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The Rural School Problem.

The Editorial Page this issue has been given to the following article on the "Rural School Problem" by W. A. McIntyre, LL.D., Principal of the Provincial Normal School, Winnipeg.

Some Difficulties.

The problem of problems in Western Canada is that of education in the rural districts. The sparse population, the bad roads, the long winter season, the scarcity of teachers, the mixed races, the method of survey, the apathy of the people, the high tax-rate—all these things combine to make a solution of the question exceedingly difficult. Because of the sparse population the schools are small, and there is lacking the incentive to effort that makes larger schools so interesting to children. There is also a heavy tax for each ratepayer, and this generally means a low salary, an incompetent teacher and a lack of suitable equipment. Because of bad roads there is irregular attendance. It is said that a majority of pupils who attend school, are present for less than one hundred days in the year. The long winter makes it very difficult for pupils from a distance to attend without risk. Transportation is a necessity in most districts, and this adds greatly to the cost of school support. In the muddy spring season transportation is frequently impossible. The problem of the school, becomes the problem of good roads. The method of survey places the houses not close to the main highways but leaves them scattered irregularly over the prairie. This makes concerted action for purposes of transportation almost an impossibility. The lack of farm labor coupled with the apathy of a people who are endeavoring to make money during the formative period in the country's history, causes many children to leave school before they have learned the simple arts of reading and writing. In many cases whole families are found, not a single member of whom can sign his own name. This is true particularly in the homes of some of those who came to the West from Central Europe, and whose ambition is to make their children wage-earners as early in life as possible. But above all these difficulties is that of securing competent teachers. It is said that the average length of service of those who enter the calling is less than three years, so that the character of the work done in most of the schools is bound to be disappointing. It is doubly so because so many of those who serve as teachers are of doubtful or extremely low scholarship. Altogether the position is very grave.

Consolidation as a Remedy.

Among the suggestions offered by various persons for improving conditions there are three or four that are particularly worthy of notice. The first of these is contained in the word "consolidation." By this is meant a union of two or three districts in one. For example, the districts surrounding a village may unite with the village in the support of a common school. This will necessitate transportation of pupils at public expense. The cost will probably be no greater than it now is in most districts, but it will be felt more. The farmer who drives his own children to school does not reckon his time and labor as a cost whereas if he pays a tax to hire a teamster for his own and his neighbors' children, he will consider it a matter of expense. There are, without doubt, many advantages in consolidation where it can be worked. It will mean better buildings, better teachers, better equipment, better grading, more regular attendance, more advanced studies, teaching of special branches. It will also mean the cultivation of broader sympathies and a higher form of social life. In the consolidated school the pupils will have the combined advantages of life in the country and life in the town.

But the districts in the West are in many cases already so large, the roads are so bad and the weather so severe that the plan of consolidation will never apply to more than a fraction of the whole number of the schools. In any case it will be possible in a large way only when transportation of pupils is made a cost to the community rather than to the individual, and when the local school board gives way to the school board for the municipality.

Transportation of Pupils.

It seems strange that people who live at a distance from a rural school should be willing to carry their own children to school at their own expense. The very first principle of fair government is that there should be equality of opportunity for all. As we find things in the West to-day

there is no such equality of opportunity. The man who has the school house placed close to his door has an immense advantage over the man who lives a distance away. Any ratepayer would be justified in demanding that if the school is to be placed a long distance from his home, the district should see to it that his children are transported free of cost. In short, free transportation is a corollary to a free public-school system. The present method of transportation is not only unfair to the parent who lives a longer distance from the school but it is extravagant, and it is imperfect. There is no reason why three or four conveyances should be employed to draw the children to school when one large conveyance could do all that is necessary, and there is no reason why children should come in open carriages when they could travel in a covered van. If public transportation were established as a principle it is evident that consolidation would follow.

Municipal School Boards.

It is probable, however, that nothing on a large scale will be done until the present local school board gives way to the municipal school board. It is almost impossible to get the trustees of three or four neighboring districts to agree to any common plan of work, but it would be a very simple thing for the trustees of a municipality to devise a plan whereby the needs of the whole municipality would be met. The present system of school boards was borrowed from eastern provinces or perhaps from the United States. It suited conditions in the early times but it is by no means suitable to conditions to-day. Provided the twenty or thirty schools in a municipality were under the control of one general school board, a common curator of buildings could be employed who would see that caretaking and repairs were properly attended to, that the grounds were fenced and properly planted, that the equipment was well chosen and in a state of preservation. It would be possible, also, to have travelling instructors in physical culture, in manual work, or in any other branches of study that might be deemed of first importance. Indeed, it might be possible for a municipality to engage the services of its own inspector who would act as principal for the whole of the schools in the municipality. And one of the first results of the institution of municipal school boards would be the erection of large central high schools, which all the children of the municipality could attend free of cost. Under present conditions the outlook is altogether too local and there is no proper relationship between the elementary education and the education of the secondary school. What would happen if in one of our large cities with its thirty or forty separate school buildings there were as many local school boards? The question needs no answer. The union of all the schools of a municipality under one board of management, is just as necessary in rural as in urban communities.

If the municipal school board and public transportation were necessary parts of our system, consolidation with all its benefits would naturally follow, and even though consolidation will not work in all cases, its benefits are so many in the cases where it will work, as to justify the people in putting forth great efforts to make it a reality.

School Property.

The irregular attendance is not altogether due to the fact that children are living so far away from the schools and that they are not driven to and fro. In some cases they do not wish to come because the school is so unattractive. The building is broken down, the grounds are neglected, the equipment and furnishings are disgraceful in the extreme. There is nothing whatever attractive for either the child or adolescent. Recent attempts in Canada and the United States to improve the grounds and buildings have resulted not only in an increased attendance of pupils, but they have made the parents take fresh interest in the work of education. It seems too bad that where the surroundings might be made so beautiful, so educative—with very little outlay in money or time—that something should not be done. If the people could only understand that children are educated more by what they see and

hear and do than by what they read from books, they would probably give more attention to these matters. The beautiful school garden and the well-equipped school house would not be regarded as fads and luxuries, but necessities.

Taxation.

It is said, however, that the cost of education is already so great that to make any further levy in order to equip the schools or improve their condition is an impossibility. There is no doubt that the cost is great and that the proportion of taxes devoted to school purposes is abnormally high; yet the whole taxes in this western country are not high when we compare them with taxes in other lands. A man with a half-section has an asset worth twelve thousand dollars and his total tax is probably forty dollars. This surely is not unreasonable. In some countries it would be one hundred dollars or more on the same valuation, and in towns and cities it is probably greater than in the country. A farmer feels his tax more than another man because he does not handle so much money during the year. Any payment in money always seems large. Yet surely the education of one's children is worth a great deal to any man. Probably there is no forty dollars so well spent as the forty dollars that is spent in education, even if the school be of the very poorest type.

The Teaching Force.

That there are many poor schools goes without saying, and the poorest kind of a school is always that in which the most incompetent teacher is employed, for in the long run the efficiency of a school depends upon the teacher. Consolidation, public transportation and municipal school boards will do much, and improved conditions may also be expected to result from the improvement of the grounds and buildings, but all being said and done these are secondary matters. The great thing is to secure more efficient teachers. At the present time the teaching force is inefficient for two reasons: First, because it is lacking in men. It is not that men are better teachers than ladies. As a matter of fact, in most cases ladies are to be preferred. But there should be a number of men, especially in the senior departments, for every pupil should at some period of his or her life come under the instruction of a gentleman of culture and high attainment. There is only one way of retaining men in the profession in a country like Western Canada, and that is by paying higher salaries than are given to ladies. This may be thought to be an injustice, but it is to be recognized that if the men are to be retained this is the only way to retain them. The second cause of inefficiency is that teachers do not remain in the profession long enough to become experts. As indicated above, the average length of service cannot be much more than three years. One reason why teachers do not remain in the profession is because the novice receives almost as high a salary as the teacher of experience. The simplest thing in the world would be to arrange for a system of graded grants. This would be no hardship to teacher or to district. It would simply mean that novices would receive much less than they are now receiving, and that experienced teachers would receive more, and that both would be getting exactly what they are worth. It would be conceded that many beginners are now receiving far more than they are worth, while other teachers, who are skilled and competent, are not receiving enough to encourage them to remain in the profession.

Programme of Studies.

But even if the necessary proportion of men were obtainable, and if the teachers of superior attainment were retained in the profession, this would not be enough. Those who are best acquainted with teachers and their capabilities will confess that in many cases they are not adequately fitted for their work, that they do not know things which a teacher ought to know in order to take charge of a rural school, although they have spent much time in learning many things that were not so necessary for them to know. It would seem that if the teaching force is to be improved, particular attention must be paid to the character of the

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