



When the first Sacramento County Superintendent of Schools took office in 1853, no public schools were yet in existence in the county—despite the 1849 adoption of Article IX of the California State Constitution, which had provided for “common schools to be established in every district for at least three months every year.” In 1852, the state legislature had even voted to adopt a five-cent tax for each \$100 of taxable property for funding for schools. However, local officials failed in attempts to establish any public, or “common” schools that year.

The office of the County Superintendent of Schools was created in 1852 by state statute. Many counties delayed in filling this office, however, possibly because the statute had not determined the manner in which the County Superintendent was to be elected or appointed. In 1853 state law determined that the county assessor would serve as “Superintendent of Common Schools” for the county. It wasn’t until 1855 that the Superintendent of Schools would become a separate office and the County Board of Education would be created.

The challenge of providing public education in Sacramento County was immense. In the immediate aftermath of the 1848 California Gold Rush, the area’s population had dramatically increased. The city’s population count of April 1849 was just 150. By October of that year, the city’s population had skyrocketed to 2,000. The 1850 federal census showed a combined city-county population of 15,907. That figure included an estimated 400 school-age children. By 1851 eight townships were flourishing in the county.

Concerned citizens and religious congregations had tried to start schools in several locations, including a tent on the banks of the Sacramento River and a very small (14-by-20-foot) building on the edge of a nearby slough known as Sutter (or China) Lake, which later became the site of the Southern Pacific rail yard. For various reasons, none of the schools succeeded in staying open very long. In 1853 the public looked expectantly to the new County Superintendent of Schools for leadership. The first common (public) school opened February 20, 1854, in an old theater at the corner of Fifth and K streets in Sacramento. Others soon opened elsewhere. By July of that year, 500 children were enrolled in public and private schools in Sacramento County. By the end of 1854, the county’s school expenditures totaled \$22,000. The first elected County Superintendent took office in 1855.

The California Superintendent of the Department of Public Instruction reported in 1855 that schools had been established in 15 Sacramento County townships:

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| American Township | Brighton Township |
| Center Township | City of Sacramento Township |
| Cosumnes Township | Dry Creek Township |
| Georgiana Township | Mississippi Township |
| Natomas Township | Prairie Township |
| Sacramento Township | San Joaquin Township #1 |
| San Joaquin Township #2 | San Joaquin Township #3 |
| | Sutter Township |

Within 15 years, there were 52 public school districts throughout Sacramento County. School enrollment had reached 5,406 students. Among the County Superintendent’s responsibilities was to personally visit each one of the 66 schools in the county annually—a difficult task due to frequent flooding and the distance to be traveled by horse and buggy.

In the following decades, townships disappeared and cities grew. Smaller school districts merged to become larger districts in growth areas of the county.

As of 2003—150 years since the start of formal public education in the county—there were 16 public school districts within Sacramento County serving 232,612 students.

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