

WINCHESTER'S FIRST FULL-TIME SUPERINTENDENT OF SCHOOLS

By Ellen Knight¹

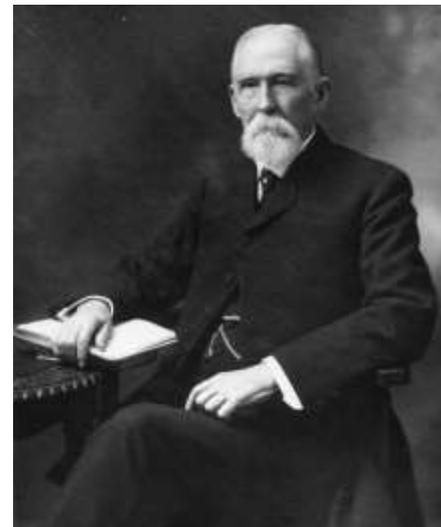
Until 1902, a full-time superintendent was not a familiar figure in the Winchester school system. The School Committee originally managed the duties that the superintendent would take over, but a special committee appointed in 1881 recommended that the School Committee be authorized to employ one at an expense not to exceed \$600 per year.

Such a sum could not support a full-time superintendent, so the first superintendent, Professor B. F. Tweed, was engaged for "at least two days a week." Tweed stayed for three years and had no successor for two years as the town sought to share a superintendent with an adjoining town. "Our town is not large enough in population or in financial means," the school committee reported in 1885, "to support a first-class superintendent alone."

The second superintendent divided his time between Winchester and Medford. But, following a third part-time superintendent whose time and salary grew steadily, in 1902 the town hired a full-time superintendent, Robert C. Metcalf.

Metcalf came to Winchester after a long career in education. His own earliest schooling took place in a one-room red schoolhouse, about a half-mile from his father's farm in Wrentham. At that time, he wrote in his *Recollections of a School-Master*, "educational principles did not count for much, normal schools cut no figure in the training of teachers, and so-called 'methods of instruction' were unknown."²

His early schooling, he recalled, was quite limited. "Our knowledge of literature was confined to the brief selections in the school Readers... Our work in geography, grammar, and history was of the most primitive character."



After his father moved to a factory village, "my father sent his children to school whenever there was a suitable school to attend, but the school terms were very short, and the teachers, well, they were the best that could be found for two and one-half or three dollars per week beside their board."

At age 66 he wrote in his diary that "what I needed at the outset, before school (teaching) work was undertaken, was six or eight years of study in the best schools and colleges." What he got, after the one-room schoolhouse, was a three-term course in a normal school.

Metcalf conceived his ambition of becoming a teacher while working in a cotton factory and at

age 17 was able to enter the Bridgewater Normal School and train to become a school master. He was first engaged in that profession in Needham in 1850, the year Winchester was incorporated.

After a job in Weston, he became principal of the Northborough High School, then went to Cohasset for a year, and was then engaged to teach at Roxbury High School, all before turning 21 in 1854. His highest annual salary was \$1,000.

Marrying in 1856, Metcalf found a more lucrative job in the Adams School in East Boston where his salary started at \$1,200 and rose to \$1,600. Thus began a long, respected career as a teacher and master in the Boston schools. In 1882, he was elected to the Board of Supervisors, on which he served until 1902, when he became superintendent in Winchester.

In 1902 Metcalf was 69. For over a year he had been considering, severing his connection with the Boston schools, he wrote to the Winchester School Committee. Though the Winchester position meant a salary cut, from about \$3,750 to \$2,000, "the time has come, when I should throw off some of the cares which my present position demands of me."

Further, he wrote, "At the same time, it permits me to return to Winchester and enables me also to keep in touch with educational affairs to which my whole life has been devoted."

WINCHESTER SUPERINTENDENT

The Metcalf family had previously lived in Winchester, from 1877 to about 1888. Martha Metcalf had served on the School Committee from 1881 to 1884, during the dozen years of the late 19th century that women were allowed on that committee. Robert Metcalf served on one of the Town Hall building committees and as a library trustee.

When he returned, Metcalf reported that he found the schools "in good running order, well housed in most cases, equipped with an abundance of good material, and officered with an enthusiastic corps of teachers."

Subjects which occupied his first report were the length of the school year, which was four weeks shorter than was ordinary in the state, the length of the school day, the "weakness in grammar school work," and "the urgent demand for a higher standard of scholarship in the high school."

Throughout his report Metcalf stressed the importance of good teachers. "The teacher who inspires his pupils with a love for learning, who, by his own scholarly attainments, stimulates them to put forth every effort to acquire knowledge, who arouses in them an ambition to become leaders in whatever lines of work they may choose, such a teacher is worth more than any town is able to pay for his services."

He defined the function of the supervisor (or superintendent) in his diary in 1895. "A supervisor's work is many sided. He has duties to parents, to teachers, and to pupils. He is the chosen

confidential friend of the parents, because to him parents must look for advice in the education of their children. While it is his business to plan for the careful instruction of all the youth in a town or city, he must so plan that there will be no waste of the means of his constituents. For the time being, their property is his property, and in his expenditures for education, he must protect them in their rights as carefully as he would protect his own.

“The rights of the children must also be protected, even against the false economy and financial meanness of their own parents. School buildings must be kept in good repair and must be well furnished with all proper accommodations for instruction. Good teachers must be selected and placed in charge of the schools. Parents must be kept informed of the progress of pupils, and frequent reports must familiarize them of the usual work of the school room.

“All these demands upon the superintendent’s time must be met. But beyond all this, there is one demand that exceeds in importance all others. The Superintendent must be the inspiring force behind the teacher. To him the teacher has a right to look for guidance, instruction, and inspiration.

“A school cannot be managed by a superintendent from his office. He needs to know the interior workings of his classrooms– the trials and troubles of his teachers as well as their successes. He must be able to rejoice with them and also to give comfort and help.”

Metcalf, who received a Litt. D. from Tufts in 1905, resigned in 1907. He remained in Winchester and in 1910 gave an address at the high school graduation and distributed the diplomas.

During his career, which continued until his death, Metcalf also lectured on education and co-authored two text books. For decades he also taught and supervised Sunday Schools. He wrote articles on education, including several pieces published locally up through May 1911, five months before his death.

Once, in 1877, Metcalf wrote in his dairy that he wished he had been called to be a preacher. “And yet, I can be an effective preacher by living the good I already know.” Five years later he wrote that “man has the power to reach out and touch the world on all sides and by so doing adds to his own happiness while he does the work required.”

Quoting Henry Ward Beecher, Metcalf also wrote in his diary that “Education is the knowledge of how to use the whole of one’s self.” As is evident throughout his writings, promoting such an education was not just a job but clearly a life’s mission to Metcalf and explains the high esteem in which the town held their superintendent.

“AN IDEAL SCHOOL”

by Superintendent of Schools Robert C. Metcalf
From in his 1906 annual report

“The ideal school has about forty pupils. In Winchester we average about forty-two in the grades. These pupils are not all brilliant scholars. Some are slow and dull, and a very few may come near being stupid. But every one is trying to do his best, and he is trying because he has a teacher whom he loves. He knows that she is doing her best for him. When he makes mistakes, or even carelessly blunders, he sees how patient she is, and because of her patience, he pulls himself together and tries again to visit. To visit such a school is a delight and an inspiration. The room itself reflects the good cheer of teacher and pupils. The very pictures on the walls, and the plants in the windows, are voicing benedictions on the school. The room is not deathly quiet, but what one hears is the hum of a busy group of studious but happy boys and girls. The study periods are short, but they are devoted strictly to hard work. And yet the boys and girls do not think of it as work. The periods for recreation are frequent but brief, and these are given exclusively to play, which our ideal teacher enjoys in full measure with the children.

“Have I overdrawn my two pictures? No, I have seen many such in my experience of fifty years. But, how I wish there were more of them! Money cannot pay for ideal teachers. Their pay comes in a coin called gratitude, which springs up and continues to grow in the heart of the pupil; and throughout the long years of after life it becomes the inspiration to the highest types of manhood and womanhood.

“Winchester needs ideal schools and wants ideal teachers. When our wants and needs are fully met, Winchester will be an ideal town.”

¹ This article © 2018 is a revision of an earlier article by the author, Ellen Knight, published in the *Daily Times Chronicle* on Aug. 30, 2002. This revision supersedes all previous articles.

² Quotations from Metcalf’s writings are taken from a collection of his writings in the Winchester Archival Center.