

The Public School.

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I

HISTORICAL INTRODUCTION.

The development of the Public School System of Ontario was practically accomplished by 1876. In that year the duties of the Chief Superintendent of Education and the Council of Public Instruction were transferred to a responsible Minister and the Education Department.

By the Constitutional Act of 1791, the Legislature of Upper Canada received the right to legislate in reference to all matters pertaining to the development of the country and to the establishment of institutions deemed necessary for the educational and social welfare of the people. It was not till 1807 that the educational idea resulted in a Legislative Act. The desire to establish schools and promote education had impressed itself on some of the leading minds at the centres of the larger settlements; and private schools were established at Kingston, Cornwall, Bath, York, Niagara, Hay Bay, Port Rowan, Napanee and a few other places. With these Schools, will ever be associated the names of Bishop Strachan, M. S. Bidwell, Rev. Robert Addison, Jonathan Clarke, and others. While they were doing appreciated work among the pioneers, some of the more progressive and enterprising members of the legislature were unremitting in their efforts to formulate a scheme for the establishment of a system of public education for the province. In this connection must be mentioned the names of Governor Simcoe, Mahlon Burwell, Charles Duncombe, W. W. Baldwin and Wm. Morris. They each in the position they occupied strove to promote the educational interests of the province. They have left their mark on educational legislation which followed their patriotic and persistent efforts in this direction.

The question may be asked: What first awakened the desire to establish schools and promote education in Ontario? To answer this question we cannot do better than quote from Dr. Strachan's address at the opening of King's College (now Toronto University) in 1843. He said:—"When the independence of the United States was recognized by Great Britain in 1783, this province became the asylum of those faithful subjects of the Crown, who, during the revolutionary war had adhered to their king and to the unity of the Empire. And it is pleasing to remark that in 1789—a little more than five years after their first settlement—they presented a memorial to the Governor General, Lord Dorchester, on the subject of education, in which after lamenting the state of their children growing up without instruction religious or secular, they requested His Lordship to establish a Seminary at Kingston. To this the

governor paid immediate attention and gave directions to the Surveyor-General to set apart eligible portions of land for the future support of schools in all new settlements."

Early in the century schools were established in the chief centres of the settlements. Soon a grammar school was to be found in every district and ultimately common schools, fashioned by the United Empire Loyalists, on the New England pattern were put in operation in every settled township in the province.

In 1807 the legislature passed the first School Act, which was the germ of the High School Act of the present day. This provided for the establishment of a public school in each of the eight districts of the province, and that \$400 should be set apart annually for the payment of the salary of a teacher for a school in each district. Five trustees were to be appointed by the Lieutenant-Governor, for each district. They were to nominate as teacher, a fit and proper person, satisfactory to them morally and intellectually, and to make such rules and regulations for the good government of the school, with respect to teacher and pupils as they deemed expedient.

The character of these eight schools did not supply the demands of the growing population of the province. They did not provide for the elementary education the Loyalists had enjoyed in the New England States. After nine years of agitation and consideration, the legislature, having established Grammar schools at the centres of the chief settlements and made provision for their maintenance, in 1816 passed the first Common Schools Act, providing for the establishment of a system of elementary education. By this Act elementary schools were placed within the reach of the great mass of the people and provision was made for their maintenance by appropriations of public money. The sum of \$24,000 was to be divided among the schools established by law, but in no case was any school to receive more than \$100 annually. As no provision was made for fees or raising of taxes for the support of these schools, any sums needed in addition to the legislative grant were raised by subscriptions.

This act authorized the inhabitants of a neighborhood to meet in public assembly and provide for the erection of a school house and elect three trustees if they were able to show that twenty children were likely to attend the school.

The duties of the trustees consisted in examining and appointing a teacher, making rules and regulations for the management and discipline of the school and selecting text-books. No teacher could be removed without the consent of the Lieutenant-Governor.

To us this act seems very elementary in character and provisions, but it is of interest, as the first attempt of the legislature to provide for the educational needs of the whole people and a legislative recognition of the right of the people

to provide for the education of their children.

In 1824 an amendment was made to the act of 1816, transferring the power of granting certificates to teachers from the Trustee Board to the Board of Education for the district. Thereafter no school was to share in the distribution of the legislative grant unless in charge of a teacher holding a certificate signed by at least one member of the Board of Education.

The composition of Trustee Boards, the mode of their election and their duties, remained unchanged till 1841, when the School Act then in force was repealed and a comprehensive, Common Schools Act passed, introducing some radical changes in the local administration of schools. The most sweeping change and the most distasteful to the people was the abolition of Section Trustee Boards and the substitution of Township Boards of commissioners. The Township Board consisted of five persons elected by the ratepayers of the township, and is the germ of the Township Boards of Trustees, still alive in a few townships in this province.

The commissioners were authorized to tax the inhabitants for the maintenance of the schools. This was the first time that property was declared taxable for public education.

Each child was charged a fee of twenty-five cents a month for tuition.

The municipal councils were to divide the several townships in their districts into school sections and raise by assessment the sum of \$200 to build a school house in each section where none existed. They were also authorized to appropriate \$40 to provide such books as were recommended by the commissioners.

The District Boards of Trustees appointed by the Governor, under the act of 1807, for the management of the grammar schools were abolished and the Municipal Council for the district was constituted a Board of Education for such district.

The duties of the commissioners were to select school sites, superintend the building of school houses, appoint teachers, regulate the course of study in each school, select text books and make rules for the management and discipline of the schools, hear and settle complaints, visit each school at least once a month by one of their number, relieve indigent persons from the payment of fees for the tuition of their children and report their proceedings to the Municipal Council.

The management of schools by commissioners proved unsatisfactory to the people. They had become accustomed to having the trustees in their immediate neighborhood, and could more easily express their wishes or lay complaints regarding the management of the school.

Such representations were made to the legislature, that in 1843 an amendment was made to the act of 1841, abolishing Township Boards of Commissioners and