

## **A Historical Snapshot of Education in Wise County Schools**

The first schools in Wise County were known as “field schools,” so named because in warm weather, heads of various families in a community would teach the children under the shade trees out in the fields. In 1870, after the Civil War, these schools were replaced by public schools. It was typical in those times for each community to have its own school. In 1928 there were 106 school buildings scattered across Wise County.

Gladeville College, a precursor to the high school, was established in 1882 at Wise. This institution was not only a college but also a school serving all grades beginning at the primary level. In 1906 Gladeville College became Wise High School, the first high school in Wise County.

Before integration, the African American population in Wise County had its own schools, including several grade or elementary schools. The first high school for African Americans was Central High School, located in the Appalachia area near Stonega .

Over the years the small rural and community schools were phased out. A flurry of building activity occurred in the 1950s as school enrollment numbers grew after World War II. In 1956 Bland High School was built in Big Stone Gap, and Central was closed. Three of the current high schools - Coeburn High School, J. J. Kelly High School, and Pound High School - were erected in the early 1950s. By the end of that decade, Appalachia High School and Powell Valley High School had been constructed. Schools were integrated in the mid 1960s, and with that event came the closure of Bland High School.

The present Wise Primary School building was occupied in the fall of 1968, with an addition completed in 2000. Fry Hall, which currently houses the Wise County Alternative Education Center, was also constructed in the 1960s. The 1970s was a very busy time of school construction and building upgrades, surpassing that of the 1950s. The following eight schools were included in this building phase: Appalachia Elementary, Coeburn Primary (with improvements completed in 2000), Coeburn Middle, J. W. Adams Elementary (now J. W. Adams Combined School), L. F. Addington Middle, Powell Valley Primary, St. Paul High, and the Vocational-Technical Center (now the Career-Technical Center). Powell Valley Middle was completed in 1985, a new St. Paul Elementary School building was constructed in the early 1990s, and major improvements were made to J. W. Adams Combined School in 2000. At present, the Wise County school system consists of seventeen school sites: five elementaries, three middle schools, one combined school, six high schools, a career-technical center, and an alternative education center.

In the early years there was no standard length for a school term. There was great variation among schools, with some terms being five months, others six or seven and a half, and yet others eight and a fourth or nine months. In 1916, all schools began operating on the basis of a nine-month term.

In an interview given in 1959, Dr. J. J. Kelly, Jr., superintendent of Wise County Schools at that time, related that when he became superintendent in 1917, enrollment was 10,120 students, but

the average daily attendance (before compulsory school attendance laws) was 5,828. At the end of December, 2003, total school enrollment was 6,609, with monthly percents of attendance per school generally ranging from 92 to 95 across the county.

In the very early years many Wise County students walked or rode horses to school. Others were driven to school in family-owned horse-drawn wagons or buggies. In 1913-14 the school system first transported pupils to school by “horse-drawn conveyance.” Prior to 1913-14, some students in the Big Stone Gap area were transported by train. As better roads were built and maintained, the first school buses began operating at about 1923, beginning in East Stone Gap and Big Stone Gap and gradually spreading to all areas of the county. At first, buses were owned by individuals with whom the school system contracted but by 1951, all the school buses were owned and operated by the county. In 1954 Wise County Schools was operating thirty-seven buses daily. Today, in 2004, Wise County Schools operates seventy-eight buses daily, which includes eight that are specially equipped to transport students with disabilities.

Whereas no lunch was provided at school in the early days, Wise County Schools now has both a lunch and a breakfast program. Many schools also offer a la carte items. Approximately 4,215 lunches and 1,280 breakfasts are served daily.

The high school curriculum has grown and expanded over the years. In the beginning, about twenty high school subjects were offered. By 1956, sixty-four high school subjects were available. Currently, Wise County Schools offers a wide-ranging array of courses in the high schools numbering approximately 200.

Wise County Schools has been served by only sixteen different superintendents since the beginning of free schools in 1870. The longest tenure by far is that of Dr. J. J. Kelly, Jr., who began his service in 1917 at the young age of twenty-six and continued serving as superintendent for a phenomenal 46 years. In an interview conducted in 1959, Dr. Kelly noted that when he became superintendent, Wise County Schools had seven school boards, each with three members. In 1923 this management system was changed to one school board, which continues to the present time. The Wise County School Board has eight members, each representing a magisterial district. A noteworthy change occurred in 1996 when school board members were elected for the first time, having previously been appointed by the School Electoral Board.

In that same interview in 1959, Dr. Kelly enumerated six “firsts” for Wise County in Virginia education, which are still a source of pride today:

- (1) Establishing summer high schools.
- (2) Placing high school principals on a twelve-month employment contract.
- (3) Offering home economics and business education in all high schools.
- (4) Establishing the five-year high school.
- (5) Establishing and maintaining a county-wide vocational school.
- (6) Equalizing salaries and school terms.

The Wise County student of the 1800s with slate and slate pencil in hand would probably not have been able to imagine the schools of today in which computer access is available to every student. Today, distance education classes are delivered by satellite to many Wise County students, as well as to other high school students in the Commonwealth and across the nation. Additionally, all Wise County high schools participate in a video network that provides distance education classes for regional students over 16 southwest Virginia counties. Wise County Schools offers a full range of K-12 programs at 17 sites. Four-year-old students are served at the appropriate schools. The Wise County Career-Technical Center (an outgrowth of that “first” vocational school established long ago) offers eighteen diverse programs of study comprising over fifty courses. Those students who plan to attend college are well prepared by college preparatory classes. Collaboration between the two colleges located in the county, the University of Virginia’s College at Wise and Mountain Empire Community College, allows students expanded learning and dual enrollment opportunities. Wise County’s award-winning Program of Academic Challenge for Excellence (PACE) is an innovative academic competition that has been used as a model by other school divisions in and out of state. Outstanding English students have the option of participating in the Young Writer’s Workshop, and serious music students may participate in PACE band. Students with special needs are served through the Regional Learning Academy, the Alternative Education Center, the Adult Education Program, the Wise Skills Center, Special Education and Gifted and Talented programs, and the Governor’s School. Adding to the effectiveness of the total school program are school nurses in each school, mentor/tutoring services as a part of dropout prevention, and a variety of other prevention and intervention programs to promote positive school adjustment and performance by the students. The Education Center, located on the school board office grounds, provides a facility where teachers can receive up-to-date and timely training as needed in an environment conducive to learning.

As the years have passed, education standards have become more stringent, and Wise County Schools has ably met the challenge. All Wise County schools meet state accreditation standards by the Virginia Board of Education and the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools. In fact, all of the schools have achieved “Fully Accredited” status, which is the highest level under the Virginia Standards of Accreditation. As the history of education in Wise County demonstrates, over one hundred and forty years of citizen support, motivated students, dedicated and hard-working teachers, and capable administrators have kept Wise County Schools at the forefront of educational leadership and accomplishment.

#### Information sources

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- Paul Kilgore, member of Wise County Historical Society.
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- Notes of interview with Dr. J. J. Kelly, conducted by W. D. Richmond, March 24, 1959.
- Wise County Board of Supervisors Minutes, May 2, 1911.

- *Wise County History, 1856-1974*. Reprinted from *Wise County: Its Government, Its History* (VA Cooperative Extension Service, 1974).
- *Wise County Geography Supplement: "Know Your Own County,"* by Luther Addington, Nancy Fields, Della Inge, & Cora Reynolds, 1928.

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