The curriculum of the school varied over the years, but its elements were determined by what was required by the Normal School Law. Three areas of study offered in the early years included the Elementary, which was meant to "prepare teachers for the common schools," the Classical Course which was meant to train teachers for "positions in Classical Department of Instruction in Graded, High Schools, and Academies, "and the Scientific Course, which was meant to "prepare teachers for higher departments in graded schools." They also had a model school, which was a grade school whose classes were taught by normal school students in their senior year under the supervision of faculty critic teachers.

Such instruction was relatively inexpensive, particularly if students did not live on campus. In its first year, tuition, room and board was priced between $70-80 a term. Some financial aid was available from the state, which provided support for would-be teachers. Tuition support of $.50 per week was paid by the state if the students would agree to teach for at least two years in the public schools of Pennsylvania after graduating. A higher subsidy of $1.00 per week was granted to the orphans of Civil War soldiers. Upon graduation, those who had agreed to teach were given a $50.00 bonus.

It was widely recognized that many of students who attended the State’s normal schools were of moderate means, and Indiana was no exception. While minimal by
modern standards, even these fees were a challenge to some students and their families. Still they found ways to attend.

Boarding out reduced the price of attending considerably and though there was a rule that students must live on campus, the Trustees could be petitioned to, and often would, waive this requirement in cases of financial necessity. In September of 1886, the Trustees assisted financially strapped young women who they deemed “trustworthy young ladies” and allowed them to attend as day students and pay the tuition when they had the money. Other students were allowed to borrow against the graduation bonus from the state.

The flexibility of its programs also attracted students of moderate means. Attendance figures for the summer sessions tended to be higher than those in the fall and spring, suggesting students were teaching school during the academic year and coming to school in the summer. Other students did not attend for an entire semester and the catalogs list fees that could be paid by the week. Many more students attended than ever graduated. The example of Elizabeth Jane Cochran, who would change her name to Nellie Bly and become a famous investigative reporter, was not uncommon. She came to ISNS in 1879 when she was 15, but had to drop out due to lack of funds.