

History of Thomas Edison Charter Schools



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Thomas Edison Charter Schools in North Logan and Nibley Utah were originally inspired by and patterned after the highly successful Benjamin Franklin Elementary schools in Mesa Arizona. The first Ben Franklin Elementary School opened its doors in 1978 as part of the Mesa Public School District as a 'school of choice'. That school has its own rich history in that three individuals who supported the Franklin School concept and educational methods were elected to the Mesa Public School Board so that the Franklin program could be approved by the Mesa Public School Board via a 3 – 2 vote in 1976. Since the first charter school in the nation did not open its doors until 1992 (in Minnesota) – Benjamin Franklin Elementary was nearly 15 years ahead of its time as a 'school of choice'.

The original Thomas Edison Charter School in North Logan was made possible by three events:

- 1) passage of the 1998 Utah Charter Schools act,
- 2) relocation of the Peterson family (and later the Scholes family) into Cache Valley in 2000, and
- 3) passage of the 2001 Utah Charter School Amendments law.

The road to the establishment of the first Thomas Edison Charter School was riddled with much political opposition and adversity – but in following the spirit of Thomas A. Edison, success was ultimately achieved.

Following the example of other states, the Utah legislature passed the Utah Charter Schools act in 1998. The charter school movement began in 1992 in Minnesota and spread rapidly to other states. However, charter school advocates considered the 1998 Utah law weak since it only allowed for 8 pilot schools that were mainly small and/or highly specialized in rural locations.

In March of 2000, the Peterson's relocated to Cache Valley from Mesa, Arizona. The Peterson's had just experienced the exceptional and highly successful Franklin Elementary School educational program, and they quickly formed a desire to bring that same quality program to Cache Valley. After introducing the total language arts and reading method (Spalding) used by the Franklin Elementary schools to a group of interested parents, a vehicle was searched to bring this educational program to Cache Valley.

When the Scholes moved to Cache Valley from Mesa, Arizona, in August 2000, they provided a further witness to the outstanding education program offered in that public school of choice. Ironically, the two families never met until after moving to Cache Valley.

In September 2000, after attempts to start a pilot program within the Cache County School District failed, the Petersons, Scholes, and other Cache Valley parents in the group discovered that a well-organized parent group in Utah County was working to establish a stronger Utah Charter School law. The Cache Valley group joined forces with the Utah County group, and assisted with lobbying the legislature to allow more Utah charter schools. This led to the passage of the Utah Charter Schools amendments law by the 2001 Utah legislature (sponsored by Senator Howard Stephenson of Draper) which allowed new Utah Charter schools to be opened in Utah.

The new law required that charter school applicants apply first to a local school district. The Cache Valley group applied to the Cache County School District, and was promptly denied since the district feared loss of funding. The group subsequently applied to the Utah State Board of Education (USBE).

On August 24th, 2001, a subcommittee of the USBE convened to discuss the applications of three charter schools: Thomas Edison Charter School (TECS) and two applicants from the Utah County group

(Timpanogos Academy and John Hancock Charter School). At that meeting the school districts who had denied the applications were allowed to speak to the subcommittee. A contingency from the Cache County School District showed up, including the Superintendent and the Cache School District Board President. Both of those individuals made impassioned pleas to the USBE subcommittee to deny the TECS application – primarily for financial reasons.

Fortunately, the TECS applicants had invited Senator Howard Stephenson (sponsor of the 2001 Utah Charter School Amendments bill) to attend the meeting. Senator Stephenson willingly came to the meeting and was invited to address the subcommittee. He told the subcommittee that it was the intention of the legislature that the USBE only judge the applicants on the merits of the application, not on any claimed financial difficulty by the school district. That likely saved the TECS application since some of the USBE subcommittee members stated that they would have voted against the TECS application due to the claimed financial strain the charter school would present to the district. Thus, the subcommittee approved all three applicants.

On September 7, 2001, per the recommendation of the USBE subcommittee, the full body of the USBE granted approval for the existence of Thomas Edison Charter School, as well as Timpanogos Academy and John Hancock Charter School.

In May, 2002, the location of the school was chosen to be in North Logan after efforts to purchase land for a school site in Millville failed. The school began operation in August, 2002, with about 220 students at the Aspen Grove Reception Center in Logan since the North Logan facility was not quite ready for occupation. On September 3rd, 2002, the school began operations at its permanent North Logan location in a 9,100 square foot facility. Since then, the North Logan school has expanded five times and its facility has grown to about 38,500 square feet with an enrollment of nearly 540 students.

In early 2004, parents living in Cache Valley South of Logan, including the Scholes and other founders of the original Thomas Edison Charter School, began working toward establishing a branch campus. Later that year the Utah State Board of Education granted the application for a new charter school to be built in Nibley, Utah, whose educational program was patterned after the original Thomas Edison Charter School. The new charter school was named, “Thomas Edison Charter School – South” (TECS-S). TECS-S opened the doors of its 33,000 square foot facility in the fall of 2005 with an enrollment of 284 students. Since then the TECS-S facility has expanded three times to about 66,000 square feet and enrollment has increased to about 800 students.

Original Selection of the Name

The original founding parents met in March of 2001 to decide the name of the Cache Valley charter school. The founders discussed the choice of naming the school after a place or a person and quickly decided to name it after a person. After considering many candidates they settled on Thomas Edison. They chose “Thomas Edison” since he is one of the most famous Americans in world history, and since he will be a tremendous example for children who attend the school due to his perseverance and unstoppable spirit that led to his many successes.

Merging of the Two Schools

After the North Logan site location was selected in May, 2002, the original founders envisioned that

there would one day be two TECS campuses, one North and one South of Logan, operating under one board and one charter. However when application was made for the TECS-S in 2004, state law at that time did not explicitly allow for a two campus, one charter arrangement. Thus, the schools operated under separate boards and separate (albeit very similar) charters. In 2005, a cooperative general services and business agreement was signed by the TECS (North) and TECS-S boards. This agreement enabled the schools to cooperate together in a number of ways, including retaining and synergistically enhancing the same educational program, shared teacher training, and the sharing of some employees, while enjoying the same Thomas Edison Charter School name.

In 2007 the Utah legislature approved statutory language which made it possible for the two schools to effectively apply to merge under one board and one charter. In January 2008, the Utah State Charter School Board approved the application to operate both schools under one board and one charter and the Utah State Board of Education ratified the approval in February 2008. Thus, TECS became the first charter school in Utah approved to operate two campuses under a single board and single charter. The merge of the two boards and charter became effective on July 1st, 2008 – which fulfilled the early dream of the original founders to operate a North and South campus under one board and one charter.

Administrator Connections to Ben Franklin Elementary School

Marc Mason, was the original Principal of Ben Franklin Elementary school in Mesa, Arizona. Mr. Mason was hired by the original Thomas Edison Charter School (TECS) as a consultant for its first two years of operation. Mr. Mason served as Ben Franklin Elementary School Principal for approximately 24 years.

Eldon Budge, served as co-Principal with Marc Mason from 1994 – 1996 of Benjamin Franklin Elementary School, and as principal of Ben Franklin West Elementary School from 1996 – 2002. In 2003, Mr. Budge moved his family from Arizona to Cache Valley to become principal of TECS in North Logan. In 2005, Mr. Budge became principal of Thomas Edison Charter School-South (TECS-S) so that the program developed at the original TECS would properly carry forward at TECS-S. Mr. Budge retired from TECS-S in 2014.

Scott Jackson, served on the original faculty of Ben Franklin Elementary in Mesa Arizona. Through the tutelage of Marc Mason and Romalda Spalding (founder of the Spalding total language arts method), Mr. Jackson became a master teacher. Mr. Jackson later become a principal at various charter schools and consulted with the Petersons on the writing of the original TECS charter. In 2005, Mr. Jackson moved his family from Arizona to Cache Valley and became principal of TECS – replacing Mr. Budge who had been assigned to be principal of the new TECS-S. Mr. Jackson retired from TECS in 2017.

Melani Kirk, taught P.E. at Benjamin Franklin West Elementary School from 1996 to 1998, and taught 2nd and 6th grades at Benjamin Franklin Northeast Elementary School from 1998 to 2003. Ms. Kirk also received administrative credentials during that time. After moving to Utah in 2003, to teach at a district school in Provo, Ms. Kirk was recruited by Mr. Budge to be a teacher mentor and director of instruction at TECS beginning in 2004. She served as a director of instruction until 2014, when she took over for the retiring Mr. Budge as principal of TECS-S and has served in that position since that time.

With the hiring and recruitment of the above key administrators, having Ben Franklin Elementary school backgrounds, to TECS, the dream by the Petersons and the Scholes, “to bring the Franklin Elementary School educational program of Mesa, Arizona, to Cache Valley” became a reality. Indeed, some say that the TECS educational program has become better than the one after which it is patterned.