

The Progress of Education in Lower-Canada.

Essay read before the Teachers' Association in connexion with the McGill Normal School, on Saturday 5th. Nov. 1859, by Mr. H. Arnold, Teacher, Montreal.

In the first place it may be proper to say what was the state of Elementary Education in the Lower Province a few years ago; and trace its progress from that time to the present.

Previous to year 1844, the voluntary system, as it was called, prevailed in Canada, but as far as many places in Lower Canada were concerned, the term, non voluntary would certainly be the most appropriate, for very few persons contributed voluntarily to the support of Common Schools, a much greater proportion of them, even with large families, who would have been benefited to an incalculable amount, refusing to give one penny to their support; and the few who were anxious to have the blessings of an Education placed within the reach of their children, often forced to contribute beyond their means to the maintenance of the few schools scattered throughout the country.

It was, however, not to be expected that these few persons were always as able as they were willing to offer the full amount of support to these schools; for it is well known that in many school districts in Lower Canada, the farmers and others, who compose the population are not in circumstances which would enable them individually to keep up an efficient school; and besides in the few instances in which the opposite has fortunately been the case, when the non-voluntary supporters have found the school in successful operation, and having had some faint idea that the education imparted would be of some little benefit even to their children, they too have sent to school; but have generally been the first to discover any fault either with the Teachers, system of conveying instruction, mode of correction, arrangement of classes, or some other part of the general management of the school.

These faults real and imaginary and other interference perhaps, on the part of those who paid nothing towards keeping the school in existence, soon discouraged the few who were willing and able to support it, and the consequence has, of course naturally been—the breaking up of the school, probably for years.

Then again the majority of these schools, so few and so far between, were under the charge of Teachers very poorly qualified for the task, caused partly by the salary being inadequate to their comfortable support, and partly by the supply of good Teachers being extremely limited, for very few professional teachers could be induced to come to a country that offered no encouragement, but rather every species of discouragement to them; and if now and then, one had the courage to try it, he very soon became thoroughly disgusted, and remained no longer than he could possibly help.

No wonder then that under the state of things then existing the condition of Elementary Education should have alarmed men sensible of the degrading effects of ignorance on the inhabitants of any country, particularly a growing one like Canada.

Hence the passing of a law in 1844 by which a grant of money was made towards the establishment and maintenance of common schools both in Upper and Lower Canada. Thus the first real and substantial stimulus was given to the Education of the masses in Canada. Under this act a superintendent was appointed whose duty it was, among other matters, to see that Commissioners and Trustees were elected or appointed in each locality, and the Townships and Parishes properly divided into school Districts, and as far as possible a school opened and maintained in each.

Notwithstanding the imperfection of the law as then passed, the ignorance and apathy of Commissioners and Trustees with regard to school matters, and the inveterate opposition offered its harmonious operation, still it was an important step in the right direction. Education began to be thought and talked about through the very opposition that was got up in many parts of the country against the working of the law as then constituted. Almost year after year it was altered and amended—an objectionable clause struck out or a desirable one inserted till it became less distasteful to the people and much more conducive to the end which it was designed to serve.

The law of 1846, it can be said, has placed our school system on an equitable and solid basis inasmuch as it is thereby provided that the School Commissioners should be bound to collect an amount equal to that allowed as a share of the government grant to these municipalities—the latter losing the help of the government if it would not help itself. The same law contained a clause to compel those who had children of school age, that is from seven to fourteen, to pay fee in addition to the direct tax, whether

the children were sent to school or not. These compulsory measures were at first not very agreeable to the minds of a certain class of the community, and as was to be expected amongst a people constituted as they are in Canada, much renowned discontent and opposition were the consequence. But they soon saw that this wise legislation was intended for the benefit of the children of all classes; particularly those whose parents cried out the loudest against it; for these poor children would have been entirely neglected had not the law virtually compelled their parents to send them to school.

Soon after this another wise measure was passed which provided for the appointment of School Inspectors; and I think no one conversant with the progress and the working of the system will deny that the result of this act has been most favorable to the cause of Elementary Education throughout the country. I will not say that the allegations which have occasionally been made with regard to the incompetency, or neglect of duty in a few, are altogether unfounded; but these only affect the few, who will no doubt soon be removed, and replaced by better qualified or more conscientious men. To say that a great amount of good has not been done by the Inspectors as a body would, to say the least of it, be doing a great injustice to some very worthy men—men well qualified both by temper and attainments in learning, to do the work, arduous as it may be, and who perform it faithfully to the advantage of teacher and pupil.

Again, the powers that have been given by recent legislation to our present able and energetic Superintendent have added not a little to the efficiency of the Common School system; and had he more pecuniary means at his disposal, I have no doubt he could do much more towards its further improvement and extension. Notwithstanding the recent enactments by which the authority of the Educational Department has been strengthened in many points there is no doubt that it is yet impeded in many particulars not only for want of adequate funds but also for want of the necessary power. There is a good deal said in our days about selecting the right man for the right place; but the place must also be made right for the man; it is therefore to be regretted that the Educational Department should be still deficient in two of the most essential things, money and authority; as without a good supply of both of these, it is not to be expected that our present system will be brought to that near approach to perfection which I am convinced the head of our Educational Department is able and anxious to effect.

The next point to be noticed in the amendment of the act, is the granting a sum of money towards defraying the expenses of publishing and supporting a Journal of Education in the Lower Province. This little sheet is very creditable to the Office from which it is issued, and ought to be in the hands not only of every teacher, but of every friend of Education throughout the country. I have picked up many valuable hints from its pages, which have been of material assistance to me in the teaching and management of my school.

The next pleasing feature in the way of amendment to the act, is the very liberal grant, in the shape of a pension fund, for the partial support of those Teachers who become aged or infirm in the work of instruction. This was certainly one of the wisest and most considerate measures that has ever been passed in connexion with the school law; for it is a fact, known to every one, that the Teacher's salary is scarcely adequate to his present support; so that he has no means of providing either for old age, or the accidents and calamities, incident to men of every calling and every period of life.

The crowning point, however, in the improvement of the system, at least of that part which relates to the actual teaching and management of schools, was the provision made for the establishment and maintenance of Normal Schools in Lower Canada, similar to the one that has for several years existed in the Upper Province, and those in other countries. Nothing was wanted more than these; for it was of little use to enact laws and amendments to laws for the encouragement of education, when properly qualified teachers were not to be found; and, as I stated in another part of this paper, professional teachers were exceedingly scarce, in consequence of the encouragement held out being wholly insufficient to induce such to come here from other countries; and we had not the institutions in which to train them in this. The consequence was that all the legislation for school purposes was likely to avail very little in the way of any real improvement in the education of the people; for without well trained, systematic and experienced teachers, education cannot possibly make much progress; particularly in a country like this, in many parts of which, the very first rudiments of learning were, till lately, almost unknown. To correct this great evil, the establishment of the Normal Schools