

History of Education in Decatur Township

Much of this information was obtained from the 1960 historical account of Decatur Township education compiled by Historian Lois Esther Littler.

As pioneer-era settlers flocked to the area that became Decatur Township in the early 1800s, they recognized the importance of education. During that initial rush to live in the area west of White River, Samuel Wicks began teaching the township's first school in 1824 in a cabin on Colonel D.L. McFarland's farm. That location is now in the west section of Mayflower Village. In the fall of 1825, another cabin was constructed where the railroad crosses Troy Avenue. Joseph Fassett, the first Baptist minister in the township, taught that school's students.

Within two years, the "school corporation" concept was developing in Decatur Township as yet another school was built and became known as Liberty School or Liberty Church, on the east side of Mann Road. It had logs hewn and extending across the building for students' seats, and a fireplace leading to a stick chimney heated it. When the fireplace was deemed insufficient for heating even the one-room facility, the school became cutting-edge for the day as one of the first wood stoves in the Decatur Township area was shipped in from Cincinnati.

The next documented school in Decatur Township was built and named Union School in about 1840. The Fairfield Monthly Meeting of Friends operated the school. Brushwood School, a two-story building about three miles southeast of Bridgeport was a flourishing school in the early 1870s under the auspices of Beech Grove Monthly Meeting. Brushwood had between 40 and 50 students when it was torn down and replaced by a brick structure, becoming School No. 6 under the township district division system. About the same time, the Fairfield Monthly Meeting of Friends started a second school, Lick Branch, but it didn't have continuous classes.

Decatur Township actually had a school known as "Beech Grove School" under the care of the Beech Grove Monthly Meeting. It was a frame house built in 1854, and its tenure of education ran until the township formally assumed control of the schools in 1870. At that time, Beech Grove School had 77 pupils and was experimenting with the high school-type education program. During the Civil War, Decatur Township had a school building where soldiers are believed to have drilled.

The Committee on Education of the Fairfield Monthly Meeting also operated a school in West Newton that had 26 students being taught by Benjamin Pucket, a Quaker minister. The school didn't last long and its better students moved onto to Landersdale School. The distance to travel, however, was too demanding for the transportation of the day, so a second school was constructed near the cemetery in West Newton.

The second school had luxuries such as desks and stoves, but its curriculum was its drawing card, even bringing in people as old as 30 to attend class. The school was known for its curriculum in grammar, arithmetic, reading, spelling, writing and geography. Since it was under Quaker control, students were required to attend worship meetings on Wednesdays.

Rapid growth in student numbers dictated building a third frame schoolhouse in the West Newton area. By 1854, the school was overflowing and a second story was added. It had crowding problems similar to today's schools with enrollment at about 135 in 1871. Three teachers were responsible for teaching the large student body.

When the township took over the schools in 1870, six districts were established: Liberty, Spring Valley, West Newton and vicinity, Valley Mills, Bethel and Brushwood. The district school system was eventually discontinued and the township's schools were consolidated into buildings at West Newton and Valley Mills. Decatur Township started regular transportation of students in horse-drawn wagons and - by the latter part of the 1800s - Decatur Township schools were considered among the best in Marion County.

West Newton established a high school in 1887, with a 3-year study program. In 1890, the first graduating class left that building. A 4-year course was introduced in 1894. The original brick portion of the present school building at West Newton was erected in 1906, and West Newton became a commissioned high school in 1907. High school classes were offered at West Newton by 1897, but pupils had to complete the fourth year at West Newton.

Five students made up the first Valley Mills graduating class in 1911. An addition was built at Valley Mills in 1913, but the entire structure burned on October 31, 1930. The loss of the Valley Mills building prompted school officials to consolidate students of the two former high schools into one building housing Decatur Central and part of the junior high classes. Elementary school students from the northern half of the township also were schooled in the building at one point.

Since that time, population has grown at a rapid pace in Decatur Township and a wing was added to the West Newton school building in 1951, with a T-wing constructed in 1954. Stephen Decatur Elementary School was built in the Mars Hill area in 1952 and expanded in 1958. An influx of housing precipitated the construction of the present Decatur Central High School in the early '60s and enabled the curriculum to be expanded to include greater opportunities in aspects of academia such as music instruction, vocational preparation and in athletics.

Lynwood Elementary School also was constructed to meet the number of students in the northern half of Decatur Township and Decatur Middle School - constructed in the early 1990s - grew to be one of the five largest middle schools in the state.

The 21st Century ushered in a new philosophy and approach to education. The list of unique and inventive happenings around the MSD of Decatur Township since the turn of the century is long and diverse. A few of the corporation's varied efforts to improve student learning and change the community's culture since 2000 include a construction/renovation project to provide the MSD of Decatur Township with new or updated facilities addressing overcrowding needs and aging, deteriorating buildings.

The work began in the summer of 2003 on two new intermediate schools for fifth and sixth graders, as well as badly needed extensive renovations at Stephen Decatur and West Newton elementary schools. Greatly improved facilities are a very important step as the MSD of Decatur Township's Journey Toward Excellence has picked up steam.

That journey is progressing toward a focus on excellence in every area of education and community involvement. The corporation continuously revisits how students learn as it strives to become a total learning community. Another aspect of that evolution is forging a new, positive culture rather than one of conflict. We cannot emphasize enough that our goal is to have an educational process in which everyone is working together as a team, not the once-common topdown approach. The Journey Toward Excellence should be a community-wide project resulting in a universally winning situation for children.

Another of the more prevalent developments for the MSD of Decatur Township is a partnership with Holladay Properties, the developer of AmeriPlex Business Park, because the agreement recently brought the MSD of Decatur Township's dream of launching the Challenger Learning Center to reality.

The district opened the Challenger Learning Center of Decatur Township in April 2004, providing an opportunity for students in grades 5-10, as well as community members, to experience simulated space missions. The standards-based program not only bolsters teamwork and communication skills, but also enhances standards-based learning in the areas of science, math and language arts. Such a partnership also holds the key to establishing an entire educational campus inside the business park.

Besides housing the Challenger Learning Center of Decatur Township, the facility in AmeriPlex contains the Decatur Discovery Academy, a sorely needed non-traditional secondary school program for students who learn in unique or non-conventional ways, and a satellite campus established by IVY Tech State College. The AmeriPlex-Decatur IVY Tech State College campus offers post-secondary educational programs to community members in southwestern Marion County and surrounding area.