

Ella Flagg Young – A Pioneer Woman

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Is there anything that opens more doors than an education? Ella Flagg Young thought not. Even though she was born in Buffalo, New York, on January 15, 1845, her family settled in the Chicago, Illinois area. Young was a person, who at first, was not sure if she even liked school at all. So how did this woman become the first woman Superintendent for the Chicago area Schools? On her way to becoming Superintendent, she enjoyed a life that brought her closer to that calling.

Ella's parents thought it was important to have Ella at home tending the garden and helping with house work, but yet they never missed a chance to provide Ella with as many opportunities as possible. At the age of ten, when she was not needed at home, Ella tagged along with her father when he went to work. Being the inquisitive, young lady she was, she never stopped asking questions about his work. She would often pester her father, determined to find out what he was doing. A few months later her mother was reading a newspaper article about a schoolhouse fire. Ella, although terrified, kept on looking at the words over her mother's shoulder and became very curious. She nagged her mother to reread the article over and over. She freely took the article herself and separated the words until eventually, the words came clear to her. She had taught herself to read. At age thirteen, Ella begged her parents to send her to school. She was sent to Brown Grade School where she studied diligently, progressing much above her grade level. She wanted to move onto high school but was told she needed to complete another

full year at Brown to qualify her for the high school examination. Ella wanted no part of this test and eventually quit school all together.

Two years later, at age fifteen, Ella took the teacher's examination and passed, but once again she hit a roadblock and was refused her teaching certificate because of her age. A Superintendent of one of the Chicago's schools thought attending normal school would help Ella on her way to becoming a full time teacher. She accepted his offer learning to teach standardized curriculums, popular in pre-Civil War classrooms.

Even though her own mother discouraged Ella from teaching, she was not fazed and proved her mother wrong. She wanted to become the best teacher she could be. Ella was asked to visit classrooms to improve her teaching skills. She observed several classrooms before discovering Miss Rounds' class. She knew then being a teacher was her calling. Ella spoke about her experience, "In the course of an hour, I was conscious that here was a relation between teacher and children, an atmosphere enveloping all that I had never known in a school."

Within a week, Ella was asked if she would like to teach the class herself. From that day forward she became the student's second teacher. Ella's mother heard of Ella's teaching, and to Ella's surprise she became one of her biggest supporters.

Within months, at the age of seventeen, Ella graduated from normal school and found employment as a primary teacher at Chicago's Foster School. Although excited about her new job, she was saddened by her mothers' sudden death but knew she would have wanted her to follow her vocation.

At age eighteen, she decided to return to Brown Grade School, her alma mater, as an assistant principle. Doubling her salary to \$500 a month, she was expected to keep up

with her job as well as teaching a class of fifty-six. This included helping teachers to keep focused on their students and do whatever necessary.

Within two years, Ella was offered the job of Principal of the Practice School and later the Principal of Skinner's School in Chicago. She devoted most of her time to her job, while also pursuing others interests. In 1868, putting her job aside, Ella married William Young.

Within a year, she was appointed by the governor to the Illinois Board of Education and attended the meetings monthly. While serving on the Illinois Board, she joined the University of Chicago staff as an associate professor. She was to look over the ideas of John Dewey, where she tested his functions of teaching and eventually she was given her Ph.D. for her work, *Isolation in the Schools*. In her owns words she transferred her ideas into ways the teachers could follow.

In 1909, Ella was chosen by the Board of Illinois Education to be the first woman Superintendent of the Chicago School Areas. This infuriated many in Chicago. They did not like the idea of a women given management of such a big school system. Ella ignored the anger and continued with her work. Ella added more subjects to the curriculum, organized special needs programs for handicapped, created health classes to teach sex education to boys and girls, supported gardening in classrooms in order that children could learn the growing process, and incorporated vocational, manual arts, technical training—as she was taught as a child—standard curriculum, and helped fight for women's rights. Before retiring after seven years of superintendency, she was elected into the Illinois State Teacher Association in 1910 and later she awarded her doctorate degree of law.

Ella Flagg Young died October 26, 1918. She had been a noble honorable student, teacher, and superintendent. She was dedicated from the start when all she wanted was to educate children in the best possible way. Ella was put down by men and some women. She bent over backwards for the Chicago area with many organizations. The time and effort she put in to help students and teachers was great. Teachers are still following her example. [From Jackie M. Blount, *Destined to Rule the Schools*; Lyndee Jobe Henderson, *Remarkable Illinois Women*; Mary J. Herrick, *The Chicago Schools*; Henry C. Johnson and Erwin V. Johannningmeier, *Teachers for the Prairie*; John T. McMannis, *Ella Flagg Young and a Half-Century of the Chicago Public Schools*; and Dr. Ella Flagg Young, *Isolation in the School*.]