

From the DCPS website during the tenure of Superintendent Janey (2004-2007)

"A LOOK BACK IN TIME"

District of Columbia Public Schools:

A Brief History by Richard Hurlbut, 1981

Congress, by an Act of May 3, 1802, established the City of Washington with a regular municipal government. This Act, as amended in 1804, was in effect the first Charter of Washington. It provided for a mayor of the City appointed annually by the President of the United States, and a City Council composed of two chambers, each consisting of nine members, to be elected annually on separate ballots. The mayor appointed all other officers of the Corporation.

In accordance with the provisions in the City Charter for the "establishment and superintendence of schools," the City Council on December 5, 1804, passed an act "to establish and endow a permanent institution for the education of youth in the City of Washington," which provided for a board of trustees of public schools for white children. The act also provided an annual appropriation of not to exceed \$1,500 for the support of the schools, to allow for the instruction of the children of the poor, who alone received free tuition.

At the first meeting of the board of trustees held during August 1805 in the United States Supreme Courtroom, Thomas Jefferson, then President of the United States, was elected first president of the Board of Trustees of public schools in the City of Washington.

The evolution of public education in Washington has been one of changing definition, growth, and consolidation. From 1804 to 1874, as the District itself began to grow, four separate boards of trustees represented the local separate jurisdictions of the City of Washington, Georgetown, Washington County, and the public schools operated for black children.



Samuel H. Armstrong Manual Training School, c. 1910

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Sumner School, c. 1880's

Public schools for black children in the District of Columbia were inaugurated by an Act of Congress in 1862. Their trustees were appointed by the Secretary of the Interior, and functioned independently of the local municipal government of Washington until 1873. In that year, the black public schools came under the jurisdiction of the District Government, and one year later, in 1874, were consolidated with the three other local boards of trustees into a single Board of Trustees for public schools in Washington.

The office of Superintendent of public schools in the District was first created by an act of the City Council, approved September 7, 1869. As a part of the 1874 reorganization of public education in Washington, two separate superintendencies were created for the white and the black school systems. Further consolidation came in 1900 when Congress created one Board of Education and one superintendent for all the public schools of the District of Columbia.

At the centennial celebration of the birth of the public schools in 1905, the following achievements were praised:

- the appointment of a superintendent to give expert supervision,
- the introduction of the graded system,
- the organization of the teacher training schools, and
- the development of advanced grammar schools and high schools.

After extensive investigation and examination of the administration of the public schools of the District of Columbia operating under the provisions of the Act of 1900, Congress passed a new "Organic Act" on June 20, 1906, vesting control of the public schools in a Board of Education consisting of nine members, all of whom shall have been five years resident in the District of Columbia immediately preceding their appointment, and three of whom must be women. The members of the Board, who served without compensation, were appointed by the District of Columbia Supreme Court judges for three year terms of office.

Despite the improvement and consolidation of Washington's public schools, an organizational dichotomy between white and black persisted until after the *Bolling V. Sharpe* Supreme Court decision in 1954.

The District public schools opened in September 13, 1954 with the desegregation plan going into operation for those students who were registering for the first time or who had moved from one part of the city to another. By 1955, reports concerning serious educational retardation and poor standardized test scores of tenth grade students resulted in the development of an ability grouping track system for student curricular assignment which, by 1959, had been approved by the Board of Education for the elementary, junior and senior high school levels.

The track system became the basis for a new court suit, *Hobson v. Hansen*, which was decided in June 1967. In his decision, U. S. Court of Appeals Judge 3. Skelly Wright held that ". . . ability grouping as presently practiced in the District of Columbia school system is a denial of equal opportunity to the poor and a majority of the Negroes attending school in the nation's capital, a denial that contravenes not only guarantees of the Fifth Amendment but also the fundamental premise of the track system itself." Thus, the court ordered that the track system be terminated.

Congress enacted in 1968 the District of Columbia Elected Board of Education Act which continues to vest control of the public schools of the District of Columbia in the Board of Education while changing its composition from nine appointed members to eleven elected representatives, eight of whom represent specific city wards, with three chosen by the electorate to represent the city on an at-large basis. The Act further provides that the term of office for Board members shall be four years. The first election of the Board of Education took place on November 5, 1968, and the members of the first elected Board of Education took office on January 27, 1969.

In 1971, the original plaintiffs in *Hobson V. Hansen* returned to Court in attempts to gain further relief which resulted in the Court ordering on May 25, 1971, that per pupil expenditures on the elementary level should not deviate plus or minus five percent from the city-wide mean, and the Board of Education was further ordered to file annually with the Court sufficient information which would prove compliance with the Order for equalization of per pupil expenditures. The modification by the Court in 1977 of this Order provided for a less complex formula for achieving equalization, and that the Court's Order would automatically terminate at the end of the ten year period, absent a showing by plaintiffs and providing that the Board of Education has adopted in its regulations equalization requirements that are consistent with the Court's Order.

Further litigation in 1971 had major impact upon public education in the District of Columbia. In the case of *Mills v. Board of Education*, the Board of Education, the Superintendent, the Mayor, and the District of Columbia were sued on behalf of seven children who had been identified as mentally retarded, emotionally disturbed, or having behavioral problems, and who had either been denied educational opportunities or dismissed by the public schools.

The problems articulated in this court action were two-fold: first, the D. C. Government had failed to provide suitable publicly supported education for handicapped and exceptional children; and second, the public school system had been suspending, expelling, excluding, reassigning and transferring students in some cases from regular classroom instruction without providing the students and their parents with due process by providing a fair opportunity to object through the means of a hearing.

On August 1, 1972, Judge Joseph C. Waddy ruled in favor of the plaintiffs and issued a landmark judgment and decree which ordered that: (1) no child of school age could be excluded from public schools unless the child is provided (a) another educational program suited to his or her needs which may incorporate special education or tuition grants, and (b)



Western High School c. 1890's
School is now Ellington School for the Arts

a satisfactory hearing and review of the child's status and appropriateness of the placement; (2) children cannot be dismissed from school without a hearing and an alternative educational program that included a periodic review; (3) each child in the District of Columbia must be provided a free education, regardless of the severity of the child's disability; (4) no child may be suspended from school for more than two days without a hearing before an impartial hearing officer and an alternative educational program provided for the child; and (5) children in special education must be evaluated by either public or private agencies in order to ensure suitable placement. In addition, Judge Waddy ordered a system of procedures to guarantee student's rights and special educational placement hearings, and directed the defendants to submit to the Court a comprehensive plan for the education of handicapped and exceptional children.

The first public schools in the District opened in 1805 in two little wooden school houses where fewer than fifty students were served by an initial operating budget of \$1,500. In 1981, over 100,000 students are enrolled in 190 schools supported by an estimated budget of \$297,655,154.

A review of nearly two centuries of public education in the District of Columbia reveals a continuing upward struggle to achieve educational excellence against ever-present problems, frequently opposing philosophies, and uncertain funding resources. Consonant with this tradition, the current Rules of the District of Columbia Board of Education mandate that the educational programs of the Public Schools shall be designed and implemented to provide an equal educational opportunity for all students to attain the knowledge, competencies, and skills which will enable each student to function as a useful citizen. It is with this dedication that public education in the Nation's Capital approaches the third century of its distinguished history.

Richard Hurlbut was the first director of the Sumner Museum and Archives.