



School Districts' Organization
Historical Outline of Colorado School District Formation
by Stanley A. Leftwich, former Assistant Commissioner, CDE

The county superintendent of schools had the authority to organize school districts in Colorado's territorial days. The first constitution gave the Colorado General Assembly the authority to establish school districts of convenient size. The first General Assembly in its general laws delegated the responsibility for establishing school districts to the citizens of the local communities. The parents of ten children of school age could petition the county superintendent of schools for an election for the formation of new school districts out of unorganized territory or out of the territory of already existing districts. (In 1945 this number of children was amended to fifteen children.) By 1880 over 800 school districts had been created by use of this statute. Most of these were "common school" districts. It was not until 1945 that all school districts were required to provide high school education.

Very little planning was provided; many of the early districts were organized on too small a basis to continue. On the other hand, rapid expansion of population, the Homestead Act, and mining developments prompted increasing organization of school districts. By 1935, there were 2,220 school districts in the state. The districts were classified: first class districts had over 1,000 children of school age as measured by the school census; second class districts had 350-999; and third class districts had under 350 students. It was possible for elementary districts in a county to cooperate in the establishment on a county-wide basis of a county high school system with a separate committee of one board member from each elementary district as the administrative board for the county high school. A variation of this high school system was the establishment of a union high school district when elementary districts from only a portion of a county wanted to cooperate in the establishment of high school facilities.

The General Assembly recognized problems with school district organization and, in the middle 1940s, conducted a study of school district administration. The study showed two major problems: school district structure and financing of the schools. The School District Reorganization Act of 1949 was the outcome. A general pattern of delegating responsibility to local school districts was continued, but a county committee was created to bring planning into the organization of new districts. Twenty-nine counties made progress under this Act, but there was widespread misunderstanding of it. In 1951, it was amended into uselessness. The problems grew more vexing, and the legislature again commissioned a study -- this one eighteen months long.

The redraft of the 1949 Act became the School District Organization Act of 1957. In 1957, there were 239 non-operating districts in the state and 203 one-room school districts. Through the voluntary process of the new Act, the number of school districts was reduced to 181. Today twenty counties have only one school district, seventeen counties have two school districts, and twelve counties have no more than three districts. County superintendents have been abolished.

In order to retain feelings of local control in small districts and, at the

same time, provide for specialized services, districts have formed boards of cooperative services.

RECEIVED

SEP 10 1988

STATE PUBLIC AFFAIRS

200 North Capitol Street