
ORIGIN & FUNCTIONS

Before Maryland developed a system of public education in the nineteenth century, formal education was limited to the wealthy. They educated their children abroad or in local academies and considered education the duty of parents, not government. The British concept of “free schools,” privately endowed institutions providing a classical education to upper class children and subsidizing a few charity pupils, was influential. Nonetheless, legislative appropriations to private academies incensed farmers and poor folks who resented paying to educate rich men’s sons and thought taxation for school support was more of the same. Local opinion favored local control, and local politics brought poor teachers, mismanaged funds, and voter apathy. The fervor of Jacksonian democracy led to strong public educational systems elsewhere but had little effect in Maryland. Concern for education often was expressed and consensus rarely reached. Only when public outcry became insistent did the legislature act.

Colonial Education. In the colonial period, Maryland attempted to establish free schools. The General Assembly, in 1695, assessed a tax on the export of furs to raise funds for these schools. In 1696, certain gentlemen, having subscribed quite liberally themselves, were appointed as a board of trustees and visitors to establish first a free school in Annapolis, then one on the Eastern Shore, and ultimately a free school in each of the existing twelve counties, as funds allowed (Chapter 17, Acts of 1696). Yet, only one school was founded—King William’s School (later St. John’s College) in Annapolis. In 1717, another financing act taxed importation of Irish Catholic servants and Negro slaves to support public education (Chapter 10, Acts of 1717). Enough funds had accrued from the various taxes by 1723 for a distribution to be made to the twelve counties. Boards of trustees were appointed in each county and instructed to purchase one hundred acres of land in a central location with a dwelling house and other conveniences for a schoolmaster, who was to be paid twenty pounds per year (Chapter 19, Acts of 1723). A 1728 law specified that the schoolmaster was to teach as many poor children as the local board determined, indicating that the “free schools” were not tuition-free (Chapter 8, Acts of 1728). Apparently, schools established under the 1723 act soon were floundering due to lack of funds and qualified teachers, despite additional revenue from fines, forfeitures, and the estates of intestate persons. In several instances, county schools were absorbed by the flourishing private academies or consolidated with schools of adjoining counties.

Development of a Public School System. The idea that the new republic needed educated citizens had some impact in Maryland. In 1798, a prominent educator exhorted the General Assembly to establish a State board of education and a uniform system of public schools. In 1812, the State began to raise money for a Free School Fund by taxing the renewal of bank charters (Chapter 79, Acts of 1812). Legislation followed in 1816 providing for nine Commissioners of the School Fund in each county to distribute the Free School Fund (Chapter 256, Acts of 1816). Realizing that Fund monies would not be sufficient, five counties requested the first property tax assessment to pay for the education of poor children (Chapter 244, Acts of 1816). Caroline County voters were given the option of deciding whether their public school would be supported by voluntary contributions or property taxes (Chapter 250, Acts of 1816).

Some public schools were founded; a pattern of local diversity also was established with no statewide uniformity or accountability. The legislature kept passing local laws relating to public education for each county, and sometimes for the districts within a county. State appropriations were continued to favored private academies, while the Free School Fund dribbled monies to the county boards, which could divert funds to academies, invest the funds, or actually expend them on local schools.

A uniform system of primary school education for Maryland was attempted in 1825 (Chapter 162, Acts of 1825). Subject to referendum, the law was ratified only by a few counties and then amended repeatedly by local laws until little uniformity remained. The act called for a Superintendent of Public Instruction to prepare a statewide plan for education and oversee its execution. The levy court in each county was to appoint nine commissioners of primary schools who would divide the county into school districts, call a meeting of the taxpayers of each district, and receive the county’s share of the Free School Fund, accruing under the act of 1812. Taxpayers in each school district were to elect a clerk and three trustees, select a site for a schoolhouse, and vote on a rate of tax to support the district school. The trustees were in charge of building, repairing, and furnishing their district school, as well as hiring the teacher and submitting an annual report. Appointed by the levy court, school inspectors not only were to visit each school in the county, but also to certify teachers. This requirement may have reflected dissatisfaction with unqualified teachers; however, since no education was required to be a school inspector, the standards for teacher certification potentially could be very disparate.

Baltimore City was excepted from the provisions of the 1825 act if it established its own system of public education by 1830. This precedent caused problems later, as the vigorous resistance of Baltimore City to each successive attempt at a statewide system certainly caused several efforts to fail. Baltimore City opened its first public school in 1829, charged tuition of one dollar per term, and had an impressive percentage of its children, girls and boys, enrolled in schools.