

Overview: Madison School Naming History

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From my limited research I wanted to outline key phases in school naming policies.

Phase	Time period	Salient city qualities	Salient school qualities	School naming patterns
Phase I	1838- 1855	Madison zoomed from a tiny wilderness enclave to a booming city, from about 100 in 1838 to about 10,000 in 1855. Until 1846 three county commissioners governed Madison and paid relatively little attention to the rapidly growing community. In 1846 Madison incorporated as a village, which gave Madison home rule and greater control over taxes.	Funding public education under frontier conditions was always a challenge. Many thought education to be a frill; others thought the private sector should pay the bill. Consequently, Madison's first schools were funded by voluntary citizen contributions. Getting government money was difficult during these early years. From 1850 to 1855 school revenues were controlled by the Town of Madison, not the newly created village, and the town paid scant attention to Madison's needs. In 1855 a new state law allowed the village to create a board of education, receive state education subsidies, and tax real property.	Madison's first public school building, an 18 by 20 foot frame building, had no name. After all, one school served the need and everyone knew where it was. The second school, a 20 x 40 foot building, was known as "the little brick"—a prideful term that distinguished it from cheaper wood schools then commonplace.
Phase II	1856- 1903	When Madison became a city in 1856 it went on a spending binge for pent up needs such as a city hall, fire fighting equipment, and schools. However, a terrible depression hit the nation the year after Madison went heavily into debt. In response to this depression and Madison's imperiled future, two out of five residents left, property values plummeted, and the city struggled to repay its debt. Not until 1883 did city population attain the 1857 high. Initial city debt hobbled finances for the next 30 years and made money for schools very dear. By 1903 the population grew to about 20,000.	Among the highest priorities for the new city was a system of ward schools. The 1856 plan called for four schools, one for each ward, but due to the depression only two were built and with cut back specifications. The years between 1866 and 1873 witnessed a flurry of new school construction including three new ward schools and a city high school. To build these schools with such a crushing debt load, common council members had to earmark up to 49% of the municipal budget for schools and curtail basic city services. This fact reflected the growing power of public school advocates. Not until 1893, when the city had finally paid off its debt, was the city able to build another ward school. Rapid growth of the UW beginning in the late 1880s prompted school leaders to make the Madison High School a virtual preparatory academy. Families moved to Madison so their kids could benefit from the UW-oriented curriculum. This was a major early reason why Madison schools achieved a reputation for excellence.	Schools were named for the wards they served. With a few exceptions, each ward had one school. For example, the school that stood where the Doty condos are now located was called the Fourth Ward School.

Phase III	1904-present	<p>Improving municipal financial management coupled with a rapidly growing tax base made the years 1900-1920 particularly fruitful for new school construction. During those years eleven new elementary schools and one new high school were built.</p>	<p>Madison's public schools were a major beneficiary of a dramatic growth in women's influence and political power in the early 20th century. The most powerful organization, the Madison Woman's Club, was responsible for an extraordinary list of school improvements including kindergartens, annual physical exams, the PTA movement, hot lunches, and the introduction of manual and domestic arts. Using a new state law that allowed women to vote on "school matters," Woman's Club leaders spearheaded and won a referendum for a big, new, elegant high school (old Central High) in 1904. The first woman was appointed to the school board in 1919.</p> <p>As Madison grew during the early 20th century it began to annex contiguous urbanized areas and operate their schools.</p> <p>Post-World War II suburbanization required dozens of new schools</p>	<p>In 1904-5 Woman's Club members persuaded the school board to abandon the sterile ward school naming system in favor of schools that bore the names of American presidents and literary greats, an early Wisconsin explorer, Madison's founder, and a remarkable woman who started a Civil War convalescence hospital in Madison. School boards from this point forward named Madison's schools mostly after exemplary persons, to a growing extent after neighborhoods and salient geographic qualities, and very rarely, after abstract qualities.</p> <p>When high school enrollments outstripped the capacity of the Madison High School, two new high schools were built: East (1922) and West (1930). When East was built, Madison High School was renamed Central, thereby beginning the new naming system based on urban regions.</p>
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