



# THE FOUNDING & EARLY YEARS

## of the Indiana School Boards Association

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**T**he Indiana School Boards Association was founded on March 16, 1949 after year-long deliberation within the Indiana Town and City School Administrators' Association about the need for an independent organization for school board members (Watson, 1964). The Constitution and Bylaws adopted by membership at the first annual meeting explained the purpose of the new organization: "The purpose of the Indiana School Boards' Association shall be the constant improvement of public school education in the State of Indiana" (Watson, 1964, p. 133). To understand the early years of the association, it is necessary to understand the organization out of which the association grew.

### **A PREHISTORY OF THE SCHOOL BOARDS ASSOCIATION**

The Town and City School Administrators Association

(ITCSAA) got its start in the 1930s, a time of significant growth and turmoil in education in the U.S. at large. Debates about the purposes of schooling were quite heated during the Great Depression – some advocated using the schools to lead to major social and political changes, while others insisted that the schools should instill faith in the "American Way" (Evans, 2004). State and city officials also enlisted schools in the work of Americanizing new immigrants through instruction in English, the founding documents, and national heroes and holidays (Mirel, 2010). In addition to these fights over the curriculum, school enrollments and school systems grew rapidly during the early 20th century (Spring, 2008). As school systems grew, so did mechanisms for leading and managing school systems, including school boards, superintendents, and state officials. Leaders in these systems identified the need for professionalization in the 1920s (Larabee, 1992), and by the 1930s, these professionals were

beginning to see themselves as active participants in the creation and implementation of education policy (Spring, 2008).

It is at this time, in the early 1930s, that the Indiana Town and City School Administrators Association began to take shape. In 1935, the West Lafayette School Board hosted a meeting with board members and administrators from neighboring school corporations to discuss common concerns. Attendees deemed the meeting a success and determined to expand the group and form an organization, the North-Indiana City School Administrators' Association. The group held several regional meetings for administrators and board members from 1936 to 1939, when leaders of the Association decided to develop a state-wide organization, the Indiana Town and City School Administrators' Association. It seemed as though this new group was meeting a need felt by school leaders, as the rapid growth from 1935 to 1939 attests. However, this growth stalled during World War II as, among other things, fuel shortages and rationing made it difficult for members to meet. No meetings were held between November 1940 and April 1946.

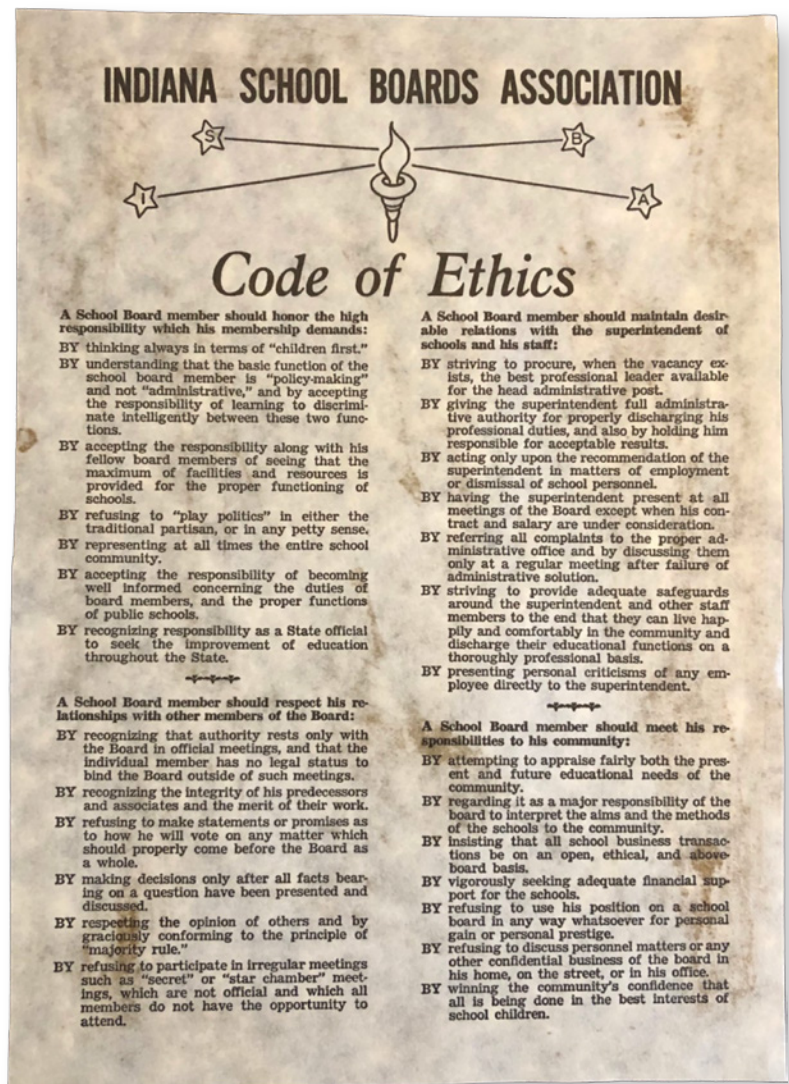
The 1946 meeting included remarks from Governor Ralph Gates, and explored topics such as making teaching a more attractive profession and reorganizing methods of transportation for students. The meeting was largely successful in renewing interest in the work of the Association. Dr. G. O. Larson, the president of the Association and an active participant in the creation of the earlier North-Indiana City School Administrators' Association, described the goals of the reenergized association when he wrote:

*"It is my sincere conviction that the major responsibilities for the laws and the administration of the laws under which Indiana public education operates should and will rest squarely on the shoulders of this organization. This means we should enter politics, and why not? We are citizens... if we do not try to properly mold public opinion as it affects our school, we are not facing the facts of life and we can have no right to criticize (Personal letter, as cited in Watson, 1964)."*

Larson's focus on legislation and policymaking indicates the central role that school boards played in this association, and also points toward the need for separate associations for board members and for administrators. As the association grew in the second half of the 1940s, more and more board members began to push for an organization to call their own.

## THE FOUNDING TO 1960

Throughout 1948 and 1949, there were discussions about creating a new, separate organization for school board members. At the January meeting of the ITCSAA, the association voted to amend its constitution to allow for the establishment of such an independent organization. A few months later, at the ITCSAA's March meeting, the full membership voted unanimously to create this separate organization, the Indiana School Boards Association (ISBA) in which only members of school boards would have voting membership or be able to hold elected office. Later that year, the association formed a partnership with Indiana University's School of Education. O. H. Roberts, the first president of the ISBA, worked with W. W. Wright, the Dean of the School of Education, to negotiate the terms of the relationship, to find space, and to establish that the position of



Executive Secretary would be held by an IU faculty member, Dr. M. E. Stapley.

The Indiana School Boards Association held its first annual convention on November 30, 1949. At this convention, the members voted unanimously to adopt new bylaws and dues structures and also identified a strategy for growing the association. Over the next several years, the ISBA sponsored regional meetings throughout the state and regularly published the *ISBA Mimeocast*, a newsletter published three or four times a year for board members and other school leaders. In 1955, the *Mimeocast* was replaced by the *Hoosier School Board Journal*, which was published on a monthly basis during the school year. In addition to the regional meetings, annual convention, and newsletter, the association performed many key roles in its early years. The professional staff of the association offered consulting services to individual school board members and to entire school boards facing difficult decisions. Consultations covered a broad range of school board activities, including selecting new school administrators, making ethical and legal determinations, and technical assistance in school district reorganizations.

Perhaps the most important work of the ISBA was training and supporting new board members, which it did through both workshops and printed materials. The association conducted annual new school board member training beginning in 1950 to address the rapid turnover and short tenure of most board members in the state. Dr. Stapley, the Executive Secretary, hoped that the trainings would both prepare new school board members and cause them to identify and remain engaged with the association. The strategy, combined with other services and activities sponsored by the association, seemed to work; between 1950 and 1960, the membership of the association grew from just over 100 to 180 participating boards.

## THE 1960S TO 1975

The ISBA continued to grow and to diversify its activities in the following decades. The association revised its constitution in 1961 to recognize the role it had already begun to play in legislative advocacy. The added statement indicated that the ISBA would, “provide the General Assembly of the State of Indiana with all pertinent information incident to the passage of sound educational legislation” (Watson, 1964). Accordingly, in 1962, the association adopted a three-pronged approach to its legislative activity: (1) sponsoring bills which it believes will promote better education, (2) supporting bills it believes to

be sound regardless of the source, and (3) opposing all bills it believes to be unsound. While the ISBA had been engaged in legislative activity throughout the 1950s, it dealt mostly with issues pertaining to school district reorganizations. In the 1960s, the association began to pay more attention to other legislative matters, including seeking greater state financial support of education. In 1961, the ISBA helped pass a bill that provided an additional 70,000 dollars (equivalent to almost \$600,000.00 in 2019) for the state Department of Education. Throughout the 1960s, the association continued to advocate for more money for education, and partnered with ally organizations to expand access to kindergarten, and to pursue redistricting and reorganizing.

In fact, redistricting influenced other program areas of the association throughout the 60s. For example, in 1961 and 1962 several school districts throughout the state chose to reorganize. To support this work, two special workshops were conducted for these reorganizing school corporations, one at University of Notre Dame and one at Indiana University. These workshops supplemented the annual new board member workshop and helped to establish the newly formed school corporations on firmer footing.

Membership in the Indiana School Board Association continued to grow, and as it grew, so did the demands of the members. As such, the ISBA determined that it needed to restructure. Indiana University and the association agreed that the Executive Secretary position could no longer be done half time (Wirtz, 1979). As such, the association appointed Dr. Lowell Rose as the Executive Secretary and, in less than a year, added the part-time position of Associate Executive Director. Dr. A. T. Lindley was appointed to that position and set about visiting districts, townships, and corporations that did not participate in the association. The effort resulted in 21 new memberships before the end of 1970.

This growth, along with the trend towards centralization of school policymaking (Spring, 2008), contributed to the need for the association to expand its areas of focus. In 1968, the association established a legislative office in Indianapolis to more effectively and immediately weigh in on bills being considered. The ISBA Board of Directors felt such an office was necessary to promote “dissemination of accurate information to legislators in order that they might comprehend the effect of various bills upon Indiana’s program of public instruction [and] reverse the flow of accurate information to local boards and superintendents regarding action being taken or contemplated by the legislature”

(*ISBA Journal*, 1969, quoted in Wirtz, 1979). As the association became more involved in legislation, in 1969 the ISBA hired a staff attorney to help districts, individual board members, and school leaders understand and implement new policies.

Throughout the late 1960s and early 1970s, a greater and greater share of the ISBA's activities centered around Indianapolis. Most meetings and conventions were held in Indianapolis, as advances in transportation had eased the need for regional conventions. Additionally, politics became increasingly professionalized in the 1960s and 70s (Skocpol, 2003) leading to a greater need for legislative work throughout the year, not just the months during which the assembly was in session. By 1973, the executive committee of ISBA began considering moving from Indiana University's campus to the capital. In 1975, the association secured office space at 222 North New Jersey Street in Indianapolis – a space that would allow the organization to

continue to evolve and to grow.

In only the 40 years between 1935 and 1975, the Indiana School Board Association grew from a local dinner meeting in Lafayette to a state-wide organization representing both board members and administrators to, finally, an independent organization that represents and serves school boards and members across the state. By 1975, the association counted 100 percent of all corporation school boards as members, and had grown large enough to require a permanent staff, new offices with room to grow, and a space near the seat of government to be a powerful voice in Indiana's education policy.

*Recognition: Most of the information in this article comes from the doctoral dissertations of two Indiana University graduates, James R. Watson, 1964, and Thomas J. Wirtz, 1979.*

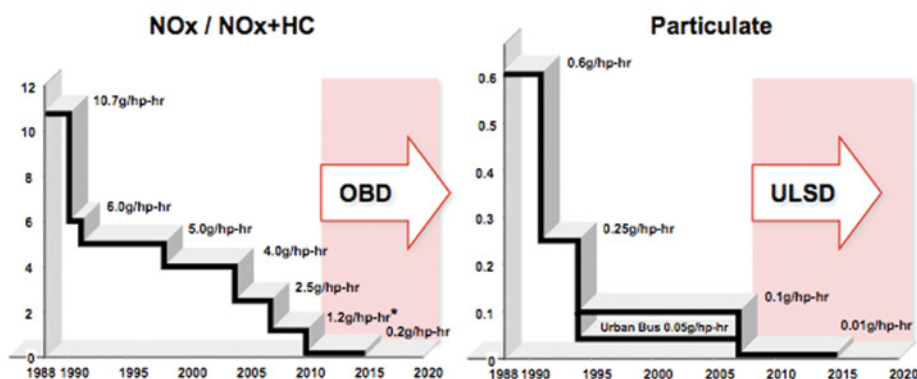
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