

KINDERGARTEN

By Ellen Knight¹

Looking back through Winchester's history, one of the disputes which may seem odd to modern minds is the ruckus that was kicked up over introducing kindergarten into the school system.

"Rousseau and other profound scholars agree that the education of the child, entering school at six years of age, has been almost completed by the nurse." So wrote Superintendent of Schools Edwin N. Lovering in his 1893 Annual Report in supporting the School Committee's decision to begin a kindergarten that fall. Though kindergartens were part of public school systems in several large cities in the country, in 1893 they were new and experimental—and controversial.

"After one or two years in the Kindergarten," Lovering wrote further, "the child enters upon the learning of his school tasks with the greatest possible advantages. Not only have his senses all been trained to keener perception, and his inventive faculties been developed, but an incalculable gain has been made in the moral training, on the side of the humanities, the special glory of Kindergarten work."



Kindergarten class at the Wyman School

Glory? Not to all. Though a citizens' petition prompted the School Committee to begin the experiment and Town Meeting passed an appropriation for it in March 1893, at the very next session J.H. Winn moved a reconsideration of the vote. Considering the previous vote to have been "hasty," he predicted that the kindergarten would simply be a "stepping stone to a large annual expenditure of money." His motion failed.

"R.R.H." then wrote to the paper that "the voters of Winchester missed a good opportunity...to express their emphatic disapproval of the most foolish of the ideas which have been brought forward and put in operation by the small number of men and women who control the school system in this town." Though he admitted that "everyone knows the success of the system in Boston," he considered it laughable to suggest that success in places such as Chicago, St. Louis, and San Francisco meant success for Winchester. The program, he argued, would benefit only a few families. He predicted that when the cost multiplied at the next town meeting, the voters would change their minds.²

Nevertheless, one kindergarten class was begun in the fall of 1893 at the Rumford School. By Christmas, the superintendent could illustrate the moral benefit of kindergarten by reference to the display of gifts made for giving away by the kindergarten children. "I remarked to a six-year-

old child," he reported, "'Next Monday will be New Year's, and we shall begin then a Happy New Year,' and the child immediately asked me 'if Santa Claus would bring him any more presents?' That was the usual education of the gift-making season. He had not been to the kindergarten."

A newspaper report stated, "We must not fail to appreciate the importance of this great work.... To cultivate the spirit of love, co-operation, and sympathy, this early, is the aim of the kindergarten. That the child in being happy forgets to be naughty."³

But many did fail to appreciate the kindergarten. That same year the Appropriations Committee (of whom Winn was one) remarked, "The majority of the Committee was opposed to the maintenance of the kindergarten, and, in its recommendation, has reduced by its estimated cost the sum asked for by the School Board."



Kindergarten class at the Prince School

Yet the Town adopted the kindergarten as part of its school system, extending the practice over the next seven years to four schools. However, much of the town was still not convinced. The March 1900 Town Meeting, having voted to build two new schools, voted against the appropriation for kindergarten and manual training. But, in the face of public concern marshalled by The Fortnightly (women's club) and others, a Special Town Meeting was called.

Addressing the largest turnout in the history of the town, Rev. Joshua Coit moved the appropriation for kindergarten and manual training. Arthur Whitney offered an amendment that such money not be expended in educating children under five years. Several speakers defended the courses for any age, citing the experience of the students and quoting letters from teachers and educators.

But others declared firmly that children under five should not be in school. Whitney claimed that school "was an injury to the brain" at that age. Lewis Parkhurst said that "it did not do to force a child too much as it would result in nervous exhaustion followed by prostration." And it was argued that the programs were too expensive given the large debt of the town. The original motion carried by a vote of 402 to 36. The kindergarten continued— as did the debate. "Education is running into fads that are fast crowding out important studies," declared Henry Shepard in the newspaper. "The kindergarten was simply a nursery where women could put their children while they went to Boston shopping and elsewhere."⁴

Others, like Wilson Palmer, championed the program: "The spirit of earnest inquiry is never more manifest, indeed never as manifest, as in the childlife. The average boy and girl of three and four years are hardly other than walking interrogation points.... So we have come, naturally enough, to believe with heart, soul, might, mind, and strength in the Kindergarten School."⁵

"The kindergarten is surely coming," wrote the School Committee in 1893. It came, but its staying was not assured for many years.

WHEN THE MONEY RAN OUT

The kindergarten question was revived in 1901 when the School Department ran out of money. "In estimating the money necessary for the needs of the schools at the annual meeting last March," an unsigned newspaper report said, "it is said a mistake was made in not fixing the amount high enough."

The solution announced by the school board in Dec. 1901 was to close the kindergarten for the months of January, February, and March. It was not a popular decision and, again, a special Town Meeting was called, reportedly attracting the largest turnout in the history of the town. A motion in favor of the appropriation was carried by an overwhelming majority.

By 1901 there were four half-day kindergarten schools with a teacher and an assistant for each. To justify closing them, School Committee member Dr. Albert Blaisdell was quoted as saying, "I do not consider them at all essentials but rather luxuries which serve a most useful purpose before the earliest grade work is begun.

"This town can well afford to tax its citizens to pay for a reasonable amount of such luxuries as kindergarten schools, cooking schools, physical culture, drawing, sewing, sloyd, and other studies, which make up the variegated bill of educational fare that is now served up to the school children of our day.

"When, however, we come to pass judgment on what proportional amount of the sum annually voted for our schools shall be devoted to these luxuries, there is, of course, a great diversity of opinions."

Just how extravagant were they? According to the committee's annual report, the cost per pupil in the kindergarten was twice that for students in the primary grades. Winchester's kindergartens, according to Blaisdell, cost "more than any other town in Massachusetts, except Brookline, the richest town of its size in the United States."

Continuing, Blaisdell said, "Some rich towns pay their kindergarten teachers 4 to 5 percent of the total amount paid for salaries, but it was left for Winchester to pay ten percent, and thus outclass even Milton and Brookline, famed for the big salaries of their teachers. If this is not an extravagant expenditure of the public money, I should like to know where you would find it."

Closing the kindergartens temporarily, Blaisdell wrote, should lead to a readjustment of the budget.

Economy was the key word in the school department's decision. "Economy may be taken in two

senses,” Superintendent Henry Walradt reported. “It may be considered synonymous with cutting down expenses. It may be designated as getting the best possible results from a given amount of money. In the first sense, it is easy to economize, but economy may be fatal. In the sense of getting maximum results with money available, economy is at all times desirable.”

This time, the committee’s chosen method of economizing led to a special Town Meeting. The hall reportedly was “pretty well filled. The ladies gallery contained many teachers of the schools and others interested in kindergartens.”

Whitfield Tuck made a motion to appropriate \$1,500 to maintain the kindergartens. He said the citizens had previously given expression to their views on the continuance of the schools and that he had letters from President William Eliot (of Harvard College), Robert Treat Paine, and the superintendent of schools in Brookline detailing their benefits.

Comments followed that it was not the kindergarten but the expense that was under question. The figures were questioned, and the expense was questioned. The School Committee chairman remarked that his committee had requested neither the meeting nor the money. The town auditor said there was enough money for the next two payrolls.

The end result was that the School Committee was instructed to pay the kindergarten teachers for the rest of the school year.

One town meeting member continued to challenge the decision in the papers for a couple of weeks, even alleging that the vote was illegal, but apparently he never mustered support. The town evidently wanted its kindergartens.

But the committee also got something it wanted. “We believe most emphatically, in continuing the kindergartens,” it wrote, “but we also believe that ... the number of kindergartens can be reduced without sacrificing anything in the way of results.”

Having called attention to the cost of the kindergartens, the next year, the School Committee successfully scaled back their number to three. From 1904 to 1923 classes were held in only two schools, and barges were run from various parts of the town to convey children to the schools. After the great school-system reform of 1925, all the elementary schools (except the Highland which had no room) held kindergarten classes. Town-wide, kindergartens became a fundamental part of education, though the 21st-century School Committee was still grappling with kindergarten questions, such as full-day and five-day kindergarten, and, of course, the cost.

¹ This article © 2018 is a revision of an earlier articles by the author, Ellen Knight, published in the *Daily Times Chronicle* on Dec. 6, 1993 and Dec. 27, 2001. This article supersedes all previous articles.

² *The Winchester Star*, Apr. 15, 1893.

³ *The Winchester Star*, Dec. 30, 1893.

⁴ *The Winchester Star*, Mar. 30, 1900.

⁵ *The Winchester Star*, Apr. 6, 1900