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School Conventions in Upper Canada.

A movement of some importance in educational circles has been commenced in Upper Canada, under the immediate direction of the chief Superintendent for that section of the province. The progress of public instruction under the existing system has been, thus far, satisfactory; yet it is thought that in some particulars the law is susceptible of improvement. Among the changes now sought to be introduced, the most important is that which has reference to the jurisdiction of local School Boards. As in Lower Canada, the principle that the rates levied in support of the schools in each municipality shall be self-imposed is fully recognised and acted upon; the essential difference is in the constitution of the Boards having the power to assess the ratepayers. In Lower Canada each municipality (where there are no dissentients) elects but one Board, whereas in the Western section there is an independent Board for every school and its school section, thus needlessly multiplying, as Dr. Ryerson declares, the number of these administrative bodies, causing much diversity in the rate of assessment in the same township or even part of a township, and impairing the general uniformity in the working of the school system. To remedy these evils and improve this system in other respects, it is proposed to substitute Township for the existing School Section Boards and to introduce various other measures of minor importance; but before taking any action on the part of the Department, Dr. Ryerson wished to consult the different school functionaries and others interested, and to listen to such suggestions as their experience and practical knowledge in the working of the school law might prompt them to offer. Hence the circular addressed in December last to local municipal bodies, school officers and others, inviting them to assemble in Conventions to be held in each county, and at which the chief Superintendent would preside.

The circumstances that seem to have suggested the idea of County Conventions are thus explained by Dr. Ryerson in his circular:

"When I began, in 1844, to apply myself to establish and mature our present system of public elementary instruction, it was part of my plan to visit foreign educating countries once in five years, in order to acquire information, to observe the nature, working and progress of systems of public instruction, so that we might in our educational system and institutions profit as much as possible by the example and experience of other enlightened countries. It was also another part of my plan to visit each County in Upper Canada once in five years, in order to acquire local information as to the circumstances and wishes of the people, to hold free consultations as to the working, progress and defects of our own system of public instruction, and the best means of improving and adapting it to the institutions and wants of the country. My last quinquennial tour was made in January, February and March of 1860; but my health did not permit me to undertake the great labour of another tour last year; and the absorption of the public mind with the subject of confederation and other exciting questions, seemed to render it inopportune for me to hold public County Conventions on school matters.

"I purpose in the course of the next three months, Providence permitting, to make my fourth and probably last visit to each

County, or union of Counties in Upper Canada, in order to hold a County school convention of all school officers and other friends of general education who may think proper to attend."

The business which was expected to engage the attention of the Conventions is concisely laid down as follows:

"1. To consider any suggestions which may be made for the amendment of the school law, for the improvement of the schools, for the diffusion of education, and for the extension and usefulness of prize books and public libraries.

"2. To consider, especially, whether or not it would be desirable to have one Board of School Trustees for each Township, as there is one Board of Trustees for each City, Town, and Incorporated Village; and whether the Township Council should not be such Board of School Trustees — thus putting an end to the trouble and disputes arising from School Section divisions and alterations, the election of Section Trustees, and the levying and collection of School Section rates, and greatly simplifying the machinery of the School System, leaving to parents a larger discretion as to the selection of a school for their children, and giving greater permanency to the situations of teachers.

"3. It is also proposed to consider whether each Municipal Council should not be invested with power to bring to account and punish by fine, or requiring to work on the roads, parents who do not send their children, between seven and fifteen years of age, to some school at least four months in each year."

Among the many articles which have appeared in the newspapers in connection with this movement, we select the following on the subject of prizes. It is from the *Hamilton Spectator*:

"The first subject suggested by Dr. Ryerson, in his circular, announcing the holding of conventions throughout Upper Canada, on the subject of the School system and its improvement, is 'To consider any suggestions which may be made for the amendment of the School law, for the improvement of the schools, for the diffusion of education, and for the extension and usefulness of prize-books and public libraries.' This subject takes a very wide range, and may, in fact, be said in its terms to include all the other topics suggested. Under it, almost all subjects connected in any way with the School system of the country might be introduced, and we doubt not that the discussions upon it will prove of very general interest.

"We purpose, however, to-day, to notice that particular suggestion which has relation to the distribution of prizes in the schools — a subject which has excited a good deal of attention among educationists, and upon which the weight of evidence is pretty equally divided. There is no question that those who oppose the giving of prizes to those scholars who, in a competitive examination exhibit the greatest proficiency, are not without solid argument by which to maintain their views. It is contended that very often the lads who are really the hardest workers, and who make the best figure in the world in the long run, are not the most successful at those examinations; and that mere smartness often takes the prize from the more industrious and meritorious; and that, in such cases, the tendency is to discourage that spirit of plodding industry which at school, as in the sterner duties of after-life, are the most to be encouraged. Where the prize is awarded solely to the most successful at the competitive examination, there is no question that this is too often the case. At school, as in life, mere self-possession, we might perhaps say the force of impudence, often carries off the prize against merit and modest worth. The reports of local superintendents of schools, published in the annual reports from the Educational Department, bear evidence that this fact has often militated against the usefulness and fairness of the prize system.

"But these arguments, after all, apply rather to the mode of distributing prizes than to the system of prizes itself. The great danger to be avoided is in ignoring the general conduct of scholars during the entire term, and leaving to the accident of the examination the determination of the question of merit. Distributed upon a well-considered principle, which would recognise fully the