

# The Peace River Experiment

## An Experiment in School Administration through the Consolidated School District

By B. A. FLETCHER\*

THE most important problem of educational administration, recognised as such by all Provincial Departments of Education in Canada, is that of reducing in some measure, the tremendous inequalities of educational opportunity that result from the small decentralised unit of school administration. There is today the widest variation in ability to support education from district to district. A ten to one ratio in financial support given to education in adjacent districts is very common. There is a similar variation in the percentage of the wealth of a community set aside for educational purposes. Education can only be democratic when there is equality of opportunity. Such equality can only exist when a man supports education in proportion to his means and the money is redistributed in proportion to the needs of the several communities making up a Province. This calls for an equalisation of tax burdens and the consolidation of school districts.

The first large scale experiment in this type of educational reform has been successfully carried out in British Columbia over a period of three years with thirty-nine previously separate school units. The following abstracts from an article in the Canadian Educational magazine "The School" for January, 1937 by W. A. Plenderleith, late Director of Education, Peace River Administrative Area, show the scope and success of the work:—

Under the former system of local school boards there had been too much diversity of control connected with "externa", such as, salaries, financial support, equipment, buildings, and administrative practices. On the other hand, there had been too little diversity and flexibility in the school services connected with "interna", such as, curriculum, the methods used in the class-rooms, and the educational and health opportunities provided for children and adults. The chief efforts of the Department, therefore, were directed to rectifying the above defects by providing: (1) a uniformity of administrative practices connected with salaries, financial support, and business routine; (2) a diversity of school services connected with the curriculum, teaching methods, and the educational process itself.

Uniformity of administrative practices connected with business routine was effected immediately by the standardizing of office routine under the Official Trustee, but uniformity of administrative practices connected with salaries and with financial support took one year to effect.

### Abuses Eliminated

The new system of larger units automatically eliminated many of the abuses that had existed under the old system of small units, and by the end of the first year a total saving of \$2,800.00 had been made on the operation of the schools in the four experimental units. As a result of the new system, the Inspector was able in June, 1935, to report to the Department of Education:

- (a) That the Official Trustee had carried out the provision of the British Columbia "Public Schools Act" without fear or prejudice.
- (b) That the teachers had been freed from the petty tyranny which was so often practised by the local school boards in the past.
- (c) That sectional jealousies caused by differences in mill rates were eliminated.
- (d) That there were no short-sighted local school boards to retard educational progress through local prejudice.
- (e) That there were no applications during the year from taxpayers desiring to be transferred from one district to another.
- (f) That a saving of \$1,600.00 had been made in secretaries' allowances in school districts under the Official Trustee.
- (g) That a salary schedule had been drawn up to give each teacher a salary in proportion to services rendered.
- (h) That a definite system of promotion was being arranged. (Under this system teachers coming from the outside will have to take the most undesirable schools, and the best teachers in the consolidated units will be given the first chance to move to better positions.)

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- (i) That the average mill rate for the four consolidated districts was 5.85 mills, whereas in the schools forming the consolidated districts the individual rates, as approved by the last annual meeting, would have ranged from 1.5 mills to 25 mills, with an average rate of 8.08 mills.
- (j) That the secretary racket had been stopped.
- (k) That the teachers were satisfied with the new system; and that those teachers working outside the consolidated districts, at the last Peace River Teachers' Convention, had voted unanimously in favour of a recommendation that the Department appoint an official trustee for the whole Peace River Inspectorate.
- (l) That there was now no desire on the part of the bachelors to close schools in order to save money, because being in a consolidated district they paid their school taxes, whether they had a school in their locality or not.
- (m) That people who had been holding land for purely speculative purposes were turning it back to the Government. Thus land which was formerly in no school district was included in the revised boundaries of the larger units, and could now be redistributed to bona fide settlers.
- (n) That the majority of the people in the larger units were now in favour of consolidation, and that many of the ratepayers, who so strongly opposed the plan when it was inaugurated, had admitted that their antagonism was unreasonable and that they had now become ardent supporters of the new system.
- (o) That all necessary equipment had been bought for the schools; that free high school tuition had been given to all students who desired it; and that increased library facilities had been provided to every school in the four larger units.
- (p) That the ratepayers of several districts (Pouce Coupe, Dawson Creek, Sunset Prairie, and Kelly Lake), which had not been included in the larger units, now realized the advantages of the larger units and had requested, voted, and petitioned to be included in the new scheme of administration.
- is supported by the following facts relating to the schools of the Peace River Rural School District:
- A. Economy in Operation. In 1935-36 a saving of more than \$12,000.00 was made in the business administration of the system by:
1. A general avoidance of waste of school funds through a proper system of budgeting and accounting.
  2. An increase of 10 per cent in the general pass lists throughout all grades in the larger unit. This increase was effected by:
    - (a) careful selection of fourteen new teachers by the Registrar of the Teachers' Bureau;
    - (b) elimination of four weak teachers;
    - (c) adjustment of seven teachers to positions they could hold more suitably;
    - (d) an increase in esprit de corps through making the entire area a promotion area for the teachers;
    - (e) increased efficiency through decreased mobility of teachers;
    - (f) additional improvements in teaching equipment;
    - (g) adjustment of teachers' salaries on a basis of "services rendered";
    - (h) guarantee of annual increment for satisfactory work;
    - (i) general quickening of professional interest as shown by enrolment of over 80 per cent of staff at summer schools and in home reading courses.
- B. Enlarged Educational Offerings and Improvements made possible by the Saving on Administration. From the \$12,000.00 saved on business administration, the following enlarged educational offerings and improvements in equipment were made:
1. Free tuition has been provided for all students who wish to attend high school from any of the local districts within the larger unit.
  2. A junior high school has been established at Dawson Creek for the benefit of those pupils who did not desire the ordinary course.
  3. Technical courses have been arranged for pupils of the Dawson Creek High School and of adjacent districts.
  4. Two new high schools have been authorized, one at Rolla and the other at Dawson Creek.

### Surprising Results

As a result of the changes made in administration, the financial and educational efficiency of the whole unit had been increased to a degree which has surpassed even the most sanguine hopes of the departmental officials. This statement

5. Free night school classes have been provided at twenty different centres where formerly none were in operation.
  6. Additional library equipment, averaging \$25.00 per school, has been distributed throughout the district.
  7. Nine library centres for adults have been equipped and are being supplied by a rotating system of libraries controlled by the official trustee.
  8. One old school, which was burned, has been replaced by a fully equipped, modern frame building.
  9. Four schools have been reopened in areas where the schools had been closed under the former system.
  10. Four new schools have been built to supply the needs of areas requiring educational facilities.
  11. Two new schools have been built to replace obsolete buildings.
- C. Actual saving to taxpayers. Notwithstanding the cost of all the above improvements, the total school taxes in the Peace River District have been reduced.
- D. That the total cost of education has been reduced;
- E. That the percentage of the costs paid by the government has been increased (although the actual amount has been decreased) in return for increased central administrative responsibility;
- F. That the local taxes for educational purposes in the Larger Unit have been reduced by \$8,482.20 since 1933, including the cost of the four additional schools that were operating in 1936.

It might also be of interest to note at this point:

1. That no additional debts were incurred by the consolidated unit;
2. That debts, bonds, and interest (amounting to over \$4,000.00) incurred by former school boards were paid up;

3. That no teacher's salary has been reduced since the consolidated unit was established;
4. That \$780.00 is the minimum salary for elementary school teachers;
5. That \$1,100.00 is the minimum salary for junior high and superior school teachers;
6. That \$1,200.00 is the minimum salary for high school teachers;
7. That the majority of the teachers in the unit are receiving more than the minimum salary.

During the three years that the experimentation with the larger unit of administration has been carried on, there has developed a steadily increasing body of public opinion in favour of the new system. Districts in which the ratepayers were one hundred per cent against the system in 1934, have now swung in the opposite direction and are one hundred per cent for it. The following excerpt from the annual report of an advisory committee indicates the change in attitude:

"Moved by Mr. Barringham and seconded by Mr. Enghnell, that the secretary write a letter to the Official Trustee and to those in his office, assuring them of the appreciation of the people in this district for the interest shown during the school term, 1935-36, by that office in making improvements to the buildings, supplying library books, and the addition of more playing space for the children."

This letter expresses the opinion of ratepayers who only two years ago unanimously signed a petition to the Minister of Education protesting against the new form of school administration.

Dozens of such letters, expressing appreciation of the new system, from Women's Institutes, Farmers' Institutes, and other public and private bodies are on file. These letters indicate the favourable attitude of the majority of the ratepayers toward the larger unit in the Peace River Inspectorate.

Judged by results, the present system of school administration in the larger unit is much more efficient in every way than the former system of school administration in the smaller local units.

