

The Common School System in New York State  
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In 1812 a landmark law established a statewide system of common school districts and authorized distribution of interest from the Common School Fund. Town and city officials were directed to lay out the districts. The voters in each district elected trustees to operate its school. State aid was distributed to those districts holding school at least three months a year for population aged 5-15. While the 1812 act authorized local authorities to establish common school districts, an 1814 amendment required them to do so. The typical district had a one-room or two-room schoolhouse where children learned reading, writing, spelling, arithmetic, and geography. By the mid-1800s New York had over 10,000 common school districts.

Beyond the "3 R's" (readin', 'ritin', 'rithmetic) offered by the common schools, more advanced instruction was available in private high schools known as "academies" or "seminaries." The Regents monitored these schools and provided them modest amounts of aid. After 1827 aid from the Literature Fund was designated for students in all academic courses, not just Latin and Greek, thereby encouraging academies to broaden their programs beyond that of the classical grammar school. By the 1850s about 165 academies around the state provided secondary education. (Very few youths went on to college).

By the 1840s the small common school districts became inadequate in populous areas. In 1853 a state law authorized one or more common districts to form a "union free school district." This law permitted the new districts to establish "academic departments," or high schools, which were to be overseen by both the Regents and the Superintendent of Public Instruction. Boards of education managed the property and finances of the city and union free districts, and hired superintendents to administer systems with several schools. The private academies could not compete with free high schools, and most soon merged with the union districts or simply closed down. High school enrollments expanded greatly during the 1920s and 1930s, leading the NYS Education Department to promote the comprehensive high school. Most of the union free districts later became the cores of central school districts.

Formation of central rural school districts was first authorized by a 1914 law. In 1917 the Legislature abolished all the thousands of common school districts and formed them into "township units." School taxes shot up, taxpayers protested, and a year later the township system was abandoned. Because a study by the Board of Regents' completed in 1938 criticized the small size of many schools, centralization procedures were improved and a master plan for school consolidation/centralization was developed by 1947 and updated in 1958. Boards of Cooperative Educational Services (BOCES) were formed in 1948 to provide shared educational services across district lines, especially in rural areas.