

Assessment and Free Schools.

The second and most important of the new provisions is that for the introduction of a limited amount of assessment for the support of schools. An attempt—it is to be hoped a successful one, to introduce that grand engine for the elevation of the mental and moral condition of the mass, which has urged on the industrial prosperity of the neighboring States, and enabled them in two centuries to outdo most of the nations of the old world in all the essentials of a people's greatness. The more intelligent portion of the population of this Province are now prepared, nay earnestly desirous to submit to the burthen of taxation for so noble an end. The very ignorant never will, if left in their ignorance, be prepared for it. The Legislature should be ready to deal boldly with this question, and for once to legislate for the true interests of the country, irrespective of popular prejudices, which are now fast decaying, and would in a year or two entirely disappear before the practical benefits of a well-planned Free School Law.

In the Bill, the Provincial grant remains as hitherto, and the remainder of the salaries of teachers are to be raised in part by a County assessment, equal in amount to the Provincial grant, and in part by voluntary contributions in the separate districts, or sections as they are to be called; this last portion of support to be contributed either by subscription or local assessment, at the option of an annual meeting convened for the purpose.

This may be viewed as the mean between two opposite methods of introducing the assessment principle, which have had their advocates in this Province. In the first place many iron friends of the Free School system maintain that assessment to the full amount should be made compulsory at once. Admitting this to be a desirable consummation, there can yet be little doubt that it would be imprudent as a first step, more especially as it does not appear that any country in America has yet gone so far as to make the whole support of Schools a compulsory assessment. In the second place, there are equally earnest advocates of assessment who would be content with a compulsory assessment in part, but would permit the remaining salary to be raised as now, by fees per scholar. Many districts in Upper Canada and New York have as yet gone no farther than this, but their experience shows that on this plan the distinction between free and paid pupils still subsists, and that many who pay a share of the tax are precluded from enjoying the full benefit of the Schools.

Neither of these extreme methods could at present succeed in this Province.

The first could not be carried into effect, especially in the poorer Counties. The second would not give the people that which can alone secure their consent to taxation, a system of Free Schools. The middle course proposed in the present Bill, appears practicable, is sanctioned by experience and secures the end in view. It must be admitted, however, that its machinery is more complicated than that required by the other methods;

but on the other hand, this machinery secures a more methodical and efficient management of the Schools.

We have then in the Bill the following arrangements for combining Free Schools with support in part voluntary.

1. The Provincial grant to be drawn by the Commissioners and distributed all in one half year, instead of the half in each half year, as at present.

2. An equal sum raised as a county tax, in the same manner as the county rate, and distributed as the allowance of teachers in the second half of the year. The Teachers will thus receive in the whole year, from the Commissioners, an average allowance of £23 per annum instead of £13 which is the present average.

3 To enable an additional salary to be raised in the separate sections, it is proposed to introduce the admirable School Trustee organization of Upper Canada and New York, which has proved in those countries an efficient agency for procuring, by means of the Trustees, larger salaries for Teachers than those hitherto paid in this Province, by fees and subscription. Doubts may be entertained as to the willingness of Trustees to perform the duties required of them; but experience and common-sense teach, that if men be given to understand the nature of their duties, furnished with all the powers required and with a remuneration for the more difficult part of their work, and be subject to a strict responsibility to their constituents, they will act with greater faithfulness and energy than when their powers, responsibilities and duties are vaguely defined and imperfectly explained.

Under the new arrangement proposed by the Bill, the trustees can offer the people of their district free instruction for every child, on condition that they raise a sufficient sum to enable the Trustees, with the aid of the Provincial grant and county assessment, to hire a competent teacher. They can do this with much less difficulty than under the present system—the public aid being double that at present received. On the one hand, if they neglect to engage a Teacher, they lose not only a school for their children, but the share of public money due to their district.—On the other, by engaging a good teacher, they have a free school at a less cost per family than will now suffice to educate one half of the children. This subject, however, merits some additional remarks.

Before leaving the subject of Assessment for the support of Schools, it is proper to notice, that at present the County tax will operate under disadvantageous circumstances, in consequence of our having no facilities for county assessment other than those afforded by the Grand Jury and Sessions, bodies not responsible to the people, and often very capricious in their action. Had we incorporated counties, there can be no doubt that the system would work more smoothly. In the meantime it is necessary

to provide some alternative in the nature of a penalty, and at the same time of a provision for the support of the schools, in the event of the County authorities neglecting to assess. This is done in the Bill by depriving Counties so neglecting of one-third of their School Grant, and distributing the remaining two-thirds only to schools which are made free by district assessment, and to poor Schools and poor Scholars in other schools. The penalty will thus fall most heavily on those of the wealthier districts which may refuse to establish free schools, and a bounty will be given on the free school system, as established in separate districts. It seems just that this should be the case, since those districts which by retaining the system of fees per scholar, refuse to educate the children of their poorer inhabitants, have certainly a very small claim to public aid.

A grave question is often asked in relation to the new system proposed, "What sums can be expected from the people of the districts in addition to the County tax, or will they raise anything?" At present it appears by the School Report, that the average salary per teacher is £38 per annum, and of this £25 comes from the people and £13 from the Province. Under the new law, about £26 will be given from the Provincial grant and County tax, and to make the teacher's salary as large as his present poor pittance, £12 per annum will be required from the people. It would require £20 from the people to raise the salary of the teacher to the average of Canada, New York, or New England. What then are the inducements brought to bear on the people under the new system, to induce them to raise this additional sum?

First—A teacher must be engaged and a school established, otherwise the people cannot claim from the Provincial grant and County assessment the sums due to their district. If no school be established, nothing can be drawn, yet they must pay their share of the county tax. If a school be kept up for half a year only, but half the year's allowance can be drawn. This makes it necessary for the trustees to engage a teacher for such sum as a licensed teacher will consent to receive, and the sum necessary for this purpose must be provided by the school meeting. Secondly—The Provincial grant and County tax are distributed according to class of teacher and number of scholars, as well as the sum raised for support of the school. There is thus a bounty on hiring a good teacher and paying him well, and on keeping a full school. On the other hand, the Commissioners being authorized to give one sixth of the Provincial grant and avails of County tax in aid of poor districts, and to employ tempora-