

Ella Flagg Young

First Female Superintendent of a Major City School System

On July 29, 1909, after five months of deliberations in which six candidates were interviewed, the Chicago Board of Education unanimously elected Ella Flagg Young as superintendent. Her appointment was supposed to bring an end to a decade of intense conflicts between the Chicago Board of Education and the increasingly powerful teachers' organizations.



Ella Flagg Young (1845-1918) was a bright and perseverant woman who devoted her life to improve democracy and progressive education. The third child of working-class parents, Young stayed home until the age of ten. When she was nine, after she taught herself how to read and write, her mother finally allowed her to go to the nearby school that her older siblings attended. A few years later, she entered high school but dropped out after a few months, partly because she was not encouraged by her parents to continue, partly disappointed by the lack of intellectual challenge. When she was 15, a friend who was going to take a teacher certification examination asked Ella to go along. Ella took the test too, and passed, but was told that she was too young to teach. She then enrolled in a teacher training school, and during her second year of training, her mother told her that she would never become a good teacher because she was too hard on herself and would be the same way with children. Rather than giving up, Ella found a good teacher and arranged to assist her, creating her own practicum experience and using it to test her potential in a real classroom. After graduation, Ella worked as a classroom teacher in a Chicago ghetto school, and later as the head of practice-teaching classrooms, as a high school math teacher, and as a principal in the largest Chicago school.

By 1887, at the age of 42, she became assistant superintendent, a newly created position in a rapidly expanding school system. Young encouraged teachers to have a voice in the curriculum, and from the meetings held to that effect emerged the Chicago Teachers' Federation (CTF). At the end of the century, at age 55, she left her work at the school bureaucracy (the new superintendent was too autocratic and his policies too

conservative) to pursue a Ph.D. under the supervision of John Dewey, who said that he took more educational ideas from her than from anyone else. Her dissertation, "Isolation in School Systems," reflected an educational philosophy based on experiential learning, social freedoms, and democratic school communities. After graduating, she served as a professor at the University of Chicago, and later as the principal of the Chicago Normal School.

In 1909, when she became superintendent, the school system was characterized by divisiveness, factionalism, and intense confrontations between teachers' organizations. Teachers had great expectations with Young's appointment. Most of the 6,000 teachers in the system had met her personally, and she was able to remember their names. As soon as Young took office, she declared that her administration would be characterized by "democratic efficiency," removed the secretive performance evaluations, introduced more relevant curriculum subjects, increased salaries for all teachers, and began to involve them in the decision-making process through a system of teachers' councils. In 1910, she was elected the president of the National Education Association, becoming the first woman to hold the leadership of this male-dominated organization.

During the last years of her life, even in retirement, Young was still active in education and politics. In 1916, she was going to present a paper at the NEA convention. When she heard Loeb, who talked before her, reiterating his attacks on teachers unions, Young discarded her prepared presentation and instead responded to his criticisms. At one moment of her speech, alluding to the fact that Loeb's children attended private schools, she contended that people who were not sending their children to public schools should not be allowed to serve on the board of education. After a half-century commitment to furthering democracy in the educational system and in society at large, Ella Flagg Young died in October 1918. The flags in Chicago were flown at half-mast. In a tribute published in the Chicago Tribune, Jane Addams wrote of Young: "She had more general intelligence and character than any other woman I knew."