A Historical Perspective on Public Education

It has been said that we can’t possibly know where we are going if we don’t know where we have been. In that light, I thought it would be helpful for those of you who work closely with your local educational partners, to know some history about Georgia public education. It will surprise you as to how recently some major educational policy has been in existence in our state.

1777: 1st state constitution directed that schools be built in each county and supported by the state. Due to the Revolutionary War, resources were not available for this, but by 1850 219 schools were chartered around the state but were primarily funded by tuition.

1785: Legislation passed that made any state funded school, a part of the University of Georgia. UGA controlled curriculum, hiring of teachers, everything. The university president was required to visit every school annually. This soon proved to be unmanageable.

1822: A “poor school fund” was appropriated for families that could not afford to pay tuition to schools but it was not until Reconstruction that a real effort was made to create a statewide public school system.

1870: An omnibus education bill was passed establishing county BOEs, state BOE, school term of 3 months, a system to distribute funds based on number of school age children, and the state school commissioner.

1877: The new constitution limited state funding to elementary grades and only to the teaching of reading, writing, arithmetic, grammar, and spelling.

1904: A constitutional amendment allowed counties to levy up to 5 mills for a local school tax with approval of a 2/3 majority. In addition, the seeds for partnership with Cooperative Extension and Georgia Schools were sown when Newton County Superintendent of Schools
founded the Boys’ Corn Club. This Corn Club became one of the first 4-H programs in existence.

1920: State funding allowed for high schools by statewide vote. Georgia was the last state to do so.

1937: A 7 month school term was established, free textbooks, and a state minimum salary set.

1945: A school attendance law was passed. The limit for the local school tax was raised to 15 mills.

1947: State law was amended to recognize 12th grade as part of the public school system. Georgia was the last state to fund it although many local systems were already doing so.

1955: No longer any 11th grade graduations.

1949: 180 day school year established, kindergarten was permitted and a state capital outlay program was created.

1951: 3% sales tax was passed to help support education.

1958: US Supreme Court ruled that segregation was unconstitutional.

1968: Only 2% of black students attended class with whites in Georgia.

Early 1970’s: Segregated public schools dismantled in Georgia.

Knowing these facts brings to light how young our educational system is in Georgia and helps us to realize how far we have come in such a short period of time.

Sources:
1) Palm, A., GSBA AGENDA, November 2009, Issue No. 1, p. 6
2) http://www.georgiaencyclopedia.org/nge/Article.jsp?id=h-2619

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