossible for him to persuade the legislature to create a single institution. A few years after the establishment of the University, the normal schools at Las Vegas and Silver City were established to train teachers. The schools are now known as the New Mexico Highlands University and the New Mexico State Teachers College. Goss Military Institute of Roswell, an already established institution, was taken over by the territory in the nineties and its name changed to the New Mexico Military Institute. Shortly after the turn of the century, the legislature created the Spanish-American Normal School at El Rito. Eastern New Mexico College at Portales, the last institution of higher learning established by the state, opened its doors to students in 1934. All of these institutions, while they have had setbacks at times, have enjoyed a steady development since their founding. Their student bodies continue to grow in size, academic standards are constantly being raised, and the caliber of the faculty attracted to the schools is becoming notably better. As the institutions have grown and raised their standards, the people have become increasingly proud of them and have, considering their means, supported them generously.

Special Aspects of Education in New Mexico

Educational Attainment of the Population

The 1940 census statistics on years of schooling completed represent the first complete picture of the educational status of the entire population of the United States. The statistics relate only to persons twenty-five years of age and older, persons who may generally be considered to have completed their formal education.

The median number of years of school completed by persons in the United States was 8.4, the equivalent of about half a year more than eight grades. The median number of school years completed by persons in New Mexico was 7.9. This gave New Mexico thirty-seventh position among the forty-eight states. Nine of the eleven states lower

A median is a point so chosen in a series that half of the individuals in the series are on one side of it, and half on the other.
In the scale were in the South. Of the 247,295 persons in New Mexico twenty-five years of age and older, 10.7 per cent never had attended school, 16.6 per cent had completed from one to four years of grade school, 11.5 per cent from five to six years, 23 per cent from seven to eight years, 13.1 per cent from one to three years of high school, 12.2 per cent four years of high school, 6.7 per cent one to three years of college, and 4.4 per cent four or more years of college. For 1.8 per cent there was no report.

It is obvious that the 27.3 per cent of New Mexico people who reported four years or less of formal schooling are ill-prepared to meet the demands of an increasingly complex culture with its emphasis upon facility in written communication. Reaching this group with a meaningful program of adult education is one of the aspects of education in New Mexico that merits special consideration in the years ahead.

The proportion of this group which is actually illiterate cannot be precisely ascertained, but it is undoubtedly substantial. In 1870, 78.5 per cent of the people in New Mexico ten years of age and older were illiterate. By 1930 illiteracy had fallen to 13.3 per cent, a commendable decrease of 65.2 per cent. In the 1940 census the question on educational attainment replaced the inquiry on illiteracy included in previous censuses; therefore, present figures on illiteracy are not available. But a very large majority of those persons listed as never having attended school, and probably many of those who did not go farther than the fourth grade may be considered illiterate. Illiteracy is, of course, much higher among adults than among youths and children. The older the age group the higher the percentage of illiteracy.

Further reduction of illiteracy in the years ahead presents an important and difficult task. "Sparseness of population, bi-lingualism, different cultures and a large percentage of the population on a low economic level are factors," as Seyfried points out, "which make it difficult for the educational system to increase literacy. Moreover, a considerable portion of the population live in remote areas, leading a life somewhat primitive and of a nature that formal education seems to offer relatively little appeal or advantage to them. A comparatively large Indian population under the wardship of federal government further tends to make illiteracy widespread and to keep the educational level of the state low in comparison to that in other states."
Bilingualism in New Mexico

About half of the children in the public schools are native Spanish-speaking pupils. They are both a problem and a challenge to the school system that is not being adequately met.

Most of the Spanish-speaking children, when they enter the first grade, are kept there for two years, so that they are automatically retarded one year for the rest of their schooling. In some counties the schools have attacked the language problem by establishing a pre-first grade. Its chief function is teaching an English vocabulary of 300 to 700 words. Where this is well done, the children go to first grade at the end of the year, and do quite satisfactorily. In fact, the figures in San José several years ago showed that the first graders scored above the norm in the standard reading tests. It seems very probable that as the schools improve in language instruction in the lower grades the Spanish-speaking children will come to have the same distribution on standardized tests as the English-speaking children.

Contrary to the custom in many bilingual countries, no use is made in New Mexico of the native language in the beginning years of school. English is the medium of instruction required by the constitution, and the children are expected to accommodate themselves to this language. Whether this is the correct procedure is open to doubt, and there is a growing movement in the state to introduce Spanish in the elementary school as a special subject. The aim is to help Spanish-speaking children improve and keep their language alive. Such a course also enables more native English-speaking children to learn Spanish and by so doing to become more sympathetic with the problems of those who must learn English. The fourth grade has arbitrarily been chosen as the best level for the introduction of Spanish. There is a great deal of opposition to this movement, and it is not clear yet how extensive the practice will become.

The schools in New Mexico are increasingly recognizing the Spanish influences, by using Spanish songs and dances and language units on Mexico and other Latin American countries. As a result of this and the improving economic status of the Spanish-speaking group, the number of native children who continue in school is increasing.

There is no official segregation of school children in New Mexico on race or color lines, and such division of the school population as exists is generally due to the location of school buildings.

Many educators in New Mexico see in the bicultural character of the state one of its greatest potential assets. If this point of view is ac-
accepted by an increasing number of teachers and school officials, and the curriculum is reorganized to further the concept, Spanish-speaking children will undoubtedly come to be more interested in formal education.  

**Compulsory Attendance**

While eradication of illiteracy and raising the educational status of the population will require time and various approaches, one immediately available method of improving the situation would be better enforcement of the compulsory attendance law. While this would not reduce illiteracy among adults, it would prevent today's children from growing up without formal education. In some sections of the state, particularly in rural areas, children are allowed to stay away from school without much being done about it. Too many children who start the first grade never enter the second, many who enroll in the second do not enter the third, and so on.

The school census in 1943-1944 showed 142,000 children of school age in the state. Of this number 132,000 were enrolled in school, but the average daily attendance was only 100,000. In 1941-1942, a fairly normal year, the school census showed 146,000 school-age children with an average daily attendance of only 107,000. Reference to the reports of the state superintendent for earlier years reveals that the problem is of long standing. For instance, the biennial report of the state superintendent in 1932 showed that approximately 18,000 children entered the first grade of school. The same report for 1934 showed an average daily attendance of only 5,000 children in the second grade. “What happened to those other 13,000 children who should have been in the second grade?” the superintendent asked plaintively.

Some of them undoubtedly had good reasons for leaving school, but lack of enforcement of the compulsory attendance law was probably the most important factor.

The constitution provides that “every child of school age (between six and sixteen) and of sufficient physical and mental ability shall be required to attend a public or other school during such period and for such time as may be prescribed by law.”  

Children attending private or denominational schools, those physically or mentally unfit, and those residing more than three miles from school houses and to whom no free public means of conveyance is available are exempt from the provisions of the law. Also, children between the ages of fourteen

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9 The writer is indebted to Dr. Loyd Tireman of the University, the state's leading authority in the field of bilingual education, for much of the material in this section.

10 New Mexico Constitution, Art. XII, Sec. 5.
and sixteen who are employed may be excused from full-time school attendance upon the issuance of a certificate of employment by the school superintendent within whose jurisdiction such children reside or are employed.

Parents, guardians, and persons having control of the children are responsible for the school attendance of boys and girls under their care, and are subject to fine and imprisonment if they neglect their duty in the matter. The local superintendents and boards of education are jointly charged with the task of seeing that the compulsory attendance law is enforced in good faith. Whether this responsibility of parents and local school officials is being discharged in an effective manner is very obviously open to question at the present time and warrants attention by the public, the press, and supervisory school officials.

Free Textbooks

In a state with a population of low income one of the most practical ways to improve school standards is to provide free textbooks. A large investment in school buildings and a trained teaching staff will not achieve desirable results if parents cannot afford to buy textbooks for their children. Educators in New Mexico long realized this and in 1931, when times were hard throughout the state, prevailed upon the legislature to pass a free textbook law. A percentage of the income to the state from the Federal Oil and Mineral Leasing Act was assigned to finance the purchase and distribution of the books. In the first years sufficient money was not available to supply all grades, so a beginning was made in the first, second, and third grades. As funds received under the act have increased it has been possible to supply all grades, one through twelve, with basal textbooks and supplementary materials for instruction. Private and church schools as well as public schools participate in the benefits of the program.

Textbooks are adopted by the state board of education for statewide usage. At first local teachers and superintendents had no part in the selection of books; they had to use the books adopted for them. But lately the board, instead of adopting a particular textbook for a certain grade, adopts a multiple list of texts for the grade, and the local superintendent and teachers make their choice from the list.

The management of the free text program is in charge of the textbook division of the state department of education. Each school dis-

11 The Albuquerque Journal, through its editor H. P. Pickrell, deserves much credit for sponsoring the idea of free textbooks in the state. The Journal campaigned hard for free textbooks in 1931, and persuaded Governor Arthur Seligman to accept the program.
strict is given an annual budget, based on its average daily attendance, and the local school authorities are allowed to requisition the division for books to an amount no greater than their budget. The publishers from whom textbooks are ordered distribute the books to the local schools in accordance with the directions of the textbook division.

Transportation

Because of the movement in recent years to consolidate schools and school districts, transportation of school children has become a problem of importance in all states. In New Mexico, with its vast territory, its sparse population, and two thirds of its people in rural areas, the problem is of greater importance than in most states.

More than one fifth of all children enrolled in the elementary and high schools of the state must be transported to school in buses. The average length of a bus route is about twenty-three miles one way, which means that some pupils ride as much as forty miles or more each school day. In many instances children must also walk a considerable distance to the bus line. More than 10 per cent of the total elementary and secondary school budget of the state goes to maintain the school transportation system.

Since the transportation of school children will continue to increase in volume as schools and school districts are reorganized into larger units, carefully developed plans are going to be necessary to reduce the average annual cost per pupil transported. The annual cost per pupil in the United States decreased from $35 in 1923-1924 to about $20 in 1941-1942, but in New Mexico, because of distance and other factors, the cost per pupil in 1941-1942 was almost $35. In Arizona it was approximately $22, in Colorado $25, in Wyoming $46, in Montana $51.

Status of Teachers

No discussion of the school system would be complete without notice of the place of the teacher in the system. By all standards the teacher is the most important factor in any school. Beautiful buildings and splendid equipment are highly desirable, but it is the classroom

12 In 1941-1942 the school transportation system used 1,020 busses and carried 29,444 pupils. The cost, excluding capital outlay, was $1,023,707. Statistics of State School Systems, op. cit., pp. 76-77. During the war, though numbers carried decreased, costs rose. In 1943-1944 the state utilized 951 school busses and carried 28,422 pupils at a cost of $1,216,161. Report of Superintendent of Public Instruction, 1942-1944, p. 42.

teacher who makes the school significant to the students and the community.

Requirements for teachers' certification in New Mexico have been rising steadily since statehood was attained. While the shortage of teachers during World War II necessitated a temporary relaxation of certification requirements, it is the intent of the state department of education to restore the pre-war standards as soon as an adequate supply of trained teaching personnel becomes available. Before many years a college degree will come to be a minimum qualification for teaching in the elementary grades, and a master's degree will be necessary for teachers in the high schools.

Along with higher certification requirements have come better salaries, as has already been noted. However, a recent survey by the State Taxpayers' Association has shown the need for equalizing teachers' salaries on the basis of experience, education, and perhaps other qualifications among the various school districts. Teachers with similar qualifications are not at present being paid at the same rate in different districts. Correction of this inequity would help to create a better feeling among teachers and provide a more even distribution of good teachers throughout the state.

Teachers are still underpaid in comparison with comparably trained or less well trained persons in other governmental activities and in private business. Two improvements in their status have been made in recent years that make amends, to an extent at least, for their relative under-compensation. These are the teachers' tenure law and the teachers' retirement act.

The tenure law gives the teacher greater security in his position than he formerly enjoyed. Now, after a teacher has served a probationary period of three years and holds a contract for the completion of a fourth year, he may not be dismissed arbitrarily by his local board without a hearing. If the local board decides against him, he may appeal the decision to the state board of education, which has the authority to reverse the decision if in its opinion the local board acted without proper cause. A teacher must be given a contract for the ensuing year by the local board on or before the closing day of the school term, or be notified that his contract will not be renewed.

The retirement act provides that upon reaching the age of sixty years teachers with fifteen years of educational service in New Mexico

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14 About three fourths of the counties now have a single salary schedule, according to R. J. Mullins, executive secretary of the New Mexico Educational Association.
may retire and receive retirement benefits. The amount of such benefits is based on the salary the teacher received during his last five years of employment. Twenty years of teaching in New Mexico is necessary to make a teacher eligible for full retirement pay, which ranges from $720 to $1,800 per year. Professors in the higher institutions of learning as well as the personnel of public schools are included within the provisions of the law. Funds to finance the retirement program are provided from sales tax revenues, income tax revenues, income from the Federal Mineral Leasing Act, and from the payrolls of the colleges.