

County Teachers' Institutes: A Snapshot from Gonzales, Texas

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Abstract

Teachers' institutes provided Texas educators with a major form of professional development during the latter nineteenth century and the first part of the twentieth century. This research offers a snapshot of the way Gonzales County, located in central Texas, conducted institutes from 1906 to 1915.

Every year, teachers throughout the United States engage in professional development activities that advance their content and pedagogical knowledge and skills. This endeavor is not a modern invention, but traces its roots to the early days of common schooling in America. Prior to the *Brown* ruling in 1954, schools were segregated for white and black students, and likewise, for teachers. Although teacher development was segregated, all teachers, black and white, were expected to enhance their teaching knowledge and skills. One important means of furthering teacher knowledge was through teacher institutes. At these professional development meetings, practicing teachers gathered for lectures about educational theory, discussions centered on pedagogical techniques, and inspirational speeches designed to create loyalty amongst professional educators (Spearman 2006). Institutes were relatively inexpensive, easy to organize, and provided a blend of local and national educational contexts. The teachers' institute was particular popular during the

decades surrounding the turn of the twentieth century. A variety of teacher institutes existed at the state and local levels, occurring both during the summer months and throughout the school year. This article sheds light on the teacher institutes conducted by one Texas town, Gonzales. Considering what Fraser describes as "understudied" nature of teachers' institutes, a historical case study of Gonzales County might prove to demonstrate a system typical of many districts throughout the state (Fraser 2007, 76).

During the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century, Texas administrators and policymakers considered the professional development of the Texas teaching corps of prime importance. This was in part due to the efforts of Dr. Barnas Sears, the first Peabody agent to visit the state of Texas (Eby 1925). In 1877, he reported that teacher institutes were "indispensable; Otherwise, the public schools will be but a farce" (Sears 1877, 710). Sears' strong statement stemmed from the belief that teachers, without a widespread normal school system, had a general lack of pre-service training and experience. Teacher institutes served to advance teachers' pedagogical and content knowledge. Through regularly scheduled teacher institutes, superintendents guided and supported the daily work of teachers. Other Texas educators later came to agree with Sears, hoping that regularly scheduled professional development might help "to raise teaching to the dignity of a profession in Texas"

(Bryant 1934, 42; Tucker 1917).

The State of Texas ran several different systems of institutes simultaneously—summer normal institutes, county institutes and city/local institutes. The State Superintendent of Education organized and regulated summer normal institutes. Despite the implications of their name, these normal institutes were not officially associated with normal schools, teacher's colleges, or university schools of education but were conducted entirely through the Department of Public Instruction. Whereas some states created special "normal districts" to house each institute, Texas held summer normal institutes based on congressional districts (News and Notes 1885). The state also had a system of county institutes, organized by county superintendents of the public schools. Where summer normals emphasized general theory and subject matter, county institutes focused on practical, pedagogical methods (Hartman 1907). Likely this reflected the certification methods available to teachers in Texas. Teachers could receive certification by graduating from a normal school or by passing county teaching examinations. Due to the more rigorous nature of the normal school curriculum, it is not surprising that county institutes focused on practical pedagogical matters that would enhance the teaching abilities of the teachers accredited through the county examinations. Additionally, some Texas school districts elected to hold local institutes sponsored by city superintendents. City institutes were not regulated by the state legislature, although most superintendents personally insisted that their teachers attend. Local institutes were conceptualized as an extension of county institute work, scheduled regularly on a more frequent basis. Additionally, the smaller setting

allowed for an increased opportunity for group work, teacher leadership and active participation (Liddell 1902).

Of the three institute types available to Texas teachers, county institutes generally garnered the largest amount of teacher participation. Indeed, the Texas legislature stressed the importance of teacher professional development by making county institutes a legal necessity. At first, according to Chapter 25, Section 42 of the Eighteenth Legislative Session of the State of Texas, laws simply mandated that each county hold some form of institute—with no specifics concerning the frequency or length of institutes, nor regulation of teacher attendance (Gammel 1898). Many administrators lobbied for more stringent requirements that would make teacher presence at county institutes compulsory (Henderson 1902). *The Texas School Journal*, the leading educational periodical in Texas during the Progressive Era, suggested that teachers who failed to attend the institutes should have pay deducted from their salaries and be forced to retake all certification exams (Editorial 1887). While the journal's suggestion never came to fruition, the legislature did eventually regulate attendance. In 1905, under the twenty-ninth legislative session of the State of Texas, teacher attendance at county institutes was mandated and teachers could attend institutes that were scheduled during the school year without pecuniary loss (Cousins 1905). This same legislature, in Article 2658, Chapter 124, granted the State Superintendent and his assistants traveling expenses for institute attendance (Woods and McAlister 1938). These institutes were often held for a week in September or during the holidays; or, alternatively, split into sessions that were held

on three non-subsequent weekends during the scholastic year.

Teachers of all grade levels attended county institutes. To better serve the participants, teachers split into sessions that grouped them according to primary, intermediate and high school grade levels. Some county institutes also provided principals and superintendents with a special section for discussing administrative work (Jackson 1897). In the case of some county institutes, teachers also broke into rural and city sections. Institutes were segregated by race into a white section and a colored section, both at the county and city levels. Although the Texas State Superintendent of Public Instruction requested that white and colored sections be held on different days of the week, occasionally they were held on the same date but at different times or in different places, as in San Antonio and Houston (Carlisle 1898). This format allowed the same guest speakers and lectures to visit both the white and the colored institutes in succession (School of Methods, 1905; HISD 1908). In general, the colored institutes had the same format as the white institutes and were also presided over by the city or county superintendent (Hartman 1907; HISD 1908).

At first, Texas county superintendents organized the structure and content of county institutes on their own. However, the quality of the individual institutes varied depending upon the amount of time and preparation that each county superintendent put into the event. During the first part of the twentieth-century, some Texas administrators and policymakers, frustrated that “a very poor grade of institute work prevailed” in many counties because of inconsistencies in the “native ability and training” of some superintendents, sought a way

to regulate county institute work (Henderson 1915). To combat this problem, the State Superintendent of Public Instruction released a general plan for county institutes each year and asked county superintendents to conform—or at least not conflict—with state suggestions. While it is unclear if county superintendents who failed to follow such guidelines received any sort of sanction from the state, they were expected to submit a copy of their institute program to the State Superintendent each year (Bralley 1910).

Teachers’ Institutes in Gonzales County, 1906-1915

Gonzales County is located in central Texas, approximately 50 miles southeast of the state capital of Austin. Since the mid-nineteenth century, the county has been comprised of farms interspersed with a few small towns. Gonzales County was settled in 1826 and was established formally as a county in 1836 (Baumgartner and Vollentine 2008). It is best known for its central role in Texas’ fight for independence from Mexico in 1835. From its early years, Gonzales County prided itself on providing educational opportunities. In 1841, residents of the county seat of Gonzales County, Gonzales, founded Gonzales College (Vollentine 1986). Although the college provided educational opportunities for males and females, only those able to afford the tuition received an education. By the late nineteenth century, a system of public schools administered by the Gonzales County Board of Directors operated throughout the county. Separate schools housed white, African-American, and Mexican children.

To enhance the knowledge levels of its teachers Gonzales County, typical of most Texas counties, offered professional

development in the form of annual county institutes for teachers. The importance of these institutes was noted in the State Department of Education's *Seventeenth Biennial Report*:

The institute serves higher ideals of education and teaching to teachers, cultivates the "craft" spirit, develops a more intelligent understanding of the science and art of instruction and school management, and generates enthusiasm for the work; it makes the increased professional power of teachers that comes from expert suggestions, wise planning and the practical study of education immediately available for school room use, and thereby reaches directly with its influence and benefits all schools in the county... (Texas Department of Education, 1911)

An examination of county institute minutes and newspaper articles on the institutes provided an insight into the workings of these professional development sessions for white teachers in Gonzales County. No substantive records remain for any county institutes for African-American teachers. It is not known if county institutes for African-American teachers were not held, or if detailed records were not saved.

The 1906 Gonzales County White Teachers' Institute commenced at nine o'clock a.m. on September 3 at the Gonzales High School with a prayer led by the local Methodist minister and a roll call of teachers. "Appropriate" religious exercises followed. A female teacher was elected to serve as secretary. A local principal was elected to serve as chairman of the institute and a committee was established to arrange a program of study for the

institute. The program committee consisted of the institute chairman and two participating teachers, who discussed the program requisites with the remaining participants before adjourning for lunch on Monday. Two sessions were held each day, one in the morning and one in the afternoon. Lessons on elementary subject content, pedagogy, and classroom administration were taught by local principals and experienced teachers. For example, the Thursday sessions of the 1906 institute included an advanced class in reading, a roundtable discussion on the topic of including high school branches in rural schools, a class in grammar, and a seminar on teaching percentages in mathematics. Additionally, a local physician provided a lecture on physiology and hygiene and Judge Glass, a county judge, addressed the teachers about Texas' school laws. At the end of the week, the Committee on Resolutions presented a resolution of thanks to the citizens of Gonzales for the kind manner in which the teachers had been treated (Gonzales County Teachers' Institute Minutes, 1906).

The institute of 1907 was typical of the institutes which occurred in Gonzales during the ensuing decade. The county superintendent presided over the institute as chairman. One noted change was that the program of study was outlined by the state superintendent rather than being organized by the local chairman as had been done in 1906. County Superintendent Haynes outlined the State Superintendent's Course of Study to institute participants. To support the state outlined program, State Superintendent Robert Bartow Cousins (1905-1910) addressed the institute on the subject of "What I Consider a Successful Teacher." Although the board of trustees and local citizens were invited, few turned out to hear the state

official (Gonzales County Teachers' Institute Minutes, 1906). One possible reason for the lower than hoped for turnout was the timing of the address. In later years, invited speakers addressed the institute during the day and presented an additional talk at night for the board of trustees and local citizens. The minutes of the institute do not indicate that State Superintendent Cousins delivered an evening address in addition to his speech to the institute. Educational topics of the day were also addressed during the institute. During the morning session on Wednesday, the teachers discussed whether children should start school at age four, five, six, or seven. The institute voted to recommend that all children younger than age seven be excluded from the county schools.

In 1908, the county institute was held in December rather than in September, as in previous years. Despite this change in time, the Gonzales County Institute remained in accordance with state regulations for teachers' institutes. Although State Superintendent Cousins initially suggested that counties hold week-long institutes in September or October, by 1908 these stipulations had changed to allow institutes any time between September 1st and December 31st (Cousins 1907; Eilers 1905). Also in 1908, a local judge who was an expert in agriculture presented lesson on the topic. Teachers visited local classrooms of the Gonzales Independent School District to observe classroom instruction. The Gonzales Mother's Club entertained the teachers at a member's home. A committee on professional reading recommended books for teachers to read throughout the year. These included Colin Sherman Buell's *Essentials of Psychology* (1898) and Francis Wayland Parker's *Talks on*

Teaching (1893). The inclusion of such reading material highlights the fact that teacher institutes were a means for teachers to become familiar with current research and thinking in all aspects of education. In addition to local teachers, principals, and specialists, a professor from Southwestern Normal School, Thomas G. Harris, instructed institute participants on problems in teaching. Although the institute was held at the county's expense, the teachers voted to tax themselves fifteen cents each to help offset the cost of the instructors. In 1908, 75 teachers attended the Gonzales County White Teachers Institute (Gonzales County Teachers Institute Minutes, 1908).

In 1909, the Gonzales County institute met in October, again at the high school building. Cecil Eugene Evans, the General Agent for the Conference of Education in Texas, was invited to address the institute. The Conference of Education in Texas was a body of teachers appointed by the state teachers' association that promoted educational issues. Evans spoke to the teachers on the topic of "Obtaining Better Schools." That evening, Evans delivered an address on "Education as an Investment" with the board of trustees and local citizens being invited to attend. Evan's evening address supported State Superintendent Cousins' institute plan, which suggested that county superintendents hold a motivational evening rally open to the general public; in particular, Cousins suggested that the 1909-1910 school rallies might promote the purpose and goals behind the Conference for Education in Texas (Cousins 1909). In 1909, the county teachers voted to organize themselves in four local districts, representing the four small towns and surrounding rural areas of the county. Local institutes were held on the third Saturday of

each month between December and March, with the hosting location being responsible for planning the program.

In 1910, Evans again was invited to address the Gonzales County White Teachers Institute. Evans discussed rural high schools, explaining their importance and how they could be obtained. Gonzales County Teachers Institute Minutes, 1910. Evans' speech was so convincing that the teachers voted to create a committee to generate public interest in a rural high school for Gonzales County. Also addressing the institute in 1910 was J.E. Rogers of the *Texas School Journal*, who presented a lesson on reading. A.S. Blankenship of the Extension Department of the University of Texas presented a talk on rural schools, libraries, correspondence courses, and school clubs. Interspersed with the guest speakers were lessons such as primary reading, geography, the dull pupil, the Speer method of teaching arithmetic, and teaching Language to non-English speaking students.

The Committee on Resolutions requested that each teacher pledge \$1.00 to aid in the creation of a Teachers' Library for the county. They also recommended endorsing the work of the Educational Conference and creating a local committee of nine members to be known as the Educational Cooperative Committee of Gonzales County, with County Superintendent A.B. Corder serving as the ex-officio chairman. The teachers heartily supported the recommendation.

At the 1912 institute, a new format was implanted with the addition of breakout sessions for teachers in different grade divisions. Throughout the week, primary, intermediate, and high school teachers met with others of the same designation to discuss matters pertinent to

their areas of teaching. Lessons in pedagogy and content knowledge continued to comprise the course of study, with additional sessions on administrative matters, such as how to fill out the county attendance registers and reports. Chapters from William Seneca Sutton and Paul Whitfield Horn's *School Room Essentials* (1911) were assigned to the teachers and discussed at subsequent sessions. The 1912 institute focused on the topic of graded schools. As in previous years, local institutes were scheduled to be held in the four small towns on Saturdays in October and November with the host location planning the program.

William F. Doughty (1913-1916), who in 1913 served as the new Texas State Superintendent of Education, addressed the Gonzales County institute in 1913 and discussed his goals for the schools of Texas: attractive schools, earnest proficient teachers, and cooperation between the teacher, the county superintendent, and the community. Superintendent Doughty stated his desire for "a strong educational system of Texas that shall have for its product men and women of sound character, capable of rendering to society and state that which they justly owe, namely, to become noble citizens" (Gonzales County Teachers' Institute Minutes, 1913). Over 100 teachers and administrators attended the 1913 session to hear Superintendent Doughty.

During the 1913 session, the teachers expanded the offerings of the county schools by approving the formation of an Interscholastic League for the students. The Interscholastic League offered students the opportunity to participate in athletics, academics, and arts competitions. The Interscholastic League (the local affiliate of the statewide University Interscholastic League) was for white students

only. Black students participated in the Prairie View Interscholastic League. The group not only formed a county organization, but voted to enter into affiliation with the statewide University Interscholastic League.

By 1915, attendance at the county institute had grown to nearly 140 school personnel. The group continued to meet at Gonzales High School and County Superintendent Cochran served as chairman of the institute. As in the past, the county institute hosted prominent individuals in the field of education to enhance the knowledge of the institute's attendees. A United States Bureau of Education specialist in city school systems, Walter S. Deffenbaugh, delivered an address on the importance of teachers using supplementary and instructive materials. Deffenbaugh's address was followed by a speech from the State Rural School Supervisor of Texas, and the Rural Supervisor of Louisiana schools, C.J. Brown. The rural supervisors contrasted city and county schools and discussed how to obtain additional funds for county schools. That same evening, Brown presented a stereopticon talk on the condition of rural schools in Louisiana for institute attendees, school board trustees, and members of the community. Often guest speakers remained at the institute throughout the week and delivered multiple presentations. For example, Brown addressed the institute each day during the 1915 meeting.

Brown's visit to the Gonzales County Institute earned Cochran statewide attention as a model superintendent who had "the right conception of the function of a teachers' institute" (Rubinow 1916). S.G. Rubinow, a Texas A&M Professor, lauded Cochran's efforts to bring in notable visiting lecturers who might serve to raise the caliber of Texas teachers'

institutes to an intellectual level more like a normal school. Rubinow praised Brown's visit to Gonzales County, saying that presented enough information to "[bring] the bacon home" and suggested that other county superintendents would soon follow Cochran's meritable example (Rubinow 1916). An additional guest speaker during the 1915 institute was Hugh Thomas Musselman, editor of the *Texas School Journal*, who presented as talks on "That Boy of Yours and What to Do With Him," "The Biological Aspects of Education," "The Cause of the War in Europe and America," and "The European War" (Gonzales County Teachers' Institutes Minutes 1915). Musselman was an outspoken proponent of the teachers' institute who often used the pages of his periodical to promote professional development within the state (Spearman 2008). As part of his preparation for a series of *Texas School Journal* articles on the county teachers' institute printed between 1915 and 1918, Musselman lectured at a series of county institutes around the state, including Gonzales County. Musselman, like Rubinow, lauded the way that Cochran sought leaders in education from areas of the country outside of Texas by having Brown speak at the Gonzales institute all week (Musselman 1915). Brown, according to Musselman, "was one of three or four really great rural school men in America" (Musselman 1918, p. 10). As the success of the 1915 Gonzales County institute spread around the state, other counties sought Deffenbaugh and Brown for their own teachers' institutes. In 1918, for example, the two men spoke at a joint county institute for Fort Bend, Matagorda and Wharton Counties (Musselman 1918).

As with previous institutes, teachers from different grade levels met together under

the supervision of a school principal or an experienced teacher for lessons and discussions pertaining to their teaching level. Lessons from the 1915 institute included the importance of mental arithmetic, correlated reading, school accessories, teaching music, the necessity of agriculture, domestic sciences, and manual training in county schools, and teaching and testing the recitation. Teachers continued to hone their knowledge of pedagogy and subject content.

The administrative structure of the county teachers' institutes of Gonzales County in the early 1900's echoed the design of many other Texas counties. The institute met during the fall semester and was held at the high school in the town of Gonzales, the county seat. The participants elected a chairman, usually the county superintendent or a school principal, and a secretary, usually a female teacher. In 1906, the chairman planned the program for the institute, but beginning in 1907, the program was outlined by the State Superintendent of Education. This change was significant enough to elicit an entry in the institute's minutes and time was set aside during the institute for the chairman to outline the State Superintendent's Course of Study. Teachers posed many questions and generated "several very interesting discussions" regarding the institute program (Gonzales County Teachers' Institute Minutes, 1907). During the early years of the institute, the group met as a whole, but later altered the meeting format to allow time for teachers of similar grade levels to meet for lessons or discussions pertaining to their teaching level.

Individual lessons or discussions were led by school principals or experienced teachers in the Gonzales County schools or from the

Gonzales Independent School District. Local experts, such as agricultural specialists and physicians, addressed the participants on a variety of topics. State and national educational personnel also were invited to speak, often with additional addresses being delivered in the evening to institute participants, school board trustees, and members of the community. Two State Superintendents of Education, officials of the *Texas School Journal*, university men, school officials from other states, and national educational figures all visited the Gonzales County White Teachers Institute to provide instruction to teachers and administrators. Local social organizations provided activities for institute participants. The local Mother's Club, Businessman's Club, and school vocal groups provided amusements such as teas, automobile drives of the town, and concerts to entertain the town's guests each year. Although the format of the institutes and the speakers changed over time, the goal of Gonzales County yearly meetings remained the same, to provide professional development for the teachers of the county school and to enhance teachers' pedagogical and academic content knowledge.

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