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A TIME OF CHANGE: PUBLIC EDUCATION IN GALENA, ILLINOIS DURING
THE POSTWAR ERA

A Thesis Submitted to the Graduate School
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of
Master of Arts

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Pittsburg, Kansas

April 2017

A TIME OF CHANGE: PUBLIC EDUCATION IN GALENA, ILLINOIS DURING
THE POSTWAR ERA

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This thesis was the end result of several years of coursework and research. It would not have been possible without the assistance of family, friends, colleagues, and especially the Pittsburg State faculty. I would like to thank Dr. Kelly Woestman for taking the time to be my advisor on this project. Her Modern America courses helped shape my understanding of the time period and it was ultimately her encouragement to pursue the thesis option that led me down this path. I am grateful she came along for the ride. Dr. Kristin Lawson bent over backwards to assist me with my program during my time at Pittsburg State. She has always gone the extra mile, whether helping me improve my writing, or taking time to show my family around the campus. Her efforts are truly appreciated. I am thankful that Rebeca Book took the time to serve on my committee. To have a Galena, Illinois native on the PSU faculty showed me how small this world is. That her mother taught in Galena schools during the time of my research was incredible. I would also like to thank the staff of the Illinois State Archives for making my visit there a wonderful experience. Their professionalism and assistance was appreciated. Steve Repp at the Galena Public Library was an amazing asset. His assistance in tracking down sources proved invaluable. My time in the library's Alfred Mueller Historical Collections room was enjoyable, especially visiting and learning from the "regulars," including Dale and Eldon Glick. Finally I would like to thank my family who have been supportive from the beginning, allowing me time to check out and complete coursework and research. While I am sure she has not always enjoyed it, I appreciate my wife Rose taking on extra duties, including driving on multiple long trips so I could read or write during these past few years. She has been supportive every step of the way and is a true

partner in crime. Our children Corrina, Hayes, and Everett have kept me motivated with their excitement about my program and thesis. The Gorillas definitely gained three new fans through all of this. Finally, I'd like to thank my parents, Roger and Debra Noble, for providing the upbringing, experiences, and support that has gotten me to this point.

A TIME OF CHANGE: PUBLIC EDUCATION IN GALENA, ILLINOIS DURING THE POSTWAR ERA

An Abstract of the Thesis by
Brett Noble

The years after World War II brought profound changes to American society. The expansion of government power, the influence of experts, and the demand to conform joined with technological innovations to revamp institutions throughout the United States. Public education underwent sweeping changes during this time. The revision of tax codes, curriculum initiatives, and improved transportation brought about the end of the one-room schoolhouse.

In Galena, Illinois, a small city in the state's northwestern corner, the school system emerged from the war years in need of reform. Overcrowded schools and a skeletal and outdated curriculum brought calls from residents for improvement. Unfortunately, the district's financial situation prevented immediate actions. Only after a series of state laws brought about the end of rural districts, was Galena able to seriously pursue change. This thesis argues that during the postwar era, state regulations, curriculum changes, and social issues such as an expanding population and a desire to keep up with neighboring communities fundamentally changed the public education system in Galena. It also examines the effect of those changes on the district in the years after enacting an infrastructure improvement plan.

The city of Galena continues to deal with the repercussions of postwar educational reforms. This research seeks to shed light on the impetus of those changes,

providing guidance to current residents on how and why the district arrived at the current situation.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION: GALENA UNIT SCHOOL DISTRICT #120 DURING THE “CRUCIAL DECADE.”

In 1956, historian Eric F. Goldman published *The Crucial Decade: America, 1945-1955*. The book argued that the preceding ten years fundamentally changed the course of American history. The events, social trends, and policies created in the immediate aftermath of World War II would forever alter the United States government’s role both at home and abroad. Changes that had been taking place since the Progressive Era, through the Great Depression, New Deal, and World War II, now bore fruit. The decade would see increased government involvement in nearly every aspect of American life. One of these areas was public education. Policies and initiatives at both the national and, especially, the state level would fundamentally change the role of education in American society.¹

These reforms affected not just the nation’s large urban areas, but also the small towns and rural areas. In the small northwest Illinois city of Galena, the impact of legislation and other postwar social trends would dramatically alter a school district that had functioned relatively untouched since the mid-nineteenth century. Ultimately, this major overhaul of Galena Unit School District #120 during the postwar era resulted from changes in state law, a shifting curriculum, and internal community factors. The impact

of these modifications would alter the district's size, finances, and curricular offerings going forward, and continues to be felt today.

In the years following World War II, the state of Illinois engaged in major school reforms. Seeking to cut the number of school districts down and create equitable educational opportunities, the Illinois State Assembly passed legislation aimed at forcing consolidation. Throughout the state, districts were both encouraged, and sometimes forced, to give up their independence and merge with neighboring schools. These legislative changes had a profound impact on school districts in Jo Daviess County, of which Galena was the county seat. District #120 expanded through annexation and as a result acquired more territory, students, and tax dollars. These additions necessitated changes to both the district's legal structure, as well as its infrastructure.

The 1950s also saw a change in the nature of educational curriculum. Nationwide initiatives and state legislation sought to improve offerings to students of all ages. Early childhood experts advocated kindergartens to prepare children for school. Educators emphasized physical activity and playgrounds to promote wellness. The state encouraged school districts to embrace a junior high concept and expose students to various courses. Perhaps most importantly, high schools were encouraged to expand their curriculum to better prepare students for the new postwar world they would be entering. High school was no longer just for those attending college. Educational leaders pushed courses that stressed civics, vocational training, and homemaking. Communities expected public schools to prepare all children to be productive members of society.

In Galena, residents demanded these various curriculum reforms. The postwar era saw community efforts to create a public kindergarten and expand recreational areas.

The school board spent considerable time attempting to find ways to offer shop classes, agriculture, driver education, and other courses. Ultimately the need for space to offer these classes pushed the board to undertake an ambitious building plan that would construct a new high school and make substantial renovations to Central school. Before the first wall could go up however, community support would be needed to pass multiple referendums that would create the modern District #120 and grant the board permission to sell bonds to finance new construction.

Ultimately, the campaigns to improve education in Galena found success due to ongoing efforts to revitalize the community. Various groups took the lead to ensure Galena students were receiving a top-notch education. The PTA, Lions Club, and other civic organizations organized the effort to pass the referendum that resulted in a new high school in 1955. The business community, led by the local Chamber of Commerce supported the tax increase required to build improve infrastructure. The local newspaper was an ardent supporter of efforts to update both the curriculum and buildings.

Throughout the decade's first half, voters routinely passed referendums designed to improve the schools. Without the support of residents, District #120 would have been unable to make the changes required by the state, and advocated by educational leaders.

From the end of World War II through the 1950s, Galena public schools underwent vast changes. During that time, voters passed four ballot initiatives that ultimately reshaped the district boundaries, finances, and infrastructure. Residents voted to end a unique special state charter that had governed the district for nearly one hundred years. Annexation enlarged the district to eight times its original size. The district expanded from one building to five by acquiring or reopening four school buildings.

Renovations at Central school created more space for additional classes. Perhaps most importantly, the community came together to construct a brand new high school in an undeveloped area of the city. This had the intended effect of sparking residential growth in that section of town. It also resulted in a major restructuring as four buildings were closed, including all rural schools, and Galena became a two building district. Despite the consolidation of facilities, the new high school allowed for expanded programming for both elementary and secondary students.

This thesis traces the history of Galena Unit District #120 from its nineteenth century origins through the 1950s. A brief overview Galena's early history and its early schools provides the reader with an understanding of how the district took the form that emerged from World War II. An examination of changes in Illinois state law gives insight into external factors pushing the district towards the changes that occurred in the postwar era. The issue of school reorganization in rural Illinois sheds light on how the district expanded its borders. Community efforts to improve both the curriculum and infrastructure ultimately resulted in a campaign to build a new high school. Finally, this research explores the reforms' unexpected consequences and problems that arose as the district expanded and modernized.

The issues that faced Galenians in the 1950s have not disappeared. Residents are still dealing with initiatives involving infrastructure, curriculum, and finances. The high school building constructed during the postwar era is again the focal point of a community effort to improve District #120 for twenty-first century students. In order to understand the current situation facing Galena schools, one must contemplate how the community arrived at this point. The modern Galena Unit School District #120 is the

result of external changes brought about by state mandated reorganization, internal efforts to modernize curriculum and infrastructure, and efforts by citizens to revitalize the community for the new, modern postwar world.

CHAPTER II

THE EARLY YEARS: EDUCATION IN ILLINOIS AND GALENA PRIOR TO 1945

Public education has played a pivotal role in the United States' development. Prior to independence, communities in the thirteen British colonies established the basic structure that would shape the system that developed over the next two centuries. While public schools are a hallmark of American democracy, they are largely the domain of the individual states, and administered by local governments. The system that developed in Illinois over the first hundred and twenty-five years of its existence would result in major reform in the years after World War II. By examining the influence of Illinois educational policy on the city of Galena, one can understand the impact of state law on local schools, and the changes that would come.

The first public school in Illinois began in Cahokia twenty-four years before the state entered the union in 1818. While the state constitution did not create an educational system, the General Assembly passed the Act Providing For the Establishment of Free Schools in 1825. The law set the precedent for school district creation. Residents simply petitioned the county court to establish a district. This led to the establishment of thousands of districts across the state, most supporting only a single one-room schoolhouse. By the 1940s, the state of Illinois would have nearly 12,000 districts to

oversee. This inefficiency would lead to major reforms that had a profound impact on communities such as Galena.²

The city of Galena sits in the northwest corner of Illinois. Named for the lead that created the mid-nineteenth century boomtown, Galena was one of the most important cities in the Mississippi River corridor during the era. Located on the Galena River, near its confluence with the Mississippi, the community became a major steamboat stop and marketplace. The city reached its peak population of around 12,000 in the years before the Civil War and gained widespread fame as the prewar home to Ulysses S. Grant.

Nine years before its incorporation in 1835, residents established a subscription school in Galena. These institutions were open to the children of any family who could pay the tuition, or “subscription.” The coursework was similar to what one would expect to find in a common school. In the proceeding years, multiple instructors would set up subscription schools in the community.³

The city’s charter, approved by the state of Illinois, created the community’s public school system. In 1841, the city council passed an ordinance outlining the system’s structure. Instead of an independently elected school board, a board appointed by the mayor managed the schools. When the Illinois Constitution of 1870 created a statewide structure for school districts, the General Assembly grandfathered Galena’s charter in. This would have a major impact on the district’s future. State law dictated that special charter districts could not expand their boundaries beyond what the charter specified. This meant that District #120 was restricted to the boundaries of the city proper and ultimately, locked into a low assessed value. Before any changes could take

place in the years after World War II, the city's special school charter would have to end.⁴

By the 1840s, Galena was home to dozens of schools. While various religious denominations organized many schools, two public common schools existed along with several institutions of higher learning including the Galena Academy, and the English High School.⁵ The Galena Female Academy, affiliated with the statewide Ladies' Association for the Education of Females, provided training to the next generation of common school teachers. There was no shortage of educational opportunity for young people in Galena.⁶

A century before the changes examined in this thesis, Galena experienced a similar crisis in its public schools. An expanded population taxed the city's classrooms. Overcrowding led to calls for additional buildings and rigid attendance boundaries for the district's schools. Fearful that the community was falling behind other cities in the state, residents began advocating for a public high school.⁷

While there is much debate over where the first public high school in Illinois was located, legislation passed in 1855 and 1857 hastened their development. Pushing for graded schools, the General Assembly created multiple ways for districts, whether urban or rural, to create high schools. In the next two years, more than three dozen communities, including Galena, established high schools as part of their public school system.⁸

Following the lead of others, Illinois high schools typically followed curriculum of pioneering schools in the East. The schools offered a classical education based around Latin, mathematics, science, and history. These schools were preparing young men for

college or a career in business. Female students were often preparing for service as a teacher.⁹

Soon after the Illinois School Law of 1855 took effect, residents of Galena began agitating for a public high school. For two years beginning in 1857, various groups pressed the mayor and council for funds to establish a central school that would house a fully graded school with primary, intermediate, grammar, and high school sections. An editorial in the Northwestern Gazette worried that Galena had fallen behind other communities and called on the city government to act.¹⁰

Finally, the school board established a public high school in 1859. Classes began immediately in rented space while construction began on a new central school building. Upon opening in January of 1861, Central housed all grade levels and became the Galena's flagship school. The early curriculum and purpose was in line with that of other high schools in the state. Thus, the district's basic structure for the next ninety years was established. Galena would continue to have a central school housing all levels, with other satellite elementary schools serving the various areas of town. This would lead to overcrowding, little space for new courses, and an inability to expand. It would take nearly a century to find a solution to these problems.¹¹

During the last quarter of the nineteenth century, the number of school districts in Illinois skyrocketed. High schools increased from 110 in 1876 to 531 in 1912. To facilitate public education, and encourage the establishment of high schools, the state created multiple types of school districts. Laws passed in the first decade of the twentieth century created a non-high school district in each county. Non-high districts were made up of elementary school districts that did not operate high schools. Any student who

graduated eighth grade in a non-high district was able to enroll at the nearest public high school and have his or her tuition paid for by the student's elementary district. While this encouraged high school attendance, it provided little impetus for reorganization or consolidation. The number of school districts in Illinois continued to rise. This disorganized approach created troubles that would ultimately lead to the intensive reforms in the post-World War II era.¹²

In April 1904, tragedy struck the Galena School district. Central School burned to the ground. While authorities arranged for students to finish the school year in various community spaces, the effort to rebuild the school hit a snag due to the special state charter that enabled the district to exist. Because Galena was not part Illinois' General School Code, the school board was unable to call a referendum to secure bonds to rebuild the high school. Rather than abandon the special charter and reorganize under the current school law, community leaders petitioned the state government to pass legislation allowing city governments to issue bonds to support schools under their jurisdiction. The lobbying worked and legislation passed allowing the Galena city council to hold an election seeking voter support of a bond issue. Residents overwhelmingly approved the measure and a new Central School was constructed. Despite the construction of a larger, modern school, this episode represents a missed opportunity that would lead to many of the district's troubles over the next half-century. Keeping the charter meant the district could not expand beyond the city's borders. City politics would continue to affect school policies. Continuing to house grades one through twelve at Central would soon lead to overcrowding and a lack of space for new courses of study in the high school. The

special charter may have been a source of pride in the community, but it also became the bane of its existence, only remedied by the major mid-twentieth century reforms.¹³

The first quarter of the twentieth century saw statewide changes to curriculum and administration. The classical education that had been the high school's hallmark slowly gave way to progressive education reform. High schools embraced vocational training and home economics to prepare students, the majority of whom were not going on to attend college, for careers and homemaking. Following the lead of schools across the nation, the Galena school board would adjust not only the curriculum, but also the superintendent's role. During this time, many school boards relinquished control of day-to-day operations and the position of superintendent shifted from simply supervising teachers, to taking over as chief decision maker in districts. By the 1930s, superintendents in Galena had taken on this powerful new role. This development would be key in advancing the reforms that took center stage after World War II.¹⁴

The spirit of reform and school improvement that marked the Progressive Era came to end as America entered the Great Depression. Combined with World War II, the fifteen years from 1930 through 1945 saw public schooling in Illinois take a back seat to more pressing matters. Throughout the state, districts trimmed local budgets and reduced teacher salaries. The dropout rate increased as students helped at home or moved with their families in search of work. The quality of education offered to remaining Illinois students declined as layoffs increased the student to teacher ratio in many classrooms. Districts shortened school years and cut curriculum.¹⁵

In Galena, many non-core courses, including manual training and the agriculture program, ended. Efforts to construct new buildings were put on hold as local

infrastructure investment throughout the state slowed. Still, despite economic hardships, Galena residents passed three bond referendums during this time period to keep the schools functioning. In 1939, a \$20,000 bond issue passed to match a federal Public Works Administration grant allowing for renovations on existing schools. Voters staved off further curriculum cuts with by agreeing to a bond issue in 1942. The following year, residents again agreed to a tax increase to pay teachers' salaries. These successful referendums during tough economic times demonstrate the community's dedication to public education and foreshadow the efforts made after World War II to improve District #120. Citizens were not willing to allow the curriculum cuts of this difficult time period to become permanent, and rallied in the decade following the war to not only restore courses, but pick up the reform spirit that dominated the years prior to the stock market crash.¹⁶

Galena was not alone in advancing the cause of education during the difficult years brought on by the Great Depression and World War II. In a special session, the Illinois General Assembly, seeking to assist struggling districts, passed legislation granting a percentage of motor fuel taxes to schools. Continuing to push for the efficiency of consolidated districts, in 1938 legislators passed a bill granting the first ever state aid for student transportation. The same year also saw high schools receive general state aid for the first time. At the federal level, National Youth Administration funds led to guidance and counseling in Illinois schools.¹⁷

In 1941, the Illinois General Assembly passed legislation creating county committees to study district reorganization. The goal was to reduce the number of districts from nearly 12,000 to an amount more in line with other states. Unfortunately,

World War II took away much of the campaign's steam. Faced with teacher shortages and increased numbers of students leaving school early due to the war, the reorganization effort was put on the backburner as the state dealt with the unique circumstances of war. The campaign to reduce the number of school districts and increase efficiency and educational opportunity would be the first priority for the state in the postwar era.¹⁸

The first century of public education in Galena, Illinois was profoundly impacted by state policy as well as national trends. While this resulted in many positives such as the establishment of age-based grades, a high school, and progressive education reform, the inefficiencies created by state policies indirectly led to looming changes for District #120. The need for more space and a larger tax base to facilitate expansion would come together with state mandated reorganization to permanently alter the district.

As World War II came to end, education in Illinois was ripe for reform. Two major issues loomed larger than others did. The financial inequality between school districts, and the quality of curriculum and classroom instruction concerned state leaders. The General Assembly sought to address those issues and others with a series of bills designed to reduce the number of districts in Illinois and increase state funding of public education initiatives. These reforms would change the face of education in Illinois and lead to a reformation of Galena Unit District #120.

CHAPTER III

THE COUNTY SCHOOL SURVEY LAW AND ITS IMPACT ON GALENA UNIT SCHOOL DISTRICT #120

In 1945, after a decade and a half of instability caused by economic depression and war, the Illinois General Assembly, like many state governments across the nation, turned its attention to school reform. While Illinois schools had a reputation for progressive changes in education, inequality plagued the system. Due to many stand-alone school laws passed throughout more than a century of public education, 11,955 districts existed within the Illinois – 3,000 more than any other state in the union. In order to decrease the number of school districts, improve education funding, and create a more equitable education for all Illinois youth, the General Assembly passed the County School Survey Law in the summer of 1945. The survey's results would not only change the school district's boundaries, but would also have a major impact on Galena's infrastructure and curriculum.¹⁹

In early 1945, the 64th General Assembly of Illinois sought to take on an issue that had been vexing it for some time. School reform was once again in the spotlight. However, in addition to curriculum changes and the ongoing battle for additional state aid, the state government looked to address multiple issues through wholesale reorganization of local government. House Bill #406 sought to reduce the number of

school districts from a nation leading 11,995 districts to a more manageable number. By reducing the number of local governments, the General Assembly hoped to address a multitude of issues facing education in Illinois.²⁰

Illinois House Bill #406, known as the County School Survey Act, called for major study of school reorganization. It empowered county superintendents of schools to organize a meeting of all district school board members. Members would then vote on whether or not to pursue the study of reorganization. If approved, the county would create a nine member committee to study the issue and report their findings to both the state, as well as to their residents. The end goal would reorganize hundreds of districts in each county, through popular elections, to a handful of unit districts.²¹

Approved by the General Assembly on June 20, 1945, the County School Survey Act made school reorganization a major initiative. By reorganizing districts, the General Assembly sought to alleviate a myriad of problems. Improving the economic inequality amongst county districts was a major motivating factor. They hoped a more equitable assessed value brought about by larger districts would lead to improvements in tax rates and per pupil expenditures. Legislators surmised that this would lead to improved educational opportunities, especially at the high school level, by enlarging enrollments and increasing tax revenues, thereby allowing districts to expand curriculum. By reducing the number of board members and administrators, the law sought to streamline students' path from grade one through twelve. A single unit curriculum would lessen the issues that arose when students moved from one district as they left common schools and entered high schools.²²

By mid-summer of 1945, Governor Dwight Green had signed the County School Survey Act into law. Counties throughout Illinois began forming committees to take on the task of school reorganization. In Jo Daviess County, Superintendent of Schools F.L. Burns held a meeting of county school board members to consider forming a committee under the law. The board members promptly rejected the proposal, making the county one of only nine out of one hundred two counties in the state to refuse to take part in the reorganization effort.²³ Two years later, in 1947, the state passed another law calling on county superintendents to request another meeting seeking to form a School Survey Committee. On November 14, 1947, Jo Daviess school board members made the decision to move ahead with the survey. They then elected nine fellow members to serve on the committee. Beginning in January 1948, the committee would spend the next fifteen months creating a reorganization plan for the school districts in the county.²⁴

By the time the committee ended its initial investigation in the spring of 1949, Jo Daviess County hovered around 21,000 residents.²⁵ Yet, the rural county in northwest Illinois contained 112 independent school districts. Of these, ninety-four operated only a one-room schoolhouse. A wide variety of other types of districts made up the rest. Galena Unit District #120 was one of only three unit districts operating in the county. The committee sought to reduce the numerous one-room districts in the county to a small number of unit districts.²⁶

The Jo Daviess County School Survey Committee issued its tentative report on May 24, 1949, and recommended the creation of four unit districts. District "A" would combine two of three unit districts already in existence by merging Galena and East Dubuque, along with all, or parts of, twenty-three other districts in the county's northwest

corner.²⁷ District “A” would be contain both the largest overall population, as well as the largest student enrollment. The other three proposed districts would be similar in geographic size, but contain fewer residents and have a smaller student population.²⁸

In the months after the tentative report’s issuance, public hearings were held throughout the county. After several alterations, voters in two proposed unit districts, “C” and “D,” approved their creation. Further discussion ensued before the committee modified the remaining two proposed districts. The committee then filed its Final Report on December 24, 1949. The residents in the two remaining proposed districts would have a chance to vote on the recommendations in the spring.²⁹

On Saturday March 18, 1950, the voters in the areas affected by the proposed district “A” went to the polls. Seven different precincts, three “urban” and four “rural,” cast ballots on their school districts’ reorganization into a single entity. The measure was soundly defeated in both the rural and urban areas by large margins.³⁰ The district’s size, uncertainty over school closures, and the loss of local power all factored into the proposition’s defeat.

While newspaper reports of the public forums leading up to the election made it clear that question and answer sessions were lively, they failed to provide much detail into voters’ specific concerns. Reporters pointed out that rural voters seemed to make up a majority of those in attendance at the meetings. One can reason that the amount of attention the committee and county superintendent paid to differentiating between consolidation and reorganization meant that this was a major issue to voters, and losing control over their children’s education certainly weighted on their minds. While the proposal did not include the closing of any schools, many understood that a new school

board, elected by a popular vote in the new district, would most certainly be made up of those from the urban areas. If the new district sought to save money and equalize education, then one could surmise that it would shutter rural schools and then bus the affected children to the city schools. Facing this certainty, voters in the rural districts chose to continue to fight for independence.

Much like the rural voters, urban voters in East Dubuque faced a similar outlook. There the measure went down in flames with only 40 votes supporting the proposal, and 209 votes against.³¹ Long time rivals, it was not difficult to see why East Dubuque residents would not be interested in joining with Galena, a city more than twice its size. While committee members insisted that reorganization and consolidation were not the same, the long game meant that schools would eventually close. East Dubuque residents would not want to see their high school disappear and their children hauled off to the county seat fifteen miles away.

In Galena, the community most likely to keep its schools and be the center of the new district, the citizens narrowly defeated the proposal with 204 votes in favor, but 272 votes against the measure.³² One can assume the proposition of sharing power with two other municipalities helped sink the district. Old rivalries and a desire to keep one of the oldest high schools in Illinois under local control also factored into the vote. It is also clear that the proposal's major benefits did not apply to the Galena district. Unlike the rural districts, Galena was already operating as a unit district and had a streamlined curriculum, transportation program, and administration. Annexation would later prove Galenians were not afraid of expansion; they simply wanted it on their terms.

With the reorganized unit district plan's defeat, Galena Unit District #120 began to seek other solutions to the problems that plagued it at the beginning of the 1950s. Throughout 1948 and 1949, the school board had discussed the addition of new curriculum, renovations of existing facilities, and new infrastructure. While limited finances precluded immediate action, the Jo Daviess County School Survey Committee's looming recommendations halted any major action by the district. With the possibility of the new district suggested by the committee removed from the table, Galena would now have to seek other solutions to the issues facing its schools.

As the decade got underway, one thing was for sure in Galena. The community would not be part of a reorganized district that included other municipalities in the area. Education in Galena would remain independent. Expansion would not come by way of the ballot, but changing laws in Illinois would make possible another alternative. Annexation of non-high school districts would become a key component of expanding the district and increasing the tax base, making possible the educational goals of Galena residents and their elected leaders.

CHAPTER IV

THE EARLY 1950S: CURRICULUM AND INFRASTRUCTURE DEFICIENCIES

TAKE CENTER STAGE

The proposed unit district's defeat in 1950 only exacerbated the issues facing the Galena public school district. Before the year was through, demands for increased course offerings, a public kindergarten, and new infrastructure took center stage in the community. Within a year of the referendum, the district received studies from the Illinois State Board of Education outlining areas of improvement and suggesting changes in the district. Ultimately, these issues would bring about a series of changes that resulted in the school district abandoning its long held charter, reorganizing as a unit district, and annexing additional land into its territory.

While voters turned down the Jo Daviess County School Survey Committee's proposed unit district "A," the public continued advocating for improved schools. During the committee's work, from 1947 through early 1950, both residents and the school board had proposed expanded curriculum and advocated for much needed space. However, due to the district's uncertain future, the board was hesitant to act on any issue requiring new funding, or calling for infrastructure improvements. Instead, major issues shifted to the backburner while the board waited on the public's vote.

With the unit plan defeated, residents once again began pushing for school improvements. In August of 1950, citizens presented a petition to the board insisting that the district add a kindergarten to the curriculum. The board adopted a resolution claiming support for a kindergarten as a “valuable addition to the educational program of the community” but maintained it was unable to proceed due to inadequate space and sanitary facilities at Central. Members suggested that in order to obtain the funds needed to add kindergarten, the district could hold a referendum.³³

With talk of a referendum, school board members began revisiting other issues. The discussions involving kindergarten shifted to improvements at the high school. Members suggested an addition to house agriculture, industrial arts, and science labs in order to create space for additional programs. At this point, the issue of adding programs came full circle.³⁴

Realizing the district needed to increase its tax revenue, the board revisited the possibility of forming a unit district. University of Illinois College of Education professor Dr. Arthur W. Clevenger visited with the board in December 1950. He encouraged the board to explore the creation of a unit district that would double District #120’s assessed valuation. Clevenger argued that once a unit district was created, surrounding rural districts would likely petition to be a part of it. Any plan for a new school building should take into account this future growth. The following month the board began the process of exploring district expansion and set up a meeting with a representative from the Illinois Farm Bureau to discuss the benefits of a unit district with rural residents.³⁵

At the school board meeting on March 13, 1951, school improvement took the spotlight. The board had recently obtained several reports from the state that highlighted the district's problems and offered multiple recommendations. Published in their entirety in the local newspaper at the request of Galena Superintendent of Schools A.R. Wetzel, these documents became a major issue within the community and provided the impetus for the decade's major developments.³⁶

A full report from Dr. Clevenger provided a broad review of the school district and the troubles it was experiencing. After visiting with the board in December, his report highlighted funding issues plaguing the district. With an assessed land valuation of less than \$6million, District #120 was unable to properly fund education. This had led to inadequate facilities and insufficient curriculum offerings. Galena's reliance on state aid was also a concern as proposed legislation could have cut funds to areas that refused to create unit districts. Clevenger also highlighted the large number of private school students in the community as reason residents may have been reluctant to vote for major changes that could raise their taxes.³⁷

In his annual review of the schools, Assistant Superintendent J. Frank Short of the State of Illinois Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction lambasted the district's facilities. Commenting on classes held in the basement of Central School Short claimed, "the enrollment has outgrown the facilities essential for carrying on a good educational program." The report took issue with the location and resources of Central's library. Classrooms lacked decoration and did not contain the modern equipment vital to a 1950s education. Restroom facilities were spartan in nature.³⁸

In another report, State Inspector George Mathis highlighted the lack of physical education and recreational areas in the district. Central School lacked gym space necessary for a school that contained grades one through twelve. There were no athletic fields on campus. Students had a mile walk to Recreation Park for athletic practices. Originally constructed as a high school, the school did not have proper playground space for the younger children who attended. Children who attended Seminary school did without a gym, sufficient playground space, and a formal library. The reports painted a dire picture of a district with inadequate buildings for future population estimates.³⁹

In addition to highlighting finance and infrastructure problems, the reports also criticized Galena's curriculum. Short suggested the addition of more classes aimed at those not planning to pursue a college education. In line with the Life Adjustment movement, a major trend in mid-century schools, the assistant superintendent pointed out that most of Galena's students were not pursuing college degrees and therefore the school was doing them a disservice by not offering an industrial arts or agriculture program. He also called for improvement in the business curriculum. This had been an issue in Galena since the end of World War II. Both the board and residents had advocated for vocational classes on multiple occasions. Unfortunately space and finances had routinely railroaded any attempt to offer these programs.⁴⁰

The elementary approach, combined with limited space at Central, cost students in the upper grades a variety of opportunities. Only boys in grades fifth through eight participated in physical education. Students in grade seven and eight did not receive instruction in home art, economics, or industrial education. This flew in the face of the junior high concept that had become the norm in cities throughout America.⁴¹

Finally, the reports highlighted troubles facing the faculty in the Galena school district. Many instructors, especially those in the elementary grades, did not have four-year degrees. Some lacked the proper number of hours called for by the state and other educational advocacy groups. Salaries were low. In order to attract and retain high quality teachers, Clevenger noted that salaries would need to improve. However, due to the funding issues, the report was again acknowledging a problem that the school board had little ability to address properly.⁴²

Throughout the spring, the board attempted to address the district shortcomings highlighted in the reports. A flurry of activity resulted in the Central School library's relocation and the renewed discussion of industrial arts and agriculture courses. Realizing the district lacked space for expanded programming, the board called upon the superintendent to seek out a vacant building to act as a shop. A survey of students found a robust demand, as sixty-four incoming junior and senior boys were interested in industrial arts classes.⁴³

At the June school board meeting the Buildings and Grounds Committee outlined plans for a new addition to Central School that would include a shop, stage, and band room. The band room's relocation would also make space available for the kindergarten program sought by community petition. The school board hired a local architect to draw up plans for future consideration and received two plans at their July meeting. By August, the board had the mayor's support to bring the issue to referendum.⁴⁴

It was at this point that a new wrinkle appeared, altering the efforts to modernize the Galena school district. On August 14, 1951, at the same meeting that the board learned of the mayor's support for a referendum, Board Secretary R.H. Wightman shared

a letter from County Superintendent Harold Taft notifying the district of major changes in the county's rural schools. Recent legislation by the Illinois General Assembly dissolved several districts. This meant other districts in the county would see their territory, and therefore their tax revenue, expand. This seemed to be the development needed to carry out infrastructure improvements. However, Superintendent Taft also sent some bad news. Due to its special school charter, Galena was ineligible to expand its borders. As long as District #120 operated under the special charter, expansion was off the table. The district's precarious finances pushed the school board to take drastic and immediate action. All improvements would take a back seat to district expansion.⁴⁵

CHAPTER V

ANNEXATION AND EXPANSION: GALENA ENTERS A NEW ERA

The developments of early August 1951 led to a burst of activity by the Galena school board. In the days after the August 14 meeting, a petition circulated the community calling on the board to hold a special election to dissolve the school charter and reorganize under the General School Law of the State of Illinois. On August 24 the board met and scheduled the referendum for September 4. Within three weeks, the citizens of Galena had tossed out a system that had been in place for ninety years. Clearly, to the residents of Galena, school improvement called for drastic action. In order for the district to finance the changes demanded by the public, the tax base had to increase. The chance to expand the district's borders was too good of an opportunity to pass up.

The impetus for the action was a law passed in 1949 by the Illinois General Assembly calling for the dissolution of school districts that did not operate a building for two consecutive years. At the end of June 1951, county superintendents were charged with formally dissolving these districts and attaching the territory to neighboring schools. This was part of the state government's ongoing effort to cut down on the number of school districts and streamline the education system.⁴⁶

In Jo Daviess County, twenty-two districts faced dissolution. The county superintendent held hearings to determine to which district residents preferred to see their territory attached.⁴⁷ While several of these districts were contiguous with Galena, the special state charter that created District #120 forbade the annexation of territory outside the city limits. Despite the wishes of citizens, Galena would be unable to take attach any of the available land.

In 1951, Galena was one of only twenty charter districts still in operation in Illinois. Prior to the 1870 state constitution, which created the modern Illinois school system's structure, the General Assembly issued charters to communities that wished to operate public schools.⁴⁸ Granted to the city of Galena in 1861, the charter created a district that was part of the city government instead of an independent entity. Unlike districts created by the General School Law of the State of Illinois that featured school board members elected by the public, the mayor of Galena appointed a school board consisting of nine members. The charter limited the school system to the city borders. The district could not add area outside the city limits unless it abandoned the charter and reorganized under the Illinois school code.

This had proved to be much harder than one would expect. The mayor and city council, along with their appointed school board members had kept a tight grip on their power and resisted previous attempts to end the charter. After the fire of 1904, state law prevented the board from issuing bonds needed to fund the high school's reconstruction. Rather than give up the charter, city officials petitioned the state to allow the city government to sell bonds to finance the reconstruction. Miraculously, the state passed a law to allow this.⁴⁹

The charter was again in the crosshairs in 1947. Superintendent Wetzel shared a letter from the State Advisory Commission seeking to convince the board to dispose of the charter and reorganize. The request went nowhere as public attention shifted to the Jo Daviess County School Survey Committee's unit district proposal. That effort also met defeat as city residents refused to turn over control of the schools to a board outside the city's direct control. Clearly, the school charter had proven to be a document the residents of Galena, and the city government, held dear.⁵⁰

However, the new issue was a perfect storm. The school board had discussed the need for more taxable property to fund school improvements continuously since 1947. This was a way to get it without running another campaign for a community unit district. The pressure to improve the schools was too great. The school board sought to abandon the charter to improve the students' educational experience. Ending the charter would allow the district to annex the non-operating districts surrounding it and allow other districts to petition to join the expanding district. The board scheduled a special election for September 4, 1951 to dissolve the charter and reincorporate under the General School Law of Illinois. In light voting, the measure passed with 272 votes in favor, and 74 votes against. Over the course of three weeks, the residents of Galena had abandoned a system that, for nearly ninety years, had been untouchable.⁵¹

The charter's abandonment set the ball in motion for several major changes over the next three years, ultimately resulting in the decision to build a new high school. Immediately after the referendum on the charter, district leaders scheduled an election for October 27 to create a new school board in accordance with Illinois state law. In a

change from the old mayor-appointed nine-member format, the board moved to seven members elected from the district at large.

The major achievement was the annexation of new territory. Galena acquired the territory of three complete rural school districts, and parts of two others. This territory brought in additional students, but most importantly for a district starving for resources, the acquisition increased the tax dollars available to the district. According to the superintendent's annual report to state officials, the assessed valuation rose roughly \$1 million from 1950-51 to the 1951-52 school year. Taxable wealth increased by over one thousand dollars per student. Without taking on too many students, District #120 was able to gain much-needed funds to put towards school improvements.⁵²

The increased tax base would prove useful just over a year later when the Galena school board again took up the issue of a building addition. Beginning in January 1953, the district resumed discussion of the gymnasium addition the school charter and reorganization efforts delayed. With an estimated price tag of \$31,000, the school board learned it had the capacity to move forward without a bond referendum. The additional tax revenue had already proved beneficial in realizing the district's goals. By May, the board was accepting bids on the work. While the building project did not fully address all of the district's space needs, it did allow for the addition of industrial arts to the high school curriculum, and freed up space for other programming

As construction began at Central school, District #120 was, once again, about to have its future impacted by changes in state law. In 1949, as part of its effort to reduce the number of school districts, the Illinois General Assembly passed House Bill #1070. The legislation called for the elimination of all elementary districts that were not also part

of a high school district by July 1, 1953. These “non-high” districts faced annexation into the nearest unit or high school district by the county superintendent’s ruling.⁵³

By the summer of 1953, Jo Daviess County still had a large amount of non-high territory. The offending districts managed to get a one-year extension from the state to deal with the issue. In July 1953, District #59 petitioned to join Galena. However, the majority of these districts continued to resist. By June 30, 1954, the Jo Daviess County Boards of School Trustees acted. All, or part, of six districts were annexed into Galena. These schools then filed a lawsuit in the circuit court seeking to have the annexation law overturned. While the case delayed the annexation orders, it was not successful. On January 4, 1955, Circuit Judge Robert L. Bracken upheld the state law and ruled against the districts. Non-high districts would no longer exist in the Illinois.⁵⁴

House Bill #1017 had a major impact on Galena Unit School District #120. The district added nearly seventy square miles of non-high territory. More importantly, this resulted in an additional \$3.9 million in assessed valuation. Not only did this result in expanded enrollment, but it also brought new buildings into the mix. While these structures would provide a short-term solution to some of the overcrowding, their eventual sale would bring more funds into the district.⁵⁵

Overall, the annexation of territory brought on by changes in state law was a positive development that allowed District #120 to meet the demands of residents who advocated for improved curriculum and more space. The district jumped from nine square miles to eighty. The taxable wealth per pupil increased more than \$5,000 from \$8,888 in 1950 to \$14,248 by the beginning of the 1955-56 school year. These additional funds made new infrastructure possible.⁵⁶

As seen in Galena, Illinois state law served its purpose. In Jo Daviess County, laws passed by the General Assembly to streamline the education system eliminated non-operating districts, special charter districts, and non-high school districts. These changes had a major impact on Galena schools and ultimately played a role in the biggest development in the school system in half a century. In November of 1955, only ten months after the annexation lawsuit ended, the residents of Galena Unit School District #120 voted to issue bonds to build a new high school. Clearly state legislators looking to reform the education system by encouraging reorganization succeeded in Jo Daviess County.

CHAPTER VI

THE PUSH FOR A NEW HIGH SCHOOL

On April 1, 1955, the Illinois Education Association ran an advertisement in the Galena Gazette. The ad was part of a statewide campaign to raise awareness of issues in education. It boasted of a “bumper crop” of children, claiming that Illinois schools were growing by 1,200 students per week over the next two years, and encouraged citizens to care for it. The ad came at a key time for Galena schools. A campaign to build a new high school would consume the community for the remainder of 1955. A growing student population due to mandatory attendance laws, territorial annexation, and the baby boom was just one of many reasons Galenians were forced to act. The high school’s changing role and an expanded curriculum likewise contributed to the need for more space. Ongoing community revitalization efforts would also play a role in the greatest change to the Galena school system in half a century.⁵⁷

Almost immediately after the annexation issue was settled by the court system, Galena residents renewed calls for expanded programming and improved infrastructure. Annexation brought additional territory and a larger assessed value to the district, but it also brought more students. These two issues pushed the district to embark on a campaign to improve the infrastructure.

At the start of the decade, the Galena school district had an assessed value of less than \$6 million. In late 1950 at the school board's request, University of Illinois College of Education's Dr. A. W. Clevenger reviewed the issues facing the district. At a meeting with school board on December 12, he suggested a community unit district could meet the students' needs and solve the curriculum and infrastructure problems. In order to move forward with school improvement he advocated expanding the district borders to achieve an assessed valuation of \$10-\$14 million.⁵⁸ By 1955, annexation had helped the board achieve that goal, resulting in a district with an assessed value of \$10.9 million. Annexation had improved the district's bonding capacity and put it the school board in a position to finally create a comprehensive plan for improvement.⁵⁹

While the annexed territory improved the finances of District #120, the added students threatened to burst the seams of already overcrowded schools. When the annexation litigation ended at the beginning of 1955, Galena took possession of five one-room schoolhouses. At the time, those schools served an additional eighty-four elementary students. Galena had no plan to continue operating the rural centers. Eventually, the children from those areas would be bussed into the city to attend school. At that point time however, Central and Seminary lacked the additional space needed. Territorial expansion forced the district to address the overcrowded buildings and create a plan for the future.

Other changes in state law also increased attendance of teenage students. A change to the State Compulsory Student Attendance Law signed by Governor Stevenson in 1951 made it illegal for anyone under the age of sixteen to receive a permit to work during school hours.⁶⁰ Students could no longer drop out until the end of the school term

in which they reached the age of sixteen. Students were no longer able to end their attendance after eighth grade. The goal of this legislation was to increase high school attendance and cut the drop out rate. More students staying in already overcrowded schools longer was yet another cause for concern.⁶¹

Actions by the General Assembly were hardly the only reason for increased enrollment in District #120. By the mid-fifties, the “baby boom” was affecting schools throughout the United States. In the years after World War II, Americans married younger and started families sooner than in previous generations. The baby boom was not simply an issue of families having more children. While the number of children in families increased by about one per household compared to the 1930s, this was occurring across all groups regardless of class, race, or religion. The result was a major spike in population in rural, urban, and suburban communities.⁶²

Like much of the nation during the 1950s, Galena dealt with an expanding enrollment brought on by the “baby boom.” The district had shown a steady uptick in students even before the addition of territory. From 1945 through the 1951-52 school year, elementary enrollment increased by nearly forty students. During the same time period, high school enrollment increased by seventeen students. When discussing the 1954 student population that increased from the previous year by forty-one at the elementary level and thirty in the high school, Superintendent Cravens pointed out that districts across the nation were experiencing the same issue.⁶³ All over the nation, schools saw increased strain on infrastructure as children of the baby boom generation flooded the classrooms. Galena was hardly alone in seeking new facilities to deal with

this issue. In Illinois alone, schools added 1500 classrooms each year by the end of the 1950s.⁶⁴

In addition to the increased student population, Galena residents pushed for a new school to add much needed space for new programming. The “life adjustment” trend in education called for vocational training amongst other curriculum enhancements. This initiative, proposed by Charles Prosser and the U.S. Office of Education, had become the trend in high school education in the United States during the 1950s. Galena was hardly alone in attempting to provide an education that would impact all students, not just those heading to college.⁶⁵

The majority of the district’s students attended Central school, a building that housed grades first through twelve. A new high school building would allow Central to house not only first through eighth grade, but also add a public kindergarten. In 1948, The Galena Woman’s Club had started a program for children to prepare for first grade. The kindergarten soon outgrew its space at the public library and residents petitioned the school board in the summer of 1950 asking District #120 to take over. Citing space and financial issues, the district declined.⁶⁶ By, 1955 the local chapter of Beta Sigma Phi had taken over the program and received state recognition. However, the five-dollar per four weeks tuition prevented the kindergarten from being accessible to all families. Only a takeover by the school district would ensure all children the opportunity to receive early childhood education.⁶⁷

While a new building would impact all grades, additions to the high school curriculum drove much of the desire to add classroom space. The high school had lacked agriculture since World War II. A small community in the middle of northwestern

Illinois dairy country, the board had discussed the absence of agriculture continually beginning in the spring of 1948. Certainly, rural students now attending Galena High School after annexations would be interested in curriculum aimed at a possible future profession.⁶⁸ Adding agriculture classes had been a goal when the district added the addition at Central in 1953. Unfortunately, the increasing enrollment and other needs had prevented this. A new building would finally allow the district an opportunity to bring this program back.

Another course to improve students' lives became a major issue in the summer of 1955 after an automobile accident badly injured three local teens. A rather harsh editorial in the Galena Gazette called for the immediate addition of a driver education course at the high school. Pointing out that other local districts offered the course, editor Paul C. Allen insinuated that the board was partially to blame for accidents involving Galena youths. Allen recognized the need for more space but did not feel the issue could wait. He called on residents to "rise up and demand of their school board that driver training be instituted."⁶⁹ In a follow-up editorial, Allen criticized local infrastructure by indicating that aging and deteriorating roads were not safe for modern automobiles operated by untrained drivers.⁷⁰ By late August, bowing to public pressure, and spurred to action by a recently passed state law and a donation of sixty textbooks, the school board announced a plan to immediately implement driver's education. This took precious space at Central and was yet another reason citizens were willing to support the ongoing campaign for a new school.⁷¹

With all of these factors pushing them towards new infrastructure, the school board had already begun to act. At their February 8, 1955 meeting, district leaders

created a committee “to study the problems of the local school.” This group would work on a list of eight essential questions focused on enrollment trends, faculty needs, district finances, and infrastructure requirements. These questions sought to provide a path forward on whether to build a new school, what type of school to build, and whether the district could afford to construct and maintain a new building.⁷²

At the same meeting, board president Metzger was instructed to inquire about putting a one-year purchase option on a nineteen acre tract of land for the possible construction of a new school building. Recognizing the limitations of renovations and additions at Central School, it seems the board prepared for a new facility. The location on the outskirts of town was telling. A new building would be close to areas planned for housing developments. It would also be closer to areas just annexed into the district. The board was taking steps to win the support of district residents before the study was even complete.⁷³

Over the next two months, the group known as the School Problems Committee recommended several changes to improve District #120. The committee proposed referendums to raise the tax rate and receive permission from the citizens to sell surplus school property. The latter proposal occurred in April, with voters giving their consent. The sale followed in June raising \$3625 and signaling the board’s desire to move in a new direction. The district would close and sell rural schools. District #120’s future would feature new infrastructure.⁷⁴

In May of 1955, citizens formed a committee to support district efforts to build a new school. The group would work with the board to advocate for a property tax raise to improve the budget. More importantly, they would push the plan for a new high school.

In their first meeting, the new Citizens Committee, composed of prominent businessmen, educators, parents, and church leaders put forth a plan to engage various civic groups in dealing with school issues. Engaged by the Citizens Committee, the PTA, Chamber of Commerce, as well as the Lions Club and other community groups would play a prominent role in the effort.⁷⁵

Throughout the summer and early fall of 1955, citizens and the school board debated the issues surrounding the proposed new school. Both rural and city residents discussed their concerns at forums held throughout the district. Community members discussed and intensely debated a wide variety of topics. Should the new school be a high school or elementary? What was the best location? How would a new building impact programming and curriculum? How would the decisions affect the community's future? These discussions would not only solve the immediate problems facing the district, but also ultimately shape its future for the next half-century.

The committee moved quickly to decide the type of school to be constructed. A high school building had been the preference early on, however at a meeting with the Lions Club, a member asked about the possibility of saving money by pursuing a new elementary school. Ultimately, the need for more space for various high school programs resulted in a need for more square footage than was available at Central. While a grammar school might cost less to construct, the expenses of renovating and adding on to Central would be much higher. Due to economic considerations and the desire to ensure new programming would be part of any improvements, the committee advised the school board to move ahead with a proposed high school."⁷⁶

Perhaps no issue sparked more debate than the new building's location. Early on, the board set their sights on a piece of land on the city's northwest edge known as Harney Acres. This undeveloped property was near much of the land recently annexed into the district. It was also prime real estate for future house sites. The need for more housing was no secret and recent headlines made it known that Galena was in the midst of a housing boom.⁷⁷ During discussion of possible sites, residents brought another possibility to the committee, suggesting the city owned Recreation Park, site of the community fair, municipal swimming pool, and longtime home of Galena High School athletics. Rec Park, located on the northeast side of town sat closer to Scales Mound, a community that had expressed interest in reorganization in the past. A new high school in that location could encourage further annexation and additional tax dollars.

Initial discussion of the Rec Park land was optimistic. Development cost estimates concluded that preparation of Harney Acres would cost more than twice the amount of the park. Public outcry at the prospect of losing the fairgrounds and park area tempered the excitement. A September letter to the editor called for citizens to protect the community's history and green space and urged the board to choose a different location.⁷⁸ However, the deciding factor that led to the choice of Harney Acres was most likely further study by the city that replacing the offerings of Recreation Park in a different location would end up costing taxpayers even more than developing a new site for the high school. The board, with the blessing of the Citizens Committee and other groups, moved ahead with the purchase of Harney Acres in early October. By choosing that location, District #120 would make further residential and commercial development in that area of the city more likely.⁷⁹

A new school would also need to meet the district's programming needs. Recently added, and proposed curriculum changes needed space. Any building proposal needed to factor in the recent addition of Spanish, Driver Education, and Industrial Arts. Residents also wanted to ensure space for high school agriculture classes as well as a public kindergarten. A recent site visit by the state had only confirmed the need for more space and improved curriculum. The assistant to the state superintendent of schools commented on the overall problem stating, "you need a building program and you need it badly." He cited inadequate space for home economics, gym, business, and vocational classes. The Citizens Committee's own study of curriculum needs was even more damning. Space limitations rendered nearly every program at all levels inadequate. Any plan to improve the education of Galena youth called for more space.⁸⁰

On October 31, 1955, the Galena school board voted to move ahead with a community referendum on the new school issue. Unlike today's state school election laws that mandate school issues appear on consolidated state elections, or general elections, in 1955 schools had wide latitude to call elections when needed. The Galena school board scheduled an election a mere three weeks later. On Tuesday, November 15, Galena residents would enter the polling place to determine the school district's future. Two ballot proposals awaited voters. Citizens voted on whether the school board should purchase Harney Acres at a total cost of \$8,500 for use as a site for a future school. The second ballot question granted the board permission to issue \$550,000 in bonds to finance a new school building. The future of District #120 was now in the voters' hands.⁸¹

The short run-up to the election left little time for formal campaigns. The well-organized proponents of the plan continued to hold meetings with residents and various

community groups. The committee assigned PTA room mothers to canvas the prospective vote. The Galena Gazette's editor, Paul C. Allen, an ardent supporter of the new high school, published a question and answer series in the weeks leading up to the election, clearly encouraging voters to support the initiative.⁸²

The three-week notice prevented the opportunity for any true opposition group to arise. However, a minor controversy came about when an advertisement arguing against the school arrived at the Galena Gazette just days before the election on Saturday, November 12. While the editorial staff at the Galena Gazette endorsed the proposed high school and was initially against publishing the advertisement, in the interest of fair play they called for the group to pen a letter and allowed for a rebuttal by the pro-school committee.⁸³

The letter from a group calling itself the School Problems Committee appeared in the in the Gazette's November 15 edition. Clearly the work of rural voters, the letter argued the district would be spending far more than the advertised \$550,000 for a new school. Interest payments would add nearly \$200,000 to the overall bill and the writers argued taxes would need to be raised again to pay off bonds. Still seething about the annexation issue, the letter went on to complain that the board would be unnecessarily closing modern rural school building. Not only would this be a waste of tax dollars, but because the district did not need to provide transportation, rural students could be stuck without schools or a means of reaching them. The School Problems Committee further complained that during the annexation issue the Galena board assured rural families that they could accommodate them in their current buildings, however now there was

suddenly a need for a new school. The letter encouraged voters to remember this untrustworthy behavior when they entered the voting booth.⁸⁴

However, the negative letter simply allowed new-school proponents an opportunity to refute the arguments against the new school. Contacted by editor Paul C. Allen on November 13, just two days prior to the referendum, the superintendent and several Citizens Committee members met to draft a response that would be printed in the next day's Gazette.⁸⁵

The Citizens Committee's response hammered home that the increased tax rate would cover the cost of the bonds. They also pointed out that the board would continue to honor its commitment to transport rural students, however the district had to consider the more than 800 students attending Galena schools when planning for the future. While rural residents and their schools were in the minds of committee members, the group was focused on creating an environment that would benefit all students. The letter also made clear that rural students had attended Galena High School for years while not paying for infrastructure improvements, but only an annual tuition. Finally, the Citizens Committee argued the main issue facing voters was not a tax increase, but instead improving the education of the community's children.⁸⁶

From noon to 7:00PM on Tuesday, November 15, citizens were able to cast their ballot in the Central School gymnasium. The community overwhelmingly approved the referendum. Residents approved question one, granting permission to the board to purchase Harney Acres by a vote of 1202 to 476. Residents approved the sale of \$550,000 in bonds with a 1186-523 vote. For the fourth time in less than five years, Galena residents had come out and supported a referendum called by the school board to

improve the district. The results of this election would affect the school district for decades to come.⁸⁷

CHAPTER VII

NEW BUILDING & NEW CHALLENGES

On the evening of November 15, 1955, the Galena school board held a meeting following the new school referendum that took place earlier that day. The election was only the beginning of the process to construct a new school and permanently alter the school district. The district would need to secure funding and finalize plans before the movement of any dirt. Moreover, important decisions on curriculum and other school infrastructure awaited the board. Once the new high school went up, new issues arose in the final years of the decade. The need to recruit and keep qualified teachers took center stage as Galena residents battled to improve funding and continue educational progress in the community.

Almost immediately after the referendum, the school board ran into trouble with funding. The district offered bonds for sale on December 15. Unfortunately, the board was unable to move the bonds at the interest rate necessary. Financial advisors counseled District #120 to halt the sale and wait for the bond market to improve. While decision delayed the project, the economic reality forced school leaders to follow the advice.⁸⁸

Two months later, on February 16, 1956, Galena once again offered bonds for sale. This time the district found a buyer. However, a new problem now loomed. In the interim between the referendum and the sale of the bonds, a reevaluation of the district's

assessed valuation came up \$200,000 short of initial estimates. State law once again altered the course of Galena schools, as districts could not issue bonds exceeding five percent of their assessed valuation. In an effort to ensure compliance with the school code, District #120 only sold \$525,000 of the \$550,000 bonds approved by voters.⁸⁹

The shortage of capital, along with recommendations from the state department of education led to modifications of the high school plan. The district cut costs by trimming several thousand square feet from the design.⁹⁰ The shop area and classrooms also received modifications in late stage planning. While these revisions saved the district money, they ultimately prevented the building from handling future enrollment needs, and resulted in an addition to the building in 1967.⁹¹

When construction bids came back in June, the board rejected all bids from the mechanical trades due to high costs. The district had exceeded its capital and needed to ensure the work remained within the budget. This delayed the building's start for several more weeks. Finally, in early July, after hunting for bids from companies outside the immediate area, the final bids were accepted and construction scheduled for later that month.⁹² School board members were on hand as the district broke ground on the new building on Monday, July 30, 1956. The building would not be completely finished in time for the following school year due to the delays and later summer start. However, after more than a decade of advocating for a new school, the citizens of Galena could finally see tangible results.⁹³

Opened on September 3, 1957, the new high school immediately brought changes to the district. The district remodeled Central school to serve as the lone elementary for students up to eight grade. Seventh and eighth graders now had access to homemaking

and industrial arts classes. Each grade also received physical education time in the gymnasium. Central also became home to District #120's new kindergarten. Ninety-three students enrolled in the program during its first year, making it the largest grade level at Central, and justifying the previous calls for additional space for future enrollment.⁹⁴

At the high school, an agriculture program finally came to fruition. Galena offered three courses in agriculture the first year and created a fourth a year later. The district also added a course in sociology. Outside of the curriculum, the high school building also featured a full size regulation gymnasium along with a modern cafeteria and other amenities.⁹⁵

However, some did not see the building program's results as entirely positive. In June 1957, just months before the new high school's opening, the district announced the closing of three schools. Two of these were recently annexed rural schools. The families in these areas saw their fears of losing their local school become reality. To District #120 board members, the costs of operating rural schools could not be justified when state aid made transportation to a newly remodeled Central more affordable.

The district also shuttered Seminary Hill elementary school. This structure, built in 1890, had closed during the 1940s. However, due to rising enrollment it reopened to serve four grades in 1946. Decommissioned again in 1957, a private owner bought Seminary Hill School for \$1040. The following year, Pleasant View, the last rural school in district #120 shut its doors for good. For the next decade and a half, Galena would remain a two-facility district.⁹⁶

As the decade neared its end, school finances continued to plague the district.

With the new high school's construction, the board had answered the demands of families by adding courses, improving bussing, and offering a hot lunch program. The district sought to improve the teachers' salary schedule to compete with other local communities and recruit high quality educators. Despite increased state and federal aid, District #120 struggled to keep pace with educational trends while keeping a balanced budget. The board would once again ask voters for a tax increase. For the first time ever, district residents voted down the proposal. A lack of information, previous school tax increases, and other issues in the community led to a narrow defeat.

Recruiting and retaining teachers continued to be a major issue during this period. In January 1958, the PTA hosted a forum titled "How Can We Make Teaching More Attractive in Galena?" Panelists discussed the need for salary increases and improved housing options in the community. Discussion also centered on making teachers welcome in the city. By April, the school board overhauled the teacher salary schedule, granting increases for years of experience along with additional coursework and evaluations. Despite this increase, Superintendent Aaron Cravens noted that Galena still lagged behind the state average for similarly sized districts.⁹⁷

In the spring of 1958, district finances were once again in the news. The new expanded lunch program ran a deficit. Despite state aid and federal food subsidies, the program ran a \$1577.13 deficit between September and March. At the same meeting, Superintendent Cravens announced the district would add behind-the-wheel training to the Driver's Ed program. Once again, Galena lingered behind neighboring districts and residents supported action regardless of school finances. The board sought to offset the program's cost through a new state aid package. The board also sought a local car

dealership to provide an automobile for the course. The board faced a familiar problem. Residents sought to increase programming and services, often in an effort to keep up with other communities, despite the lack of funds.⁹⁸

By early 1959, the school board found itself with a budget problem. District operational costs had increased by 13.8% between 1956-57 and 1957-58. During the same period, total educational fund expenditures increased by 32.6%. To add to the troubles, the district had depleted its reserves with the high school's construction. The board expected to issue tax warrants due to finding shortages. Despite this, residents and board members citing state trends, called for increased spending on the guidance program at the high school, a remedial program at the elementary, and the additional teachers at the junior high level to cut class sizes. The art and music programs also called for funding. Teacher salaries continued to trail behind neighboring districts despite increasing 29.5% since the 1955-56 school year.⁹⁹

To balance the budget and improve programming, the board called a referendum for April. Supported by the PTA, the ballot measure called for an increase of four dollars per thousand dollars of assessed valuation. Considering the average home in Galena had an assessed value of \$3,000, a Galenian could expect to pay an extra twelve dollars per year.¹⁰⁰

Ultimately, voters narrowly defeated the referendum by a vote of 587-521. A variety of factors may have caused the defeat.¹⁰¹ Several other tax raises occurred during the same period including a sales tax increase along with two other property tax increases for various community needs. Voters may have also been tepid due to the high school referendum only four years prior. Local media also lacked information about the

referendum with only one article appearing in the community newspaper in the weeks before the election. It was the first time ever voters in Galena had not backed a measure supporting the schools.¹⁰²

The years after the high school's construction demonstrated that the battle to improve education in Galena was far from over. The defeat of the 1959 referendum did little to stem the calls for advancement in the district. Each candidate in the spring school board elections called for continued progress as their major goal. Residents continued to demand improvements to not only keep up with national and state trends, but other local communities seen as rivals. The request for these enhancements caused continued budget troubles, yet citizens, caught up in the desire for excellent schools, refused to settle for anything less.

CHAPTER VIII

CONCLUSION

In 1961, Superintendent of Public Instruction George T. Wilkens reaffirmed the belief that the local school district would continue to be “the basic unit of school administration” in Illinois. He called for county superintendents to act as conduits between these local governments and the state. His office would continue to provide guidance and assist local school boards in making the decisions that best fit their community’s needs. More than half a century later, despite the growth of state authority over matters of public education, local school districts continue to be the driving force of education in the state of Illinois.¹⁰³

The decade following the end of World War II had a profound effect on public education in Illinois. The efforts to address the inequity in both district finances and educational opportunity fundamentally altered the structure of education in the state. In Jo Daviess County, more than one hundred school districts were eliminated as a result of the changes enacted by the General Assembly. Galena Unit School District #120 began a new era during this time period. It was during the postwar years that the Galena schools assumed the basic structure that still exists today.

The haphazard organization and regulation of the public schools by the state of Illinois during its first fifty years of existence created a system riddled with inequality.

While efforts were made to overhaul the system and create uniformity throughout the state during the next half-century, it was not until 1945 that state policies began to enact real change. Beginning with the County School Survey Law, the state finally put teeth into reform law. Although areas throughout the state, including Galena, resisted efforts by the school survey committees to restructure school districts, other laws passed that same year forced their hand. By tying school aid to reorganization efforts, the state was able to provide a carrot to advance their agenda. Laws forcing the annexation of non-operating and non-high school districts then played the role of a stick to eliminate districts unwilling to cooperate with the reform efforts.

These postwar policies changed Galena schools in several ways. Annexation increased the district to eight times its original size. However, before that could happen, the state, in an effort to further simplify the system, required residents to agree to give up the special charter that had governed the district for nearly a century. Faced with the inability to annex land, and therefore receive additional tax dollars, the community fell in line and reorganized under the modern school code.

At the same time the General Assembly pushed school reform, board members in District #120 grappled with their own issues. Overcrowding and inadequate programming at the high school led to calls for infrastructure improvements. Unfortunately, district finances prevented this from happening. State reorganization efforts ultimately made these changes possible in Galena. It was only through annexation that district leaders were able to improve finances enough to engage in a comprehensive improvement plan.

While expanded territory provided a much-needed increase in assessed valuation, a supportive community was still required to approve the tax increase that would make infrastructure improvements possible. Motivated by projected enrollment increases due to the nationwide “baby boom,” residents understood something needed to be done. An expanded sense of patriotism and community building brought on by the Cold War provided further impetus for citizens to get behind the school board’s plan to build a new high school that would allow for expanded course offerings and alleviate the overcrowding at all grade levels. Bolstered by the support of the business community, various civic groups, and the PTA, the school board put the measure to vote in the fall of 1955. The initiative passed by a two to one margin. A new era had arrived.

The referendum was only the beginning of the effort to reshape the district. Finances forced the board to scale the new school to its budget, rather than its curriculum and space needs. Upon the new Galena High School’s opening in 1957, three other buildings were shuttered and Central School became home to all elementary students in District #120. It would not be long until overcrowding again became an issue and by the mid-1960s an addition was added to the high school. Continued financial difficulties at the end of the 1950s again resulted in the board going to voters for permission to raise taxes. This time, by a narrow margin, voters rejected the district’s request. Galena would begin the new decade trying to find resources to continue school improvements.

Despite the shortcomings of district finances and the new high school building, the postwar era changes were positive and far-reaching. Residents finally received the public kindergarten they had petitioned for in 1950. The vocational curriculum expanded and courses in agriculture began for the first time since the Depression. Modern science

labs and home economic areas ushered in a new era of learning. The new building allowed for expanded course offerings at Central as students in the upper elementary grades assumed the areas previously used for high school courses. Students were not the only ones to benefit from these moves. The regulation gymnasium provided sufficient space for physical education classes, but also became a hub for various civic activities and allowed for increased attendance at local sporting events. Finally, the entire community benefitted as the new high school's location led to residential and commercial development in the northwest section of the city.

A perfect storm of new state laws, increased district needs, and community activism spurred by nationwide social developments coalesced to provide the impetus for the revitalization efforts in District #120 during the mid-twentieth century. These changes created the basic structure that still exists in Galena today.

Now, more than a half-century later, many of the same issues that plagued the district then are again forcing residents to contemplate major reforms. Galena High School is in need of major renovations to update the 1950's era technology still found throughout the building. Changes in safety code necessitate expensive rehab work throughout the school. The financial shortcomings that forced the district to build cheap ultimately resulted in a school that did not stand the test of time. The aging building does not meet twenty-first century educational needs. The primary school built to alleviate overcrowding at Central School in the early 1970s is also facing a substantial facelift. Overcrowded and lacking modern safety features, the structure is under fire by parents and district residents.

Much like the postwar era, finances and infrastructure are affecting programming. On April 4, 2017, for the third time in five years, voters rejected a board proposal asking residents to increase taxes and invest in a new building. Unlike the 1950s, the business community has been vocal in their opposition to tax increases that would improve school infrastructure. Many have advocated programming and staff cuts to free up revenue for building repairs. A new school board must now consider a path forward to address the district's needs. Any plan will require a major effort to heal the divide that has grown between supporters and opponents. A review of the school district's postwar era could prove beneficial as the community seeks answers to its current problems.

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Newspapers

Galena Gazette. Galena, Illinois. 1945-1960.

The local newspaper was published daily through 1953 and then moved to a biweekly format. Reports on school board meetings and the other happenings at the school provided insight into the events taking place within the school system. Regular articles written by high school students brought the school's internal workings into focus. Editorial content and advertising highlighted the important issues facing the school and provided an understanding of community support and opposition to board policies and activities.

Dubuque Telegraph Herald. Dubuque, Iowa. 1945-1960.

A larger, regional newspaper, the Telegraph Herald's reports on Galena schools place them within the larger context of regional events. Articles focused on school board meetings, extracurricular activities, and election results. Insight into the issues facing other local schools provided perspective on those facing the Galena school system.

Freeport Journal Standard. Freeport, Illinois. 1945-1960.

This is the newspaper from a larger city in the county adjacent to Jo Daviess. It was useful in searching out countywide and regional news on the school districts.

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"Charter and Ordinances of the City of Galena." Alfred Mueller Historical Collection.
Galena Public Library, Galena, IL.

This late nineteenth century reprint of the original Galena city charter and ordinances outlines the original public school system's structure. The importance of public education in the community's early years is apparent. The ordinance set the tone for the future of the city's school system and its governance through the first two decades of the twentieth century.

Hagius, Grace. "Fifty-Six Years in the Public Schools of Galena, Illinois." Alfred Mueller Historical Collection. Galena Public Library, Galena, IL.

Haigus provides a firsthand perspective of the Galena, Illinois school system both as a student, and later as a teacher in the district. This provided insight into the changes in the district from the turn of the century until the World War II era.

Illinois State Board of Education. *Annual Reports from County School Superintendents*. Record Series 106/003. Illinois State Archives, Springfield, IL.

These records, compiled by county superintendents throughout Illinois, shed light on the infrastructure, finances, personnel, and enrollment of the school districts in each county.

Illinois State Board of Education. *County Survey Committee Reports*. Record Series 106/015. Illinois State Archives, Springfield, IL.

These files include the work of county committees that investigated the issue of school reorganization within their jurisdiction. The files include meeting notes, correspondence with the state, public input, and tentative and final reports regarding school district consolidation within each county.

Illinois State Board of Education. *School District Annual Reports*. Record Series 106/010. Illinois State Archives, Springfield, IL.

These reports by district superintendents and principals provide insight into enrollment, class sizes, infrastructure, faculties, curriculum, extracurricular offerings, and calendars for each school in a district. Many reports also include a section for administrators to provide their district's strengths and weaknesses, along with efforts made to improve perceived shortcomings.

School Board Meeting Minutes. Galena Unit School District #120. Galena, IL.

Records and files held at Galena High School were used to gain insight on enrollment, curriculum, infrastructure, and board decisions during the time period explored in this thesis. School board meeting minutes proved to be an invaluable source for the events and actions shaping the district.

Articles

Eliot, Thomas H. "Toward an Understanding of Public School Politics." *The American Political Science Review* 53, no. 4 (Dec. 1959): 1032-1051. Accessed February 19, 2017. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1952073>

Eliot outlines the structure of school systems and the major issues concerning the operation of public schools in the United States during the 1950s. He analyzes the role of the elected school board, superintendent, and the teachers in running local schools, coming to the conclusion that these groups, more than the citizens, are in charge of policy. State and federal involvement in school policy, especially funding, is also examined. The article provides insight into the politics of schools during the decade and illustrates the issues at work in communities like Galena.

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School Problems Commission. *Illinois School Problems: Report of the School Problems Commission No. 5*. Springfield, 1959.

These reports from the Illinois School Problems Committee examine the major issues facing education in the state during the 1950s. School reorganization proved to be a major topic throughout the decade along with finance, infrastructure, transportation, taxation, special education, and teacher salaries. Each report summarizes public hearings held by the commission, outlines recommendations for policy changes made to the general assembly, and highlights the achievements of the prior commission. Reports also offer in-depth summaries of the major issues explored by the commission. These reports proved invaluable in understanding the problems facing schools during the postwar era, along with Illinois state policy and its impact on local schools.

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including newspaper articles, letters, maps, and photographs. His section on photographs of the past juxtaposed with those of the present provided insight into various locations around Galena, especially former school buildings.

Butchart, Ronald E. *Local Schools: Exploring Their History*. Nashville, TN: American Association for State and Local History, 1986.

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Relying heavily on newspapers and other local historians, Everhart recounts a chronological history of Galena, Illinois, focusing on the key events in city history. Everhart details the city's schools and the issues facing them throughout the decades.

Halberstam, David. *The Fifties*. New York: Ballantine Books, 1994.

Halberstam provides a journalistic overview of the politics, culture, and social changes that took place during the Truman and Eisenhower years in the United States. This work provided context to the events taking place in Galena during the decade.

The History of Jo Daviess County Illinois. Chicago: H.F. Kett & Co. 1878.

Published in the late nineteenth century, this book includes historical sketches of state and local government with a focus on the communities in Jo Daviess County. In addition to a general overview of early Galena history, this work includes detailed information on the public school system's creation and the first high school's construction in 1860. The volume also provides statistics on the county schools at the time of its publication.

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Published by the IASB, this booklet traces the organization's history and the evolution of school law in the state of Illinois. A focus on school reform efforts through the decades allows the reader to gain an understanding of key issues facing public school districts in the state of Illinois. The role of elected school boards in Illinois education policy is made clear.

Jay, Charles D. *The Sesquicentennial: One Hundred and Fifty Years of Illinois Education*. Springfield: Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction, 1967.

Commissioned by the state government to mark the state sesquicentennial in 1968, this booklet traces the history of education in Illinois from the days of the Northwest Territory to the 1960s. Major government policy changes are highlighted along with the problems that precipitated them. The info on the creation of school districts and the later efforts at reorganization proved helpful in understanding the issues that faced Jo Daviess County in the postwar era.

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This book examines the history of both private residences and public buildings in Galena, Illinois. Images of early school buildings are included. This work made it possible to check on the current status of former school buildings in the community, and compare them to the infrastructure that allowed for their replacement.

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Propeck, George, and Irving Frederick Pearson. *The History of the Illinois Education Association*. Springfield, IL: Illinois Education Association, 1961.

This is an overview of the Illinois Education Association's early years, the state's chapter of the National Education Association. The book outlines the changing policies and initiatives of the organization. A general history of school reform through the mid-twentieth century is included, along with the IEA's role in promoting major changes to Illinois school code.

Ravitch, Diane. *Left Back: A Century of Battles Over School Reform*. New York: Touchstone, 2001.

Ravitch examines the issues of school reform during the twentieth century. Highlighting the continued assault on traditional curriculum, the book demonstrates how many reform efforts harmed those most in need of a public education. Ravitch argues IQ testing, vocational training, and other efforts to sort out those deemed unsuited for liberal studies has led to a school system inundated by special programs and initiatives that have eroded the education of all Americans.

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This book is a general overview of the history of education in the United States from pre-colonization through the present. Urban and Jennings primarily explore the impact of teachers, administrators, academics, and policymakers on public education. Reform efforts throughout the decades are highlighted along with their results and impact on American education.

Articles

Belting, Paul E. "The Development of the Free Public High School in Illinois to 1860." *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society* 11, no. 3 (Oct. 1918): 269-369. Accessed February 19, 2017. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40187114>.

Belting's two-part analysis of the first decade of public high schools in Illinois begins with a review of early attempts to provide education in the state of Illinois. Private schools and early public common schools are the primary focus. This article provided insight into the various trends taking place in the early years of education in Galena.

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The second part of Belting's analysis of early public high schools continues to analyze the link between early common schools and the creation of high schools in Illinois. Belting reviews the Free School Law of 1855 and its impact on the founding of public high schools throughout the state. The earliest schools are listed and trends that would shape the next half century of high schools in Illinois are summarized. The article makes it clear that Galena was among the first communities in the state to establish a public high school. It also provides an understanding of what took place inside the walls of these early Illinois high schools.

Kessinger, Thomas A. "Efforts toward Educational Reform in the United States since 1958: A Review of Seven Major Initiatives." *American Educational History Journal* 38, no. 2 (2011): 263–76.

Kessinger highlights major education reform movements in the time since the passage of the National Defense Education Act in 1958. He argues that "essentialists" have spent the last fifty years pushing back against progressive reforms that shaped public education in the first half of twentieth century. These "essentialists" have fought for a more classical education as opposed to those who advocated for differentiated curriculum in the schools such as vocational training and life-adjustment education. His analysis of education and reform in the 1950s shed light on the larger national issues facing the Galena school system during that decade.

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differentiation and life-adjustment curriculum and the more classical approach that was called on to improve the American education system after the Soviet launch of Sputnik. The authors then look at later studies on math and science education in the United States and find that despite a focus on those subjects, differentiation and an emphasis on advanced studies in those areas for only the brightest students continued. A look at the curriculum in Galena during the era substantiates these findings.

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Walker provides a short overview of public high schools in Illinois during their infancy. His focus is on state educational policy that created public high schools in Illinois. He argues that the creation of public high schools was a direct response to the private academies that were operating in many communities. Called for by both politicians and educators, these early high schools were modeled on the Prussian example and provided a way for communities of all sizes to offer a well-rounded education to their youth. His info on school law and the curriculum in early high schools provided insight into the changes that took place between the late nineteenth century and the 1950s.

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² Charles D. Jay, *The Sesquicentennial: One Hundred and Fifty Years of Illinois Education* (Springfield, IL: Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction, 1967), 1.

³ Peter A. Henrichs, "A History of Education in Galena, Illinois" (MSED thesis, Northern Illinois University, 1964), 14.

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⁵ *Ibid.*, 22-23.

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¹¹ *Ibid.*, 29-31.

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¹³ Henrichs, 61-62.

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¹⁷ Jay, 19-20.

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⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, June 5-August 14, 1951.

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