Education has been a pillar of society from the time it began there in the mid-nineteenth century. As communities began to settle and gain a sense of permanence, schooling began to flourish in the area. People who lived in habitation long enough to ensure that education needs were met, many Native Americans were attacked regularly following the war of the county. Attacks on
A.T. Biggs and
Lincoln County’s One-Room Schools

by
Paul Bland, Steve Neill, Ed Church, and Clm Clayburn

Introduction

Education has been a priority to the people of Kansas since settlement began there in the mid-nineteenth century. As settlers arrived in Kansas to live, schooling began for children in the home as soon as people were in habitation long enough to permit it. Dugout shelters, vacant claim shanties, or other structures were also used for schools, usually without the benefit of desks, blackboards, or other furnishings. As more settlers arrived and communities were formed, formal education began to be organized, and one-room schools appeared across the countryside. It soon became apparent that local development of schools and structured governance of education and supervision of teachers were needed to ensure that education needs were being met. This paper examines the development of education in Lincoln County, Kansas, and the quality of its one-room schools as determined by one county superintendent of schools.

Organization of Education in Lincoln County, Kansas

Lincoln County, Kansas is in north central Kansas and started its education system in much the same way as did the other Kansas counties. The first county superintendent in Lincoln County was elected in 1870, the same year that the county was officially organized. The election occurred only five years after the first permanent structure was built in the county. Between 1865 and 1870, a number of settlers came to Lincoln County. Many of the settlers came as a result of the Homestead Act of 1862, and many were veterans of the Civil War (Holman, 1979, p. 51). However, between 1865 and 1870, Lincoln County was both a difficult and dangerous place to live. In addition to the hardships of survival, many Native American groups traveled through the county regularly following the waterways and sought to prevent the settlement of the county. Attacks on the settlers were frequent with much loss of
life and property until four military blockhouses were built at different locations in Lincoln County in 1869 (Holman, 1979, p. 50). The last nomadic group of Native Americans was seen traveling through Lincoln County in 1880 (Barr, 1908, p. 42).

The first known school in Lincoln County was held in a dugout home owned by a man named Martin Hendrickson. It was a “subscription school,” in which a fee or tuition of three dollars per child per month was paid to the teacher, Marion Ivy. Nine pupils attended a school term lasting three of the winter months of 1868-1869. One of the students, Harrison Strange, was killed in an attack by Native Americans just a few months later, in May, 1869. Another student in this subscription school, C.C. Hendrickson, later wrote that: “school in 1869 was conducted along simple lines, we did not need many books; we had no need for fancy learning or fine clothes; our dinner pail was filled with corn bread and buffalo meat” (Barr, 1908, p. 133).

Other early schools were equally primitive. In what was to become District 21, schoolteacher Laura Peate taught in the kitchen of a house owned by a man named Rod Wilmarth. The first school in District 22 was held in a basement with an earth floor and two little windows; Mrs. B. H. Ellsworth was the teacher. Her pupils sat on blocks of firewood that were too large to split and wrote on large sheets of manila paper (Barr, 1908, p. 133).

Job Description of the Lincoln County School Superintendents in the Late 1800’s

The early county superintendents were elected by voters in each county for a two-year term and came from a variety of backgrounds, such as business, ministry, the military, and education. The county superintendent completed many tasks, such as administering and grading teacher exams, granting licenses to teachers, assisting with the hiring of teachers, evaluating teachers, and inspecting school buildings. The superintendents were also in charge of the following functions:

- Organizing the district boundary
- Identifying and recording the district boundary
- Assisting with revenue production for the district
- Serving as a repository of district funds

Serving as arbiter of discipline

Supervising eighth grade

(Samuelson, 2000, p. 34).

Once the need for a school was determined, the superintendent was in charge of organizing the district, identifying and recording the district boundary, and assigning district funds. The superintendent also oversaw the election of the school board and served as a repository of district funds. The superintendent was required to make visits to schools. These visits were an important part of the superintendent's responsibilities, as they allowed the superintendent to assess the quality of education being provided and address any issues that arose.

Alexander Thaddeus Biggs

Early Lincoln County

Alexander Thaddeus Biggs was a school teacher who served as a county superintendent in the late 1800’s. He was determined to make it possible for all children to receive an education in the rural county. He organized district boundaries, assisted with revenue production, and served as a repository of district funds.

Biggs was elected to the boards of Winchester. He moved to the area in 1853 because of the land that was available, and located an available claim to build a cabin (Heaton, 1914).

By 1881, he was superintendent of Lincoln County. In addition, he organized training teachers in 1877 that year, 155 people were attending (Education in Kansas, 1893).

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Alexander Thaddeus Biggs:
Early Lincoln County Superintendent of Schools

Alexander Thaddeus Biggs was the fourth county superintendent
of schools and the focus of the remainder of this paper. The county
superintendent was the primary education power of that time.
Education in the rural counties became what the county superintendent
was determined to make it be. The quality of education in the county
depended on the superintendent's philosophy, experience, commitment,
and knowledge or willingness to learn.

Biggs was a school teacher, cobbler, and veteran of the Civil War
who served under both Sheridan and Custer and fought at the Battle
of Winchester. He moved to Lincoln County in March, 1873 because
of the land that was available to Civil War veterans (Rice, 1980). He
located an available claim in the southwestern part of the county and
built a cabin (Heaton, 1914).

Biggs was elected to the superintendency in 1876 and alternated
between being county superintendent and teacher for the next 30 years.
He organized most of the school districts in the county (Rice, 1980).
By 1881, he was supervising seventy-six school districts in Lincoln
County. In addition, he organized a Normal School for the purpose of
training teachers in 1877 that began with twenty-three pupils. By 1892,
155 people were attending the Normal School (Columbian History of
Education in Kansas, 1893).

One of the jobs of the county superintendent was to make "surprise"
visits to schools. These visits lasted one day, and the purpose of the visit
Serving as arbiter of disputes between districts
Supervising eighth grade examinations
(Samuelson, 2000, p. 30)

Once the need for a school district was recognized, the superintendent
oversaw the election of three citizens who would serve as a district board
of education. The superintendent would identify the district boundaries
and assign a district number in chronological order, based on creation
date of the district, not on geographical location. At that time a school
district consisted of a single school. It was the obligation of the school
board to see to it that the school house was built and provided for
(Samuelson, 2000, p. 34).
was to evaluate the teacher and the school facilities. As might be expected, these visits were called “surprise” visits because superintendents would not schedule these visits to schools; they would just show up when school was in session. These unannounced visits were more about trying to keep the teachers focused on housekeeping, recordkeeping, sanitation issues, and discipline; and less about the quality of instruction (Samuelson, 2000, p. 31).

Biggs’ Evaluations of the Lincoln County One-Room Schools

Records of A.T. Biggs’ work indicate that in the 1881-1882 school years, as county superintendent, he made 79 “surprise” school visits (Biggs, 1882). These 79 visits reflect a considerable commitment on Bigg’s part, considering the short school year of this era, and the time it took to travel between individual school buildings spread throughout Lincoln County. Biggs completed a record book that consisted of logs of school visits. The book was printed for that purpose and consisted of evaluation instruments to be filled out on each school district for each visit. His observations and comments regarding his evaluation of the school facility and materials and the instruction were confined to two pages by the evaluation. Each evaluation had four different sections for the superintendent to complete for each visit to a district. The first section consisted of district information, including district number and location; a series of set questions the superintendent would answer to ensure proper records were being kept; the teacher’s name, monthly salary, and grade of certificate (Biggs, 1882).

At that time three grades of certificates existed for teachers. A first grade of certificate was held by a teacher who scored in the lowest acceptable category on the licensure examination and was good for one year. After a year of teaching, a teacher with a first grade of certificate would need to renew his or her license by retaking the exam. The second grade of certificate was held by teachers who had scored in the middle category on the teacher’s exam and was good for two years before it would need to be renewed. The third grade of certificate was awarded to teachers who scored in the highest category on the licensure exam and was good for three years (Samuelson, 2000, p. 60).

The second, third, and fourth sections of the school district evaluation were used to assess the school house, its furnishings, and teaching materials. The second section was called “Condition of the School House,” and there were evaluations of the floor, walls, windows, and ventilation. The third section was called “Condition of the Furniture,” and included evaluations of the condition of the student’s clothes hooks, and water system. The fourth section was called “Condition of Apparatus,” and record the condition of the blackboards, dictionaries and no library books, teacher registration, textbooks. These sections included a place where the superintendent could record the condition of the floor and the condition of the south windows (Biggs, 1882).

Of the 79 evaluations that were completed, the best evaluations were District 4 and District 9. District 4 was in the southern part of the county that was settled for the longest time. The teacher who held first grade of certificate earned $25 per month. The average daily attendance at this school was 10, and the exception of the floor and the condition. Biggs’ only comment was “south windows” (Biggs, 1882).

District 9 was in the northern part of the county from the towns as they existed. It was established by a man named P.S. Price, who earned $25 per month. The school was attended by 25 children. This school also had a first grade of certificate and an average daily attendance of 10, except four of them. The stove was called “splendid,” so were the dictionaries and no library books. The walls were “provide more blackboard space,” and “closer together,” and “hang more.”

Eight districts received second grade of certificate; some of the characteristics were better than others were less than good. The best evaluations were the one with...
As might be expected, superintendents would just show up when surprise visits were more about housekeeping, recordkeeping, but the quality of instruction and teachers was also evaluated. One-Room Schools

That in the 1881-1882 school year, the superintendent was responsible for 79 “surprise” school visits in the county. Each visit was a considerable commitment on the part of the superintendent, who would record the quality of instruction and the condition of the school buildings. The visits were designed to evaluate the quality of instruction and the condition of the school buildings.

Biggs noted that the condition of the school buildings was evaluated in four sections: the first section was labeled “Condition of the School House,” and there the superintendent would note the condition of the floor, walls, windows, doors, blackboards, and the quality of the ventilation. The third section of the instrument was labeled “Condition of the Furniture,” and in that part the superintendent would record the condition of the student and teacher desks, recitation seats, stove, clothes hooks, and water service. The fourth section had the heading of “Condition of Apparatus, etc.” and in it the superintendent would record the condition of the maps and charts, text books, copy books, library books, teacher register, and dictionaries. In addition, each of these sections included a place to write suggestions. The final section of the evaluation instrument was called “Remarks”; this was the only place where the superintendent might make a note about the quality of instruction (Biggs, 1882).

Of the 79 evaluations that Biggs did of schools, the two receiving the best evaluations were District 4, Fairview and District 9, Elkhorn. District 4 was in the southeastern part of the county and in the area of the county that was settled first. The teacher there was Emma Bingham, who held first grade of certificate and was paid $31 per month. The average daily attendance at the school was 21 children. In every category the school was judged to be in “good” condition, with the exception of the floor and the textbooks, which were said to be in “fair” condition. Biggs' only comment for District 4 fell under the “Condition of School House” section where he wrote “get some curtains for the south windows” (Biggs, 1882).

District 9 was in the northeast part of the county, further away from the towns as they existed at that time. District 9 was taught by a man named P.S. Price, who had the third grade of certificate and who earned $25 per month. The average daily attendance at the school was 25 children. This school also received “good” ratings on all categories except four of them. The floor was said to be “excellent,” and the stove was called “splendid.” However, Superintendent Biggs found no dictionaries and no library books. Suggestions for District 9 included “provide more blackboard surface,” “move the seats at least 4 inches closer together,” and “hang the door to privy” (Biggs, 1882).

Eight districts received evaluations that were mixed, meaning that some of the characteristics were deemed “good,” while a number of others were less than good. A representative example of the mixed evaluations was the one written on District 13, Vesper. Vesper was
approximately seven miles east of the town called Lincoln and in the
western part of the county. The town of Lincoln was the county seat.
The teacher at District 13 was a Mr. M.J. Randall who was teaching
with a first grade of certificate and making $30 per month. The average
attendance at Vesper was 31 children. In the portion of the evaluation
called “Condition of the School House,” the superintendent wrote that
the condition of the floor was “fair,” the walls were “bad,” the windows
and doors were “broken,” the blackboards were “good,” and the quality
of the ventilation was called “fair.” In the portion of the evaluation
labeled “Condition of the Furniture,” the condition of the student desks
were “fair” and teacher desks were “good,” recitation seats were “fair”
and the stove was “good.” There were no clothes hooks in the school, nor
was any water available at the site of the school house. The “Condition
of Apparatus, etc.” portion identified the condition of the maps and
charts as being “bad,” text books were “fair,” copy books and teachers
register were “good.” There were no library books or dictionaries at
District 13. Biggs wrote one thing in the “Remarks” section: “Fix the
steps in front of the house even if you have to sell the lightning rods and
trust to the Lord for protection” (Biggs, 1882).

The remaining 69 evaluations indicated less than adequate districts,
according to the Superintendent Biggs. A district could receive a poor
overall rating by either having a school house, furnishings, and materials
that were in poor condition, or by having a facility not adequately
supplied, or both. An example of a district in which the facility was in
poor condition and that was inadequately supplied was District 27, South
Ireland. Located six miles southwest of the town of Lincoln, District 27
had an average attendance of fifteen students and was taught by a man
named Francis Downey. Downey had a third grade of certificate but
received a salary of only $17 dollars per month (Biggs, 1882).

According to the evaluation of District 27, the condition of the
floor was “good,” the walls were “rough,” the windows and doors were
“good,” and the quality of the ventilation was said to be “too good.”
There were no blackboards, teacher and student desks, recitation
seats, stove, clothes hooks, water, maps or charts, copy books, library
books, or dictionaries. The teachers register was called “good” and the
text books were called “fair.” Biggs had the following to say in the
“Suggestions” sections: “Plaster the walls and paint up on the outside.
Get a blackboard. Get your desks home at once and make use of them.

When you put in the seats, (sic)

Of all the 79 evaluations

on what the teachers were
discouraged the facility, equip-

ment taught at District 27

northwest of the town of Lin-

coln was the county seat.

Matson was probably the

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In what is now called Lincoln and in the vicinity, Lincoln was the county seat. A man named Randall who was teaching in Lincoln was the county seat. Randall who was teaching there made $30 per month. The average teacher's salary was $25 per month. The superintendent wrote that the condition of the classroom was “bad,” the windows were “good,” and the quality of the furniture was “fair.” The education portion of the evaluation was “good.” There was a recitation room with tables and chairs, and the quality of the furniture was “good.” The condition of the student desks and recitation seats were “fair.” The superintendent wrote that the condition of the student desks and recitation seats were “fair.” The condition of the maps and charts was “good.” The copy books and teachers' supplies were “good.” The remarks section stated: “Fix the windows and doors in the school, repair the school house. The “Condition of the maps and charts” was “good.” Copy books and teachers' supplies were “good.” The remarks at the end of the evaluation read: “Fix the windows and doors in the school, repair the school house.”

Less than adequate districts, such as District 27, the condition of the facility was not adequately described. In which the facility was inadequately described was District 27. The condition of the maps and charts was “good.” Copy books and teachers' supplies were “good.” The remarks section stated: “Fix the windows and doors in the school, repair the school house.” The other teacher receiving comment was an N. Coover, who taught at District 6 in the town of Lincoln. Coover taught with a first grade of certificate and earned $26 per month. Coover's class was also too large by modern standards; the average attendance was 50 children. Biggs wrote this to Coover: “Take up a conviction and incorporate it with your life. The teacher should have convictions. He is dealing with forming minds” (Biggs, 1882). This is, of course, a responsibility that all teachers have that will not change with the times.

**Conclusion**

Biggs was widely acknowledged as the driving force in the development and improvement of the one-room schools in the early days of Lincoln County. According to Barr (1908), in 1882, Lincoln County was found by Kansas state officials to have the best developed education system as it related to population numbers and “the salaries of women more nearly approximated that of men than in any other county” (p. 102). Arthur Stanley, one of the original pioneer settlers of Lincoln County, said this about Biggs in his 1915 Old Settlers Reunion Address: “Lincoln County...has had good strong men at the other end of the spectrum. When you put in the seats, don’t get them too far apart” (Biggs, 1882).

Of all the 79 evaluations, in only two districts did Biggs comment on what the teachers were doing or not doing. Everything else he wrote concerned the facility, equipment, and supplies. One teacher receiving a comment taught at District 19, Pottersburg, approximately twelve miles northwest of the town of Lincoln. She was Carrie Matson, earning $25 dollars per month and teaching with a second grade of certificate. Matson was probably the youngest teacher that ever taught in Lincoln County. Teachers were scarce, and Carrie who was thirteen but looked any age from eighteen to twenty-five, was granted a certificate and taught successfully at Rocky Point. At Pottersburg her success was repeated but it leaked out that she was under age and the superintendent “got the roast that was coming to him.” A quarter century of successful work justified the judgment of the examining board, as she finished her career as a professor of Latin at the University of Kansas (Lincoln County Kansas Biographies, 2000). About Matson’s class, though, Biggs, wrote “Too much speaking. Too much talking back.” However, the average attendance there was shown to be 40 children, recognized by today’s standards as too large of a class to teach effectively.

The other teacher receiving comment was an N. Coover, who taught at District 6 in the town of Lincoln. Coover taught with a first grade of certificate and earned $26 per month. Coover’s class was also too large by modern standards; the average attendance was 50 children. Biggs wrote this to Coover: “Take up a conviction and incorporate it with your life. The teacher should have convictions. He is dealing with forming minds” (Biggs, 1882). This is, of course, a responsibility that all teachers have that will not change with the times.
head of its school system, but she has never had but one A.T. Biggs and many a decade will come and go before we shall behold his like again." (Stanley, 1915, p. 1).

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Dr. Steve Neill, Associate Professor, is a 2002 addition to the ESU Teachers College faculty. He is currently teaching classroom management in both our undergraduate and graduate programs and is the Field Experience Coordinator for teacher preparation. He also teaches a graduate course in educational research and directs the scoring of the Teacher Work Sample. He received his BSED from Pittsburg State with a major in History, his MSED in Secondary Education from Wichita State and his ED.D in Educational Administration from Wichita State. His previous experience includes nineteen years as a high school teacher at Hesston, Concordia and Sumner Academy of Arts and Science and nine years as a building administrator at Burrton, Tonganoxie and Douglass. In 2001, Steve was recognized as KASSP District 4 Principal of the Year and he holds memberships in KASSP, NASSP, USA, Pi Kappa Pi, and Phi Delta Kappa.

References


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