

**A Brief History
of the
Des Moines
Independent
Community
School District
upon its
One Hundredth
Anniversary**

by
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One hundred years ago the citizens of Des Moines were worried about taxes, annexation, politics in Washington, D.C., a new form of city government, building a new city hall, and consolidating the school districts around the city into one large system. While Des Moines has had schools since the fall of 1846 and the winter of 1847, the first of many school districts in Des Moines was formed in 1849; this was four years prior to the incorporation of the town of Fort Des Moines. Over the years there would be more than 20 independent school districts in what now includes the city limits of Des Moines.

In the 1908 Iowa Supreme Court decision that ratified the consolidation of the district it states, "Prior to May 21, 1907, there were 5 independent school districts wholly within the corporate limits of the city of Des Moines, and 12 such districts partly within and partly without said limits." By 1907, the year voters in Des Moines approved the merger of the East Des Moines School District and the West Des Moines School District, other suburban school districts had either merged with the East District or the West District, the Des Moines River serving as the general boundary dividing the two, or were affiliated with them, using the high schools in these two districts for their students. It needs to be noted that the name West Des Moines in 1907 referred to the area of the city that lay west of the Des Moines River to 63rd Street. The West Des Moines of today was originally called by its railroad name, Valley Junction. In 1937 the suburb voted to become West Des Moines.

Some of the school districts that existed before 1907 were Capitol Park – its high school was in the original building the we know today as Wallace School, North Des Moines – its high school was in the Forest Home School and later became North High School, Oak Park – its high school was located on the third floor of the original Oak Park School, and Grant Park – its high school was located in the east portion of the present day Willard School. The Oakdale District was located in the northwest part of the city – its original building was a log cabin near the site of Monroe School, and the Greenwood Park District which was located along and south of Grand Avenue.

The school merger was a major topic of discussion on both sides of the river in 1907. For a time, both school boards of the East and West school districts

wavered in their support of the merger. Numerous articles in the *Des Moines Register & Leader* during the last part of April and through the vote in May describe the change in attitudes.

The East school board was the first to come out in favor of the merger, while the West board originally came out against it. A May 12, 1907, article printed an open letter to the West school board from Drake University President Hill M. Bell, who stated, "It is the good school, not the poor one, that justifies the levy of taxes. A successful business man will always pay a little more for a good article, knowing that in the end it is the cheapest, as well as the best." The citizens in the West District were worried that their taxes would go up with the merger, as they felt the East District buildings were in need of great repair. President Hill went on to state that, "It is certainly futile to think of a great city here if one portion of it selfishly ignores another portion; and I submit to you that selfishness is the only consideration that would permit the people of any district to use their influence against consolidation and a Greater Des Moines school system."

As the days drew nearer to the vote, the newspaper reported upbeat articles that predicted a victory for one district. A May 14 headline for an article stated that an ex-board member of the West District "says he is willing to wager all kinds of hats and cigars that the vote will be heavy." He would

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**Hill M. Bell
President, Drake University, 1903-1918**

lose that bet. As in recent school-related elections the voter turnout was quite low, with only 4,000 or so citizens voting. This compared with 11,236 votes cast in the 1906 gubernatorial election. According to the newspaper, the merger of the districts fell out as follows: East – 2,146 for and 196 against; West – 932 for and 747 against. Documents obtained from the archives of the Iowa Supreme Court state the final "for" vote tally was 3,081 and the final "against" tally was 952, or a total of 4,033 votes cast. The day after the election, Wednesday, May 22, 1907, marked the beginning of the district known today officially as the Des Moines Independent Community School District, or Des Moines Public Schools/DMPS. Dissatisfied parties challenged the vote, and in 1908 the Iowa Supreme Court ruled the new district as official.

Dr. Robert Denny reported in his *1976 Bicentennial Reflections* that high schools in America during the latter half of the 1800s were not popular with a large segment of American society; as an institution, it kept children from working and contributing to the family's overall income. However, Des Moines showed an early commitment to education by establishing numerous high schools. The West District inaugurated its high school, West High, in 1864, graduating its first class in 1868. The East District launched its high school, East High, in 1861, with its first graduate, Elizabeth Matthews, graduating in 1871. Capitol Park organized its high school in 1874, and the North Des Moines District created its high school, North High, in 1889.

As the city grew to the east, west, and south, it became apparent that new high schools would be needed. East High moved from its first high school-only building at E. 12th and Court Avenue in 1911 to the present building on E. 13th Street in a procession led by Principal May Goodrell. The students carried their books, loaded all school furniture onto trucks or horse-drawn wagons and fell in behind Miss Goodrell and the GAR color guard. They marched up E. 12th Street from their old building to cheering crowds lining the streets, turning onto E. 13th and placing all the furniture, books, and records into their new building, the present EHS. School continued on for the rest of the day, and that became the origin of East's long-standing tradition of Class Day, where alumni gather to celebrate their high school days, have a banquet, and give out scholarships to graduating seniors.

Because of rapid westward growth in the city, planning began in 1917 to replace West High School at 15th and Center streets with a new high school that would open in 1923 as Theodore Roosevelt High School, located between 42nd Street and Polk Boulevard. West High would close in 1928 as a high school and reopen as a junior high school, eventually close down until 1942, and then reopened as Technical High School.

The first building built just for North High School was at 8th and College, the present site of Moulton School. The additions to old North serve as the core of Moulton today. In 1957 North High moved to its present site at 6th and Holcomb. Lincoln High School, SW 9th and Bell, was opened in September, 1923; it has always been the only high school in the southern part of Des Moines. Herbert Hoover High School came to be after a 1962 defeat of a bond issue that would have added much needed classrooms to both North and Roosevelt high schools. The next bond issue, February 1964, included a northwest high school that was named after the Iowa-born president on the same site as Meredith Junior High School. Hoover was the only air-conditioned high school in the district until recent renovations at East and Lincoln added this necessity. Parts of Hoover were completed enough for students to begin classes in September 1967.

Des Moines Technical High School was begun during World War II in 1942. Housed in the former West High School building, it remained at 15th and Center streets until the former Ford Motor Company and Solar Aircraft Company building at 1800 Grand was purchased, remodeled, and added to. The District offices moved into the Tech building in 1958, moving from their former offices at 692 3rd Street. Students began the 1957-58 school year in their new building. Tech students were the first in the Metro area to have their own radio station, and the district became a pioneer in educational television when it began broadcasting programs on KDPS – TV. Tech High was closed in 1986 and replaced by Central Campus, which today houses some district offices, the career and technical programs, Scavo Alternative High School, Future Pathways - a credit recovery program, Prep Academy, and English Language Learner (ELL) programs. The AP and dual credit college preparatory Central Academy is now also located in the Western Gateway at 11th and Grand in the Pappajohn Center.

Today the district continually evaluates its curriculum and makes the necessary changes to provide excellent educational opportunities to all students. It has always been this way, and here are some examples by year of electives to the core curriculum:

1870 – Moral Philosophy
 1871 – Bookkeeping and Ancient History
 1873 – Elocution, Physiology, Science of Government
 1875 – Zoology
 1879 – Cicero and English Composition
 1880 – Business
 1884 – Kindergarten established in Des Moines, Ancient Geography, Greek, French
 1888 – Solid Geometry, Stenography, and Commercial Geography
 1889 – Art, Typing, Shorthand, and Domestic Science
 1890 – Manual Training
 1891 – English History
 1892 – Music
 1893 – Office Practice
 1896 – Modern and Medieval History
 1899 – The West Des Moines School District voted free textbooks for students
 1901 – College Preparatory Course of Latin replaces Greek
 1905 – Four years of English required to graduate from high school
 1909 – Business Organization
 1914 – Salesmanship, Normal Training – pedagogy courses

American public schools have been shaped by historic events and accompanying philosophies. Five major events that have shaped education in America are as follows:

1. 1830s - Horace Mann's idea that a grammar school education was a right for every child in America.
2. 1874 – Kalamazoo, Michigan decision which authorized public funds for high schools.
3. 1944 – GI Bill of Rights which opened the doors to higher education to millions of American servicemen and women. A 1971 study estimated over 11 million veterans had taken advantage of the benefits of this and succeeding bills.
4. 1954 – *Brown vs. The Board of Education of Topeka* - In a landmark ruling, the U.S. Supreme Court struck down “separate but equal” racial segregation in public schools. Desegregation implementation plans began in Des Moines in 1968 with a voluntary transfer program. This program was eventually ruled as non-compliant in 1976, and a desegregation plan was drawn up and implemented in 1977 that included busing of students to various paired schools and those with open enrollment.
5. 1968 – *Tinker v. the Des Moines Independent Community School District* - The Supreme Court decision that affirmed students' rights to free expression of speech guaranteed in the First Amendment and the Due Process Clause of the Fourteenth. The famous line from the ruling stated that, “...Students do not shed their right to free speech at the schoolhouse gate.” Des Moines administrators changed their policy of limiting student expression to comply with the court's ruling.

Other events to transform the district were open enrollment, begun in 1972, and school closings due to declining enrollment in the decades of the 1970s and 1980s. In the 1970s Extended Day Kindergarten classes began. In 1983 junior high schools became “transitional” schools when they became 6-8 buildings; in 1986 the name changed again as these transitional schools became “middle” schools. Also in 1986 the district closed Tech High School and

opened Central Campus, which combined Advanced Placement courses with career and technical courses under one roof in the former Technical High School building.

District leaders saw the need for creating alternative educational experiences for students not successful in traditional school settings by adding alternative schools at the high school and middle school grade levels in the 1980s. This followed the long tradition of meeting the needs of all students as evidenced in the programs at Smouse Opportunity School, and Slinker School, which became Ruby Van Meter School. Students from across Metro Des Moines attend these excellent schools.

In the 1960s DMPS pioneered gifted educational opportunities; these programs would become models for school districts throughout the state and nation.

Student enrollment was another factor that greatly impacted the district in the latter part of the 20th century and into the 21st century. As the post-war Baby boomers came of school age, their numbers were reflected in Des Moines school enrollment. In 1958 there were 40,422 students enrolled. During the peak enrollment year of 1967, there were 46,561 students enrolled in the district.

By 1988, the total enrollment figure stood at 30,465, which is just a few hundred more than the enrollment for 2007. The Des Moines Metro area is growing at a fast pace while the City of Des Moines continues to lose residents. This translates into steadily growing suburban districts and a shrinking city district.

Just as the citizens of Des Moines and their school leaders looked for ways to improve the city's schools in 1907 by merging the East Des Moines and West Des Moines school districts into one city district to expand educational opportunities for students, Des Moines citizens and school leaders in 2007 are keeping this spirit of excellence alive. To better meet the needs of a large and diverse student population, the superintendent has created three regions within the city – Northeast, Northwest, and South – and grouped the various elementary and middle schools along high school feeder pattern lines to create communities with a community. More flexibility to meet regional needs and tailor educational programs that reflect the special needs of students are the foundation of this re-alignment. Des Moines Public Schools continues on in the tradition of its founding districts by adapting to the needs of Des Moines citizens to provide excellent educational opportunities to Des Moines students in the 21st century.



LEGACY SCHOOLS 1907-2007

ELEMENTARY BUILDINGS STILL STANDING & OWNED BY THE DISTRICT

Cassady School: original building on site constructed in 1905; additions in 1926, 1953; former home of an alternative high school, and from 1999-2007, district administrative offices; Cassady was named for Phineas M. Cassady, prominent Des Moines pioneer lawyer, first postmaster of Des Moines, a state senator responsible for legislation naming 40 Iowa counties, 5th District U.S. Judge, and founder and president of the Des Moines Savings Bank.

Cattell School: original building on site constructed in 1890; old building torn down and new one built in 1992; named for DM pioneer Jonathan Cattell.

Greenwood School: original building on site constructed in 1901; additions in 1924, 1961, 2002, 2007; named for the spacious woodlands that surrounded the school grounds and the suburb of Greenwood Park; the school district by the same name existed until 1900, when it merged with the West Des Moines School District.

McKinley School: original building on site constructed in 1904; additions in 1927, 2002; named for President William McKinley. McKinley School was a part of the West Des Moines School District when the 1907 merger vote was taken.

Oak Park School: original building on site constructed in 1891; additions in 1900, 1925, 1954, 1977, 2004; 1891 & 1900 additions torn down in 2003; named for the forest of oak trees that grew in the area. Oak Park School was originally a K-12 building for the Oak Park School District.

Park Avenue School: original building on site constructed in 1885; additions in 1890, 1905, 1914, 1950, and 1972; the 1885, 1890, and 1905 buildings were torn down; the 1885 building and first two additions were built by the Park Avenue School District, which merged into the Des Moines Independent School District in 1909.

Wallace School: original building on site constructed in 1890; additions in 1910, 1923, 1954, and 1991 – the original building has been demolished; named for Henry C. Wallace, Secretary of Agriculture for President Woodrow Wilson. The 1890 building housed the Capital Park High School, which closed in December after the 1907 school district merger. The building is now closed, and students attend the new George Washington Carver School.

HIGH SCHOOLS ESTABLISHED BEFORE 1907 STILL IN EXISTENCE

East High School: 1861, located on the top floor of Bryant School, East 9th Street and East Grand Avenue; 1891 first building just for EHS, East 12th Street and Court Avenue; 1911, second building, present site, 815 East 13th Street; additions in 1955, 1966, 2005.

North High School: 1889, located in the Forest Home School, Forest Avenue between 13th and 14th streets; 1895 first building just for NHS, 8th Street and College Avenue, additions in 1915, 1929; 1957, second building, present site, 501 Holcomb Avenue, addition in 1967.

