INTRODUCTION

Public education never seems far from Hoosiers’ minds. Education occupies a unique place in the public debate. For residents of Indiana, that debate dates back more than two hundred years, even prior to statehood when the area now comprising the state of Indiana was a part of the Northwest Territory.

This thesis examines how the writings of Caleb Mills impacted the development of education and, in particular, public education in Indiana. While concerns regarding Hoosier education were expressed as early as the state’s founding in the year 1816, the role of state policymakers and state law in determining the proper functions and responsibilities of education in Indiana increased dramatically with the adoption of Indiana’s second constitution in the year 1851. Debate regarding the proper role of the government and community education in Indiana intensified around the mid-nineteenth century as policymakers considered those issues that would define the parameters and characteristics of public education for Indiana children. The issues frequently discussed at that time included, among other topics, proper instructional methods, the persons who should receive the benefit of public education, and the appropriate level of state and local community investment.

Caleb Mills, a professor at Wabash Manual Labor and Teacher’s College at the time, became one of the state’s leading advocates for education reform and state-funded common schools. Mills skillfully articulated the position of education reform advocates on a number of issues, issues that continue to be a part of the public debate regarding Hoosier education in the twenty-first century. Mills’ influence on state education policies
began in the year 1846. Writing anonymously using the pseudonym “One of the People,”
Mills crafted an address to the Indiana General Assembly which utilized data from the
1840 census to highlight the high rate of illiteracy among the Indiana populace. Mills
encouraged state and township taxes to be levied in support of public education. In
addition, he advocated the establishment of a statewide office, a Superintendent of Public
Instruction, to serve as centralized authority to help promote uniform education standards
and practices throughout the state.

Mills wrote five additional addresses between 1847 and 1852, each of which
continued to critique proposed education policies and reinforced Mills’ own call for
taxation, statewide supervision, and centralization of statewide education policies. Mills
delivered his fifth address in 1850 to the constitutional convention, held in Indianapolis.
Partially influenced by the address, the delegates to the constitutional convention revised
significant portions of the proposed constitution. The revision included the insertion of
an education provision mandating “a general and uniform system of common schools,
wherein tuition shall be without charge and equally open to all.”¹ Because the
constitutional provision left the actual methods of establishing the “general and uniform
system” to the legislature, Mills directed his final address to the Indiana State Legislature.
Mills’ efforts profoundly influenced the “School Law of 1852,” which conspicuously
established a state fund for common schools and the statewide office of “Superintendent
of Public Instruction.” Ultimately, much of the 1852 school law was declared
unconstitutional in 1854 by the Indiana Supreme Court. Although approximately fifteen
years would pass before a similar measure would be reinstated by state lawmakers,

¹ Indiana Constitution (1851), art. 8, sec. 1.
scholars credit Mills’ work and initial lobbying efforts for the first school statutory scheme which provided the blueprint for common education in the state. Historian James Madison writes of the “One of the People” addresses: “They are without a doubt the most important documents ever prepared on the subject of education in Indiana.”

Mills continued his work not only at Wabash Manual Labor and Teacher’s College during and following the delivery of his “One of the People” addresses, but he also continued to speak and write on the topic of education, writing as himself rather than using a pseudonym. In 1854, Mills served one term as the Superintendent of Public Instruction, the very office he had so strongly advocated to establish. In that same year, Mills co-founded the Indiana State Teachers Union, writing the organization’s original constitution. In 1856, Mills returned to his professorship at Wabash College and continued in that capacity before he tendered his resignation in 1876. From 1876 until his death in 1879, Mills served as the college’s librarian.

The writings and lectures by Caleb Mills on the topic of education contributed significantly to the manner in which the public debate regarding education was framed—i.e., the very way Hoosiers, even today, discuss education. Topics such as taxation, teacher professionalization, school buildings, and curriculum development continue to fuel the most passionate debates on the floor of the Indiana legislature and at district school board meetings.

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Chapter One explores the history of public education in Indiana, beginning with the earliest written legal document on the topic of education, the Northwest Ordinance. The chapter describes the sometimes concurrent development of similar education policies in other states of the former Northwest Territory. Chapter One also includes an examination of the role of education reformers—both reformers native to Indiana and those who immigrated to Indiana—as they influenced the construction of the modern state education system. In addition, the chapter briefly examines some of the ramifications and results of Indiana’s education policies, including methods of taxation, female education, and school architecture.

Chapter Two examines Caleb Mills and his views on education—how Caleb Mills framed the debate over education through his writings and advocacy. The chapter also provides a survey of Mills’ career, beginning with his participation in the American Sunday School Union in the second quarter of the nineteenth century, his professorship at Wabash College later in the century, and finally his tenure as a public education advocate and State Superintendent of Public Instruction.

Chapter Three examines and compares two previously unpublished writings by Caleb Mills, “A Lecture on Popular Education” and “Knowledge is Power.” Complete editions of both writings are found in Appendix A of this thesis. The first address, “A Lecture on Popular Education,” was likely written in the late 1840s, the time period during which Mills also delivered his “One of the People” addresses. Although the lecture echoes some of the same sentiments expressed by Mills in his series of addresses to the Legislature, it appears to have been directed to a more general audience, perhaps a local community or school district. In particular, Mills decries state and national
illiteracy levels based upon the 1840 census. In addition, through anecdote and example, Mills describes the proper value a local community should place on education through the hiring of teachers and the building of schoolhouses.

The second speech, “Knowledge is Power,” is an undated address written by Caleb Mills and likely delivered between the years 1852 and 1854, after the enactment of the 1852 School Law, but prior to the founding of the Indiana State Teachers’ Association in December of 1854. Delivered upon the occasion of the establishment of a local teachers’ association, much of the content of the address reflects and complements those thoughts most famously expressed by Mills’ “One of the People” addresses. The annotated version of “Knowledge is Power” contained in this thesis includes Mills’ views regarding the policy positions of both the detractors and the well-intentioned albeit overzealous advocates of popular education. Mills also delineates his opinions regarding the proper introduction and length of education for children, the role of religious instruction in education, the proper role of female education, and the benefits of a professional teachers association.

A scholarly edition of these addresses provides a critical addition to the primary sources already referenced in Indiana educational historiography. Most histories addressing the development of education policy in Indiana focus on the years preceding the enactment of the 1852 School Law and the specific addresses Mills delivered to the Indiana Legislature. Less attention has been devoted to unpublished addresses intended for more general audiences and addresses written following the educational initiatives stemming from the 1851 constitution.
Together, the addresses “A Lecture on Popular Education” and “Knowledge is Power” provide a much-needed glimpse of some of Caleb Mills’ efforts other than his famous addresses as “One of the People.” The works demonstrate how the education reformer outlined his views regarding the ideals of proper education found in his much-better known “One of the People” addresses and also highlight the education debate that has continued into the early twenty-first century.