

Building a Records Filing System for New York State Schools

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AS A result of the rapid growth of school enrollment in New York State in recent years, school administrators are faced with the increasingly difficult problem of managing their school records effectively. Harassed by urgent problems of constructing additional school buildings, recruiting more teachers, and mapping out new programs to meet increased enrollment, they find themselves beset with another complex administrative problem — controlling the growing volume of records.

Some school administrators have long recognized the need for better methods of handling both student and administrative records in their schools and have experimented with various methods to solve certain local problems. But the recent increase in pupil enrollment with its manifold problems left most of them dissatisfied with their existing systems of records keeping.¹ Many requests for some kind of records control system that would be easy to operate and that could be expanded to keep pace with school growth came from school administrators throughout the State.

In the summer of 1952 records personnel of the Division of Archives and History of the State Education Department undertook a series of studies of the problems of managing records in school districts. The first study covered the filing of school records. Throughout this study the records personnel received the wholehearted cooperation of the State Education Department's bureau of field financial services, a unit closely associated with the administration of schools, as well as the cooperation of organizations of school administrators and other school management specialists.

Examination of the records in many schools and discussions with

¹ Some relief from the necessity of keeping all New York State school records was obtained in 1951 when the legislature enacted section 65-b of the Public Officers Law providing for the disposition of valueless records in local public offices, including school districts, and put the records disposition program under the control of the Commissioner of Education.

administrators revealed that most filing systems were inadequate to meet the needs of an expanding educational program. Alphabetical, numerical, and partial subject files or files combining two or more of these methods were in use. Many files had little or no organizational pattern; their operation depended largely upon the memory of office personnel. Frequent personnel changes made this way of filing especially unsatisfactory. At the same time, the rapid expansion of school facilities had led to the dispersal of records to other offices or other buildings. As a result administrators found it increasingly difficult to keep track of their scattered records. Inactive records in storage were often forgotten and sometimes lost.

It was obvious that two things were needed: (1) a central-office filing system that would provide the needed control for active records, that could be operated easily by busy office personnel, that could be quickly adapted to the needs of an individual school, and that could be expanded as the school grew; and (2) a workable system of controlling records filed or stored outside the central files. The goal, in brief, became the development of a filing system that could be adapted easily to fit local needs and that would provide control of all school records.

ANALYSIS OF SCHOOL RECORDS

The first problem was to survey and analyze the records found in schools. Since schools in New York State vary greatly in size and character, records personnel in the Division of Archives and History surveyed and analyzed the records in a consolidated or central school (kindergarten through 12th grade) with an enrollment of approximately 1,000, an elementary and junior high school (kindergarten through 9th grade) with an enrollment of approximately 600, and a superintendent's office of a village school system with an enrollment of approximately 1,500. Although there was considerable similarity in the records of the three schools, the survey revealed in each school some kinds of records that were not found in the others. An analysis of the records surveyed revealed a wide variety of subjects and confirmed the opinion, held by most school administrators and records personnel consulted, that the best results would probably be obtained by setting up a filing system on a subject-classification pattern. It also revealed that if the filing system was to be workable the multiplicity of subjects would have to be broken down into major groups or sections and the sections in turn divided and subdivided.

ARRANGEMENT OF A FILING PATTERN

With the survey and analysis of the records completed, there began the search for a suitable arrangement pattern for the subjects. Here several factors had to be taken into consideration.

1. *Familiarity.* Since the filing system, if it proved successful in operation, would be recommended to all the schools in the State, it should follow a pattern that was familiar to school administrators and office personnel. The pattern finally selected for the sections and many of the divisions within the sections followed as closely as possible the arrangement of items in the State Education Department's budget document for schools, an arrangement familiar to most school administrative personnel. Although the budget document was not sufficiently detailed to furnish a complete pattern, it did provide the five sections upon which the filing system was eventually organized. They were: School Administration; Instructional Services; Plant Equipment, Operation, and Maintenance; Auxiliary Services; and Pupils.

2. *Completeness.* The subject-classification pattern should be made as complete as possible to provide a specific place for filing each record type, to reduce cross-referencing to a minimum, and to simplify the problem of adapting it to the records in an individual school. After considerable experimentation a division, subdivision, and folder pattern was worked out for the entire filing system. A sample taken from the School Administration section appears on the following page.

The difficulty in forecasting every subject that might in the future be included in a school filing system quickly became apparent, and a general folder was included within most divisions and subdivisions. Records that did not fit readily into an existing specific folder were to be filed in the general folder. Each general folder was to be screened periodically, or when its contents became more than a half inch thick. When several related records were found in a general folder they were to be refiled in a new folder and given a specific folder caption. This practice not only eliminated an excessive number of folders containing only a few records but also permitted the expansion of the filing system as the need arose. Such expansion to keep pace with school growth was assured by the ease with which new divisions and subdivisions could be added to the existing sections. If future developments required it, even new sections could be added.

3. *Ease of Comprehension.* The relatively high turnover in

<i>Division</i>	<i>Subdivision</i>	<i>Folder Caption</i>	<i>Finding Aid</i>
ATTENDANCE		ATTENDANCE — GENERAL	
		ATTENDANCE — ATTENDANCE OFFICER	
		ATTENDANCE — EMERGENCY PLANTING AND HARVESTING	
		ATTENDANCE — EMERGENCY SCHOOL CLOSINGS — RADIO ANNOUNCEMENTS	
		ATTENDANCE — LETTERS TO PARENTS (Circular letters regarding attendance, not letters relative to individual pupils)	<i>Flash Tab</i> ATT. REPORTS CURRENT YEAR
	ATTENDANCE REPORTS	ATTENDANCE REPORTS — CURRENT YEAR	
		ATTENDANCE REPORTS — (Make an individual folder for each year)	
	REGISTRATION	(L) REGISTRATION — ATTENDANCE REGISTERS	
		REGISTRATION — KINDERGARTEN	
		REGISTRATION — STATISTICS	
	TRANSFERS	TRANSFERS — GENERAL	
	(L)	TRANSFERS — TRANSFER CARDS	

office personnel in many schools and the limited time available for filing and finding records made it important that a filing system should be as easy as possible to learn and use. To aid office personnel in learning to use the filing system, the divisions and subdivisions in each section, except for a few divisions at the beginning of the School Administration section, were arranged in alphabetical order according to the first word in the caption.² Within each division and subdivision all folders, except the general folders at the beginning, were also arranged in alphabetical order.

Experience has demonstrated that office personnel usually become so familiar with the filing system while installing it that they find little difficulty in using it. New personnel quickly become accustomed to the filing system pattern merely by familiarizing themselves with the five sections and the divisions and subdivisions within each section.

Several simple devices were incorporated to speed up the filing and finding of records in the files. For quick identification a different colored label was used for the folders in each section, and captions were kept as brief as possible and were phrased in terms understood by school office personnel. To aid in refiling folders that had been removed from the files, the identification of the respective division or subdivision in which a folder was filed was included as the first part of the folder caption. Alphabetical or numerical tabs were used to break up long series of similar folders, and flash tabs were included to indicate the location in the files of frequently used folders.

4. *Control.* If the filing system was to solve the problem of controlling all the records in a school, a control system should be built into the filing system to identify and show the location of records outside the files. This was accomplished easily and inexpensively by inserting at the correct subject location in the school administrator's files a locator card showing the location of each record series filed or stored elsewhere. This required an inventory of all records outside the administrator's files. A locator card was prepared for each record series by splitting a folder at the fold and using the half containing the tab. Information showing the location of the record series was indicated on the body of the card, and the identity of the record series was typed on a crimson label, which was affixed to the tab. Crimson labels were used to distinguish all

² Extensive use of the filing system in many schools has since demonstrated the advisability of arranging all divisions and subdivisions in alphabetical order. To accomplish this a revision of the School Administration section will be incorporated in future editions of the installation manual.

locator cards regardless of the section of the filing system in which they were filed.⁸ Records filed or stored outside the administrator's files varied from school to school. As a guide for personnel installing the filing system, the records that, because of their age, size, or volume, were most frequently outside the administrator's files were indicated in the subject-classification pattern by an (L) before the folder caption.

The use of locator cards (see Fig. 1, below) has met with widespread approval, especially in schools where administrative functions have been decentralized. A common example is that of business records transferred from the school administrator's files to a separate business office, either in the same building or in another building. Locator cards in the administrator's files show the new location of those records. Some administrators have further increased the value of the locator cards by indicating on them data relating to the destruction of disposable records, thus tying their records disposition program into their control system.

These four considerations — familiarity, completeness, ease in learning and using, and control — were given careful attention during the development of a suitable arrangement of subjects; for, if the final subject-classification pattern lacked any of them, it would repeat the deficiencies of school filing systems already in use.

INSTALLING AND TESTING THE FILING SYSTEM

After the subject-classification pattern had been established came the problem of installing and testing the filing system. It was determined at the outset that pilot installations would be made by records personnel of the Division of Archives and History in the three schools in which the records were surveyed and analyzed. Later it was deemed advisable, as an additional safeguard, to have office personnel in a number of other schools make test installations on the basis of information gained from the three pilot installations.

The initial pilot installation was made in the Red Hook (N. Y.) Central School, and here the problem of selecting the most suitable filing materials arose. Obviously, the materials had to be readily

⁸ Cards made in the same manner and having crimson labels were used also to indicate permanent cross-references within the files. A few of these permanent cross-reference cards were inserted at points where the similarity of the subject-matter might confuse a searcher. The cards merely indicated the exact locations where records could be found in the files. They were designated in the subject-classification pattern by an (X) before the folder caption. Although the extensive breakdown of subjects within the divisions and subdivisions reduced to a minimum the amount of cross-referencing needed to find records in the files, the use of a few permanent cross-reference cards was a further step in saving time for office personnel.

available, reasonably inexpensive, and durable enough to keep replacement costs at a minimum. But more than that was wanted. For ease and speed in filing and finding records the materials had to reflect the subject classification pattern in a quickly discernible file-drawer arrangement, in which the divisions and subdivisions — the keys to learning and using the files — would stand out.

A careful examination of available filing materials led to the use of heavy pressboard guide cards with one-fifth cut metal tabs for the divisions (1st position), subdivisions (2nd position) and finding aids (5th position). Individual kraft folders with a two-fifth cut tab right of center (3rd and 4th positions) were used for folders, locator cards, and permanent cross-reference cards.⁴ This combination, together with the colored folder labels, gave an orderly drawer arrangement in which the location of records was quickly apparent (see Fig. 2 below).

Pilot installations were made in the two other schools, and the operation of the three installations for approximately 8 months proved the workability of the subject-classification pattern but left unanswered the very important question of whether busy school-office personnel could install and operate the filing system by themselves.

To determine this, 15 school administrators were asked to install and test the filing system in their own schools, using their own office personnel, with the understanding that assistance would be given in solving any problems that might arise. They were furnished with an outline of the subject-classification pattern, data for selecting needed filing materials, and a suggested procedure for making the installation. Surprisingly few serious problems were encountered; those that did arise were due chiefly to the hastily written and abbreviated installation procedure.

Besides revealing new types of records that should be added to the subject-classification pattern and ways in which the suggested procedure for installing the filing system could be improved, the test installations demonstrated that:

1. School office personnel could use the instructions furnished them to install a filing system that would serve their local needs.
2. The subject classification pattern was adaptable to the records of a school of any size.

⁴ Some schools were already using suspension type folders and for reasons of economy preferred to retain them. The same positioning of guide cards and folders was followed when suspension folders were used.

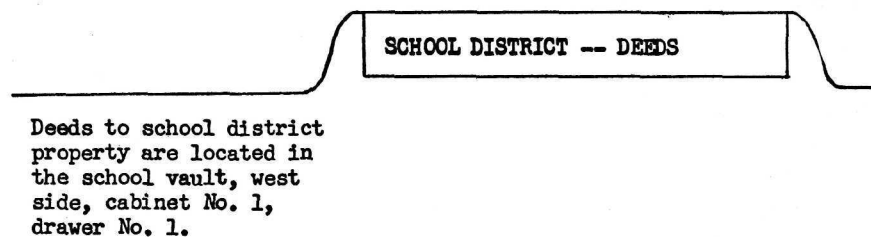


Fig. 1. A LOCATOR CARD

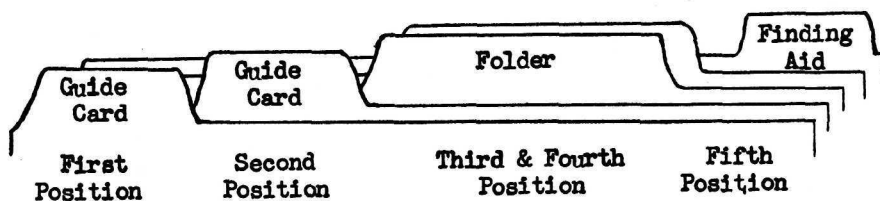


Fig. 2. ARRANGEMENT OF GUIDE CARDS AND FOLDERS

3. The cost of the materials required to make an installation was not excessive.⁵
4. The office personnel who installed the filing systems became so familiar with the subject-classification pattern that they had little difficulty in using the filing system after it was installed.
5. The best time to make an installation was during a vacation period when there were fewer calls for records and fewer interruptions in the work.⁶
6. If an installation had to be made while a school was in session, more time was required; but little difficulty was encountered in using both the old and new files until all the records could be transferred to the new system.

MAKING THE FILING SYSTEM AVAILABLE TO SCHOOLS

The success with which the filing system was set up and operated in the pilot and test installations led the Division of Archives and History to make it available to any school in the State that might desire it. To accomplish this a manual entitled *A Basic School Filing System* was prepared. To date nearly 3,500 copies of this manual have been distributed upon request to schools, libraries, and other educational organizations.

Since the manual presented much information on the filing and controlling of school records that was new to many administrators and office personnel it had to be written as clearly and concisely as possible. The information was phrased in terms familiar to school office personnel, but to guard against possible confusion the more common records terms used in the text were defined briefly at the beginning of the manual. Because a subject-classification pattern might be a concept new to many who would install and use the filing system, the necessity of determining the subject of a record and of grouping related records together was emphasized. Though the subject-classification pattern was the heart of the manual, instructions were included for every step in setting up and using the filing system. Most of these instructions were the result of experience gained in making the pilot and test installations.

Despite the similarity of records in most schools, considerable emphasis was placed on adapting the subject-classification pattern to the records of the individual school. The filing system was "basic" only in that it provided the framework into which all school records could be fitted. Adaptation involved the relatively simple steps of deleting from the subject-classification pattern any records

⁵ The cost of a sufficient quantity of good quality pressboard guide cards, kraft folders, and labels for a school with an enrollment of approximately 1,000 ranged from \$50 to \$75.

⁶ Under such conditions it was demonstrated that two or three people working full time could make the installation in almost any school in about 2 weeks.

that the school did not have and adding any records that might not have been included, but it required knowledge of the school's administrative procedures and records. School administrators and the office personnel in charge of the files were urged to perform the task jointly.

Since ease of using the filing system depended upon both the subject-classification pattern and the arrangement of guide cards and folders in the file drawers, instructions were included for selecting the proper filing materials. Several manufacturers made and distributed through hundreds of local dealers the type of materials recommended. Because most materials would be purchased from local dealers, a description as well as each manufacturer's order number was furnished for each item required. In this way the choice of manufacturer and dealer was left to the school administrator but much of the confusion in obtaining the desired filing materials was eliminated. Every step in the preparation of guide cards, folders, labels, locator cards, and cross-reference cards was carefully explained and illustrated with line drawings, even though such information might be common knowledge to many who would make the installations.

Experience gained from the test installations indicated that the transfer of records from the old to the new filing system was the most difficult and time-consuming part of the installation. To reduce that difficulty an installation plan was worked out and recommended. School office personnel were urged to prepare the necessary guide cards and folders and place them in any available empty file drawers or transfer cases according to the arrangement in the subject-classification pattern. In old files the contents of some folders that were already arranged according to a subject could be transferred quickly to folders in the new files, but the contents of folders that were not so arranged had to be reviewed, given subject classifications, and distributed to the appropriate folders in the new filing system. Having the guide cards and folders already in position to receive the reclassified records made the task easier and reduced the time required to make the transfer. The office staffs were urged to incorporate the records in the new filing system as rapidly as possible. After the transfer was completed each folder could be inspected quickly to detect misfiled records, to arrange its contents in the correct order, and to weed out duplicate copies no longer needed or records eligible for disposition.

Suggestions were also included on the use of the filing system, the preparation of records for filing, the expansion of the filing

system, the establishment of transfer or retirement files, and the proper procedure to be followed in disposing of valueless records.

School administrators were informed by mail of the availability of the basic school filing system manual, and a model of the filing system was prepared and demonstrated at their State and regional meetings. As interest in the filing system increased, the Division of Archives and History, although satisfied that the filing system could be installed from information contained in the manual, decided to experiment with visual aids as a means of encouraging new installations and assisting those already making installations. Kodachrome slides were prepared showing every step in the installation procedure and in the use of the filing system. They have been shown to hundreds of school administrators and office workers in many parts of the State and have proved of tremendous value in increasing their understanding of the filing system and in improving their filing practices.

CONCLUSION

To date some 300 schools in New York State either have installed or are in the process of installing the basic school filing system, and many school administrators have indicated their intention of installing it during the coming summer vacation. An interesting though not unexpected result has been notification from many school administrators that they have not only installed the system in their central files but also are requiring its installation in all the schools under their jurisdiction.

Many requests have been received from school administrators in other States for information about the filing system. Although the subject-classification pattern was developed for records in New York State schools, one administrator in a neighboring State has reported the successful adaptation of the filing system to his school's records.

The enthusiasm with which the basic school filing system has been received has led the Division of Archives and History to the following conclusions:

1. Where there is a high degree of similarity in the records in public offices a satisfactory subject-classification pattern can be evolved and adapted to the filing requirements of those offices. Using the same general approach to the problem of filing town (township) records, the division has prepared and released a basic town filing system to the 932 town clerks in New York State.⁷ A basic village filing system is now in preparation and will be released to the 547 village clerks next year.

⁷ This publication is reviewed in this issue of the *American Archivist*.

2. If a filing system is intended for statewide use, extensive field testing under varied local conditions is advisable to ensure satisfactory results.

3. Local public officials, including those with only limited knowledge of filing methods, can install a filing system if the installation instructions are carefully prepared. Visual aids, such as film strips and kodachrome slides, can be used successfully to increase understanding of the installation procedure.

4. Effective control of records located outside the filing system can be built into the filing system with little trouble or expense.

The increasing volume of records in public offices is daily making the problem of filing and controlling those records more difficult. Officials responsible for the records are seeking solutions to that problem. It is hoped that such experiments as the development of the basic school filing system will provide those solutions.