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The Growth of Public Education in Holyoke, 1850 to 1873

Gary L. Courchesne

During the period of reform before the Civil War, there were efforts to establish a strong system of public education. This paper analyzes the incorporation of a public education system in the town of Holyoke from 1850 to 1873. Prior to 1850, Holyoke was known as Ireland Parish and was under the jurisdiction of West Springfield. When West Springfield controlled the district, it also administered its education system. With the construction of the Hadley Falls Company dam in the late 1840's, Ireland Parish experienced a period of rapid growth. Water power produced by the dam enabled industry to develop in the area, and the growth of industry in turn led to a massive influx of immigrant workers. One result was an increase in the population of this northern section of West Springfield. In 1845 Ireland Parish contained fourteen houses;¹ five years later, in 1850, the population was 3,245.²

With this industrial growth and population increase, the people of Ireland Parish discussed independence from West Springfield. In 1849, as a result of a meeting of the residents of the area, an application for township status was submitted to the Massachusetts Legislature, with no opposition from West Springfield. In the summer of 1850, with Legislative approval, Ireland Parish became the town of Holyoke.³ For the next twenty-three years, Holyoke continued to expand both in industry and population, and with this, the educational system also grew.

Following a long tradition, the town was divided into school districts, with local control over the educational system. Initially, there were seven districts, but two more were added in the outlying areas of the town. Each of these nine districts had a Prudential School Committee, which consisted of one or two local residents, whose responsibility was to hire teachers and maintain educational standards.

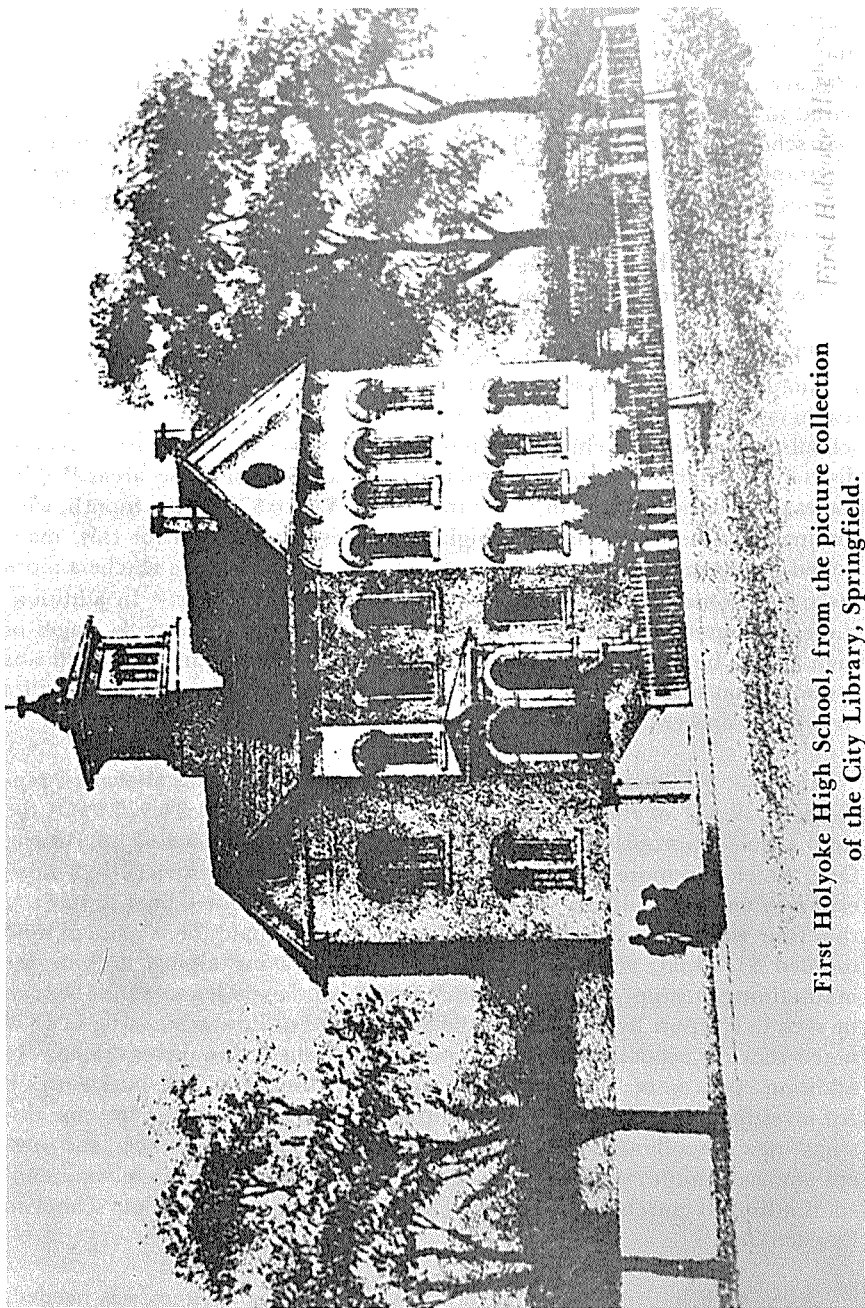
Each district had one school and one teacher, with the exception of District Number One which had five schools in the early years of the town. This

district was located near the industrial center, and the factories were surrounded by a large number of tenements for the industrial workers. District One, then, had the largest population, necessitating a greater number of schools.⁴

The Prudential School Committees were supervised by the town School Committee, which was elected by the voters and was responsible for the overall administration of the public schools.⁵

In the early schools and throughout the entire period of township the major problem encountered by the school committee was that of maintaining high student enrollment and attendance. Many children were working in the factories, and often their parents were ignorant of the benefits derived from an education. Indeed, the school was often viewed as destructive, preventing children from working and thus adding to the family income. In 1850, in the hope of combating the problem of child labor and to increase school attendance, state laws were passed prohibiting the employment of children under fifteen years of age unless they also attended eleven weeks of school. The law, however, did not seem to affect attendance to any great extent.⁶ For example, in 1850, out of a total of 537 children between the ages of five and fifteen who were required by state law to attend school, only an average of 482 were registered in both the summer and winter terms. Actual attendance figures, however, revealed an average of only 311 children attending both terms.⁷ By 1854, there were 755 children in the town required to attend school. Registration of these children, averaging 602, again proved to be considerably lower in both terms than the total number required to attend. The average attendance of 457 also indicated the large number of truants. Taking into consideration the increase in the total population, however, the average attendance had not substantially increased.⁸ As the actual attendance figures add up to more than the number required by law to attend school, it could indicate that everyone required to attend actually did enroll. However, the fact that the school committee constantly complained of low attendance and attributed that to ignorance on the part of working class parents, most likely indicates that a significant percentage of the children did not attend the public schools. As for parochial education in Holyoke, there were no organized schools in existence at this time. It is possible, however, that some children attended private academies that remained after the introduction of public education, thus, reflecting some reduction in public school enrollment.

In 1852, as required by state law, a high school was established in District One, the most populous area in the town. Although the enrollment in the high school was minimal, averaging around fifty by 1870, it did provide a higher level of training, concentrating on Latin and the Classics for those hoping to attend college.⁹



The curriculum in the early schools was somewhat disorganized and informal. The teachers concentrated on teaching reading and writing. There were major differences between the sequential system in District One, with three primary, three introductory, one grammar, and one high school, as compared to the solitary ungraded schools in the outlying districts.¹⁰ The grammar schools, which were one level below the high school, offered courses in geography, history, grammar, and arithmetic.¹¹ The high school offered two courses leading to diplomas — a two-year program in the “English Branches” concentrating on preparation for business, and a four-year course in the “Classics,” for college preparation.¹² At this time, however, high school attendance was not required by law.

The training of the teachers was a major problem. Only a handful had graduated from normal school, the teachers’ colleges of the day, while most teachers had little or no formal higher education or training. By 1860, the school committee was employing more male teachers in the more populous districts, probably due to the problem of discipline in those areas.¹³ The wages paid to the teachers in 1850 ranged from \$10 to \$37.21 per month, with the male teachers receiving the highest salaries. One reason for this, mentioned in several school committee reports, was that the male teachers more often had some type of formal education in normal schools.¹⁴ In addition, there were greater opportunities for men to find employment, so wages of men had to be high to retain them in the educational system. Finally, it was assumed that single women could live on a low salary, while men had families to support or were saving for future family responsibilities.

In 1850, \$1800 was appropriated for school support. This allocation represented 39.3% of the entire town budget, which totalled \$4,575.¹⁵ Of the total school appropriation, \$718.59, or 39.97%, was allocated to District One, which had more schools and students than the other districts. It is interesting to note that almost the entire amount allocated for school support at that time was used to pay teachers’ salaries. The sum paid for salaries in 1850 totalled \$1773.09, 96.2% of the budget, thus leaving almost nothing for maintaining or supplying the schools.¹⁶ Results of the inadequate funding can be seen in a report by an agent of the State Board of Education, who in 1854 noted that the schoolhouses were “poor, ill furnished, and unventilated.” In addition, they were “overcrowded, ungraded, disorderly and backward.”¹⁷ An investigation by the school committee in 1861 revealed that in some districts “new schoolhouses are very much needed. To all appearances, the present ones were built by a past generation. . . .” The committee also recommended funding to purchase necessary school apparatus for the high school in District One.¹⁸

An overall improvement in Holyoke’s public school system was needed. With the continuing industrial growth, and the corresponding population increase, more pressure was put on the school committee by the people of the

town to make improvements within the school system. It was clear that building renovations were drastically needed, along with a larger budget. In addition, the evaluations of the poor conditions indicate that the Prudential School Committees had neglected their duties, obviously being satisfied to pay the teachers without giving thought to the physical plant and its affect on the educational process.

With the outbreak of the Civil War the town began to support families of local citizens who enlisted in the military, making it less likely for the schools to be adequately financed. As it turned out, in the annual report of the school committee, mention was made that despite the Civil War, "the schools were doing quite well, . . . that in the midst of a gigantic war, these schools, the greatest of the arts of peace, have been blessed with signal and growing prosperity."¹⁹

The turning point in Holyoke's public education came about in 1863 when the school committee finally recognized the need for a trained administration. It was decided by the school committee to appoint a superintendent, increase the size of the school committee from three to six members, and abolish the district Prudential School Committees. The first superintendent was J.P. Buckland, a graduate of Yale College who had served as principal of the Holyoke High School for six years.²⁰

With this change from a district system to a municipal one, there was a definite improvement in the public schools of Holyoke. There was still, however, a problem with attendance, but it had improved somewhat over the years due to the school committee consulting with parents, asking them to send their children to school, and by enforcing laws that existed. These actions on the part of the school committee did result in an increase in student enrollment.

There was an overall increase in school allocations throughout the period following the change of administration. In 1863, school expenses totalled \$6251.92, and by 1870 salaries alone reached \$19,760.²¹

With this growth and prosperity during the second decade of the Holyoke public schools, a need for more schools developed. In 1863, a new school was built in Rock Valley, an outlying section of the town, the older school in this area being regarded as "ancient."²² The size of the schools was dependent primarily upon the area and its population. The school buildings in the less populated areas of the town, such as Ingleside, were smaller than those in the more densely populated areas, such as the industrial section, where the Lyman Street School was located.

Changes in the curriculum also took place. After being reorganized under the new administration in 1863, schools in the less populated areas expanded

from ungraded classes learning basic skills to graded levels with more elaborate courses of study. Schooling began at the primary level, followed by intermediate schools, grammar schools, high school, and ungraded schools in the outlying and sparsely populated areas of the town.²³ A more elaborate "course of instruction" was established. In the primary schools, emphasis was placed on reading, spelling, oral lessons and counting. Instruction in geography, Roman numerals, and physical exercise was also offered in the primary schools. For the most part, the high school curriculum remained the same but it was more clearly outlined as to the individual goals of the students whether it be business studies or preparation for higher levels of education.²⁴



First Graduating Class Of H.H.S. —

**First graduating class of Holyoke High School, 1865,
from the picture collection of the City Library, Springfield.**

In 1864 an agent of the State Board of Education again commented on the "truly admirable condition of the schools of which the citizens of Holyoke may be justly proud."²⁵ This statement shows that in just one year the school

system in Holyoke had improved considerably due to the transition of administration in 1863 — with the appointment of a superintendent.

Over the years, the state education laws were expanded. Prior to the 1860's, seven years of schooling were required. In Holyoke it was decided that four years should be spent in primary school, two years in the intermediate, and a final year in the grammar school. Two or four years of high school were available as an option for students who completed grammar school.²⁶ In 1867, the state law was changed to compel all children between the ages of five and fifteen to attend school at least three months a year. This law was probably enforced in Holyoke, and school attendance improved substantially after 1867.²⁷ In 1869, night schools were established in the winter to educate children who were forced to work to help support their families, and to allow adults to increase their knowledge.²⁸

By 1873, according to the superintendent's report, attendance within the town's public schools had improved. As pointed out in the Twenty-fourth Annual Town Report, out of a total of 1060 children between the ages of five and fifteen, 1030 were enrolled in the public schools. Thus, enrollment of children in parochial schools existing in the town at that time was minimal. The average attendance in the public schools was 813, which reflects 79.9% of those enrolled.

The overall growth of the school system can be observed through annual expenditures. In 1859-1860, expenses totalled \$3491, during the 1866-1867 school year, expenditures reached \$20,000, and in the years 1871-1872, they totalled over \$30,000.²⁹ Correlating with this increase in expenditures is the population growth over the period. In 1860, the population of the town was 4,997; by 1870, it had reached 10,733.³⁰ The rapid industrial growth was the major cause for this increase in population, and as a result there was a need for larger school appropriations due to an increase of children within the town (see table).³¹ However, the population in the town over the years increased more than four times, but the population of children of school age less than doubled. This would indicate that the population increase was comprised primarily of single workers.

Year	Number of children ages 5 to 15	Whole number of population
1850	537	3,245
1855	768	4,639
1860	730	— — —
1865	900	5,648
1870	1040	10,733
1873	1068	14,000

By 1870, the town's population passed 10,000, and now it was eligible to become a city. After an overwhelming town vote in 1872, the town applied to the Massachusetts State Legislature for a city charter. In the summer of 1873, Holyoke was granted the charter, and with the transition to a city government there were some changes in school administration. The school committee remained for the most part unchanged, but it acted independently of the city government.

There was a change, however, in the school calendar. In 1863, as indicated, the terms were changed from two to three sessions — winter, summer and fall. After becoming a city, the three terms remained, but the summer term was eliminated and classes were held in the fall, winter, and spring. A calendar for these terms emerged for the school year 1873-1874, with the fourteen week spring term beginning on March 17 and continuing through June 20. The thirteen week fall term began on August 18 and continued through November 14. The third and last term was the thirteen week winter term, beginning on December 1 and running through February 27.³²

In addition, in the 1873-1874 school year, new grade levels were established within the schools, with students having to attend each of the three terms. However, a vacation period was established between each term in order to allow students to aid in domestic affairs. The levels started at grade one and advanced through grade eight. From grade eight, students could continue through an optional four years of high school.³³

In grades one, two, and three (primary grades), students were introduced to reading, writing, spelling, counting, and problems in arithmetic. Other subjects included music and physical exercise.³⁴ In general, the teacher was expected to provide each student with a slate and pencil, and "never have the children sitting still with nothing to do."³⁵

In the intermediate schools (grade four), the pupils began using more advanced reading materials and solving more complicated arithmetic problems, but basically the course of study was similar to that of the primary schools.³⁶ Grades five, six, seven, and eight comprised the grammar schools. In addition to reading, writing, and arithmetic, the pupils also studied geography and history.³⁷ In the high school, the 'General Course' of study offered algebra, astronomy, philosophy, physiology, foreign languages, history, and English literature.³⁸ The 'Classical Course,' as indicated, was college preparatory, offering Latin, Greek, philosophy, geometry, and ancient history.³⁹

The school committee continued to be more selective in the hiring of teachers. An "examination system" was established, requiring candidates to prove themselves competent. In order to attract better qualified teachers, it was necessary to increase wages. The wages of female teachers, for instance, were increased by \$1.00 per week to average a total of \$3.50 per week.⁴⁰

Opposition to the increase in the school budget came from the citizens of Holyoke, many of whom felt that too much money was being spent on public education. The school committee, reacting to this public opposition, pointed out that Holyoke only appropriated \$9.07 for each pupil between the ages of five and fifteen, while Springfield spent \$18.01 per student.⁴¹

Looking back at the changes that took place throughout the early history of the school system, it is clear that the industrial growth of the town was responsible for the growth of the school system. Although the town did encounter many problems within its school system, such as attendance, lack of finances, and parental indifference, the early public education system had evolved into an effective means of training the city's youth.

NOTES

1. L.L. Johnson, *Holyoke Past and Present (1745-1895)* (Holyoke, 1948), p. 65.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 62.
3. Anna U. Scanlon, *History of Holyoke, Massachusetts* (Holyoke, 1939), p. 29.
4. *First Annual Report of the School Committee of Holyoke, 1850-1874*, p. 5. All town records are available in the city clerk's office.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 8.
6. *Ibid.*
7. *Ibid.*, p. 7.
8. *Fifth Annual School Committee Report (1854)*, p. 8.
9. *Third Annual School Committee Report (1852)*, pp. 4 and 8.
10. *Sixth Annual School Committee Report (1855)*, p. 6.
11. *Eleventh Annual School Committee Report (1860)*, p. 12.
12. Wyatt E. Harper, *The Story of Holyoke* (np, 1948), p. 95.
13. Constance McLaughlin Green, *Holyoke, Massachusetts, A Case History of the Industrial Revolution in America* (New Haven, 1939), p. 134.
14. *First Annual Treasurer's Report for the Town of Holyoke 1850-1874*, p. 7.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 9.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 7.
17. Green, *Holyoke*, p. 127.
18. *Eleventh Annual School Committee Report (1860)*, p. 15.
19. *Ibid.*, p. 15.
20. *Fourteenth Annual School Committee Report (1863)*, p. 18. *Sixteenth Annual School Committee Report (1865)*, pp. 21 and 33.
21. *Thirteenth Annual Treasurer's Report (1862)*, p. 16. *Twentieth Annual Treasurer's Report (1869)*, p. 32.
22. *Thirteenth Annual School Committee Report (1862)*, p. 17.
23. *Thirteenth Report of the Town Officers of the Town of Holyoke (1862)*, p. 21.
24. *Thirteenth Annual School Committee Report (1862)*, p. 27.

25. Frank H. Doane, *A History of Holyoke, Massachusetts from 1830-1873* (Holyoke, 1938), p. 128.
26. Ibid., p. 131.
27. Ibid., p. 132.
28. Ibid., p. 134.
29. Ibid., p. 128.
30. Johnson, *Past and Present*, p. 65.
31. Green, *Holyoke*, pp. 35 and 36.
32. Doane, *Holyoke*, p. 136.
33. *Twenty-third Annual School Committee Report (1872)*, pp. 43-54.
34. Ibid.
35. Ibid., p. 44.
36. Ibid., pp. 48-49.
37. Ibid., pp. 50-52.
38. Ibid., p. 53.
39. Ibid., p. 54.
40. Ibid., p. 15.
41. Ibid.