

towns, inhabited by about twenty thousand people. The law of that date rounded out the outline of the system of public instruction as it exists to-day. Evolution and not revolution has characterized the system from the beginning. Let us see what this outline really contained.

The Act recognizes the three customary grades of education,—elementary, secondary, and higher,—and all are made subject to the State's control. It lays stress upon the relation of education to the State; what is profitable to the Commonwealth is set up as the criterion to govern the action of the General Court. Again, while the responsibility of educating children is placed primarily upon parents and masters, the State may see to it that parents and masters perform their duty. Money may be raised by general taxation to defray the cost of public education; whether it shall be done or not, it is left with the towns themselves to determine. School provision is made compulsory, but not school attendance; the "shall" of the Act of 1647 is directed to towns not parents, and so is the fine that is to be imposed for non-compliance with legal duty. Citizens may provide tuition for their children at home, or in private schools as before. The schools are not formally free therefore, since they are to be supported either by those who use the schools or by the inhabitants of the town in general by way of supply, or by both of these. Important history turned on this word "or," as we shall see hereafter.

In the first elementary schools of Massachusetts only writing and reading were required to be taught.