

History of school funding in Ohio: From 1825 to the 1851 constitutional provision that required the state to secure a thorough and efficient system of common schools.

The state was slow to develop the common school system after establishing it in 1825. The problem seemed to be funding. Initially there was no provision for state funding. Also, there was no state agency to advise the legislature regarding public education or for the management of the 16th section (640 acres) of each township that had been set aside for the maintenance of public schools. To be blunt, the legislature, generally speaking, squandered the 16th section of each township by long term leases—in some cases 100 years—and selling these lands at a give-away price. One report is that a senator gained title to several sections. Try to imagine that 640 acres in each township was still available for the maintenance of public schools.

Originally there were 1362 townships. (In the range of 50 townships have been totally absorbed by towns and cities; thus, currently there are 1309 townships in Ohio.) Hence, the income in the range of 872,000 acres of land would be available to schools had the state officials exercised appropriate fiduciary responsibility for such lands.

In 1837 the legislature established the position of Superintendent of Common Schools and directly employed Samuel Lewis as superintendent. (The same year, Horace Mann was engaged in Massachusetts as Commissioner of Common Schools.) Lewis rode horseback throughout the state visiting schools to assess the condition of the system. He reported his findings (which were dismal) to the legislature. One of his reports to the legislature lamented the squandering of the township section 16 lands. Lewis' work set the stage for improvement in the common school system, but he resigned in 1840. It appears that the legislature had had enough advice from a public school advocate. The legislature abolished the position and assigned state education duties to the Secretary of State.

An interesting development happened in 1847. The town of Akron had developed a plan to bring all the districts in the town limits under one board of education. The legislature seemed to have liked that concept and passed the Akron Law which set the stage for the organization of city school districts.

The next post will review the work of the delegates to the Constitutional Convention of 1850 and 1851 regarding the common school system.