

# The Larger School Unit:

## The Report of the N. S. Royal Commission

By H. P. MOFFATT

**Editor's Note:** This article is the latest in a long series of publications which the Institute of Public Affairs has devoted to the Larger School Unit. The second issue of PUBLIC AFFAIRS carried an article on the subject. In the summer of 1937, Professor B. A. Fletcher, on behalf of the Institute, made a survey of Antigonish County with a view to ascertaining the effects of the advocated system in a representative rural area. His findings have been published in the Institute's BULLETIN No. IX, *An Educational Survey of Antigonish County*. In 1939 the Institute brought out in the series of its books a further study of Professor Fletcher's, *The Next Step in Canadian Education*. It discusses the various efforts made in Canada, the United States and in Scotland to broaden the basis of school administration.

In 1938 the government of Nova Scotia appointed a Commission consisting of Dr. H. F. Munro, Professor B. A. Fletcher, Mr. R. D. Crawford, Inspector H. M. MacDonald, Inspector L. A. d'Entremont and Andrew Fraser to investigate the problem and to make certain recommendations. The report of this Commission has just been published. Mr. H. P. Moffat of the Nova Scotia Department of Education has been good enough to summarize for PUBLIC AFFAIRS the findings at which the Commissioners arrived.

Copies of the full report may be secured at the Education Office, Halifax.

**ALTHOUGH** the report is a comparatively short document of thirty-five printed pages, it has been considered editorially to be the most important document on Education since the passing of the Free Schools Act in 1864. Whether this is true or not, of course, can be determined only when the recommendations have first been adopted and then put into operation. A pessimist might point out that a report advocating free school presented by Howe to the Legislature in 1838 had to wait over twenty-five years before it was given practical expression in the legislation of 1864. The tempo today is much faster, however, and if public opinion on the Report is favourable constructive action is likely to come soon.

### Defects of the Present System.

In the first section of the Report the defects of the present system of rural

school organization are briefly sketched. The most obvious weakness, and the one from which all others derive is the existence in a comparatively small Province of some 1,750 school units. Each of these small units, averaging only twelve square miles in area, is financially independent, and is expected to provide from its own resources a modern programme of education. While the towns, with a few exceptions, and some of the larger villages are able to offer an adequate general education, the ordinary rural school section is faced with an almost impossible financial and educational task. The Report shows that the financial burden is distributed inequitably between the Province and the sections, and among the sections themselves. Over 85% of the revenue required to support the public elementary and high schools is derived from the general property tax, in the form of local school rates (73%), and the municipal school fund (13%), while only 14% of the funds required for the ordinary operating expenses of schools come from the Province. Enormous differences among the sections, both in ability to support schools and in the effort made to do so, are shown in the Report. Assessed valuations per classroom vary from \$700 in a poor fishing hamlet to \$166,667 in a wealthy industrial village, and school tax rates vary from 36c. to \$20 on each \$100 of assessment. Even when allowances are made for variations in standards of assessment and for differences in the earning power of property, such differences indicate that "the distribution of the burden is grossly unfair and undemocratic."\*

More serious, however, is the fact that many rural sections are unable to support their schools at all, while even the best can provide only the most meagre educational services. Nearly one quarter of the rural school sections require additional

assistance from the municipal fund and the Provincial Treasury to enable them to carry on. Some are hopelessly in arrears even with the additional grants and owed their teachers in back salaries nearly \$80,000 at September 1, 1939. A number of schools are being conducted in buildings which have been, or should be condemned. Many others are equipped with little more than seats and a teacher's desk. More progressive communities, of course, have improved their schools and provided small libraries, scientific apparatus, workrooms, and other aids to good teaching, but the fact cannot be escaped that the well equipped rural school is the exception.

Also, the very nature of the small section restricts its offering to the bare essentials. It can employ only one teacher, who must give most of her time to the lower grades. In consequence, high school work is neglected, or if attempted is narrowly academic and on the whole poorly done. For high school work, and for the special subjects so important to modern education—handicrafts, manual training, domestic science, art and music—specially trained teachers are required. A town with twenty classrooms can employ these teachers and take advantage of grants provided by the Department of Education for supporting them. Twenty isolated rural sections could, in theory, combine to employ these teachers also, but in practice "lack of initiative, local jealousies, and mere inertia, keep the rural school sections apart and confine the curriculum to the prescribed text books of the academic studies. Similarly, the rural areas are unable to provide a modern programme of physical education, adequate libraries and equipment, medical and dental services, and vocational training in agriculture, all of which they urgently need and have every right to expect."\*

Having pointed out these defects, the Report examines remedies that have been tried elsewhere. Briefly, these are (1) a larger local unit of financial support and administration and (2) a greater share of the cost assumed by the province or state. The best example is in England and Wales, where the small section was

abandoned over thirty years ago. To-day the school affairs of forty one million people are administered by only three hundred and thirteen school boards—approximately one for each one hundred and twenty-five thousand of population. Equally important, the central government, while leaving administration fully in the hands of the local boards, provides grants-in-aid up to one half of the cost of operating the schools. The descriptive summary mentions, also, progress in the United States, where the county has been adopted as the financial unit in twenty states, and in the Provinces of Alberta, British Columbia and Ontario. Details of the various plans differ, but all agree in general with the two principles mentioned above. Reports on the larger unit also have been prepared, or are being prepared in Saskatchewan, New Brunswick, Quebec and Manitoba. The Report leaves no doubt that the general principles applied so successfully elsewhere can be adapted to conditions in Nova Scotia.

### The Provincial Unit.

The second of the three main sections of the Report begins with a statement of the general principles which underlie the Commission's recommendations. These are: (1) The financial burden of supporting a desirable minimum of education should be uniform throughout the Province. (2) All children whether in rural or urban districts should have access to the best educational facilities. (3) The local financial unit should be large enough to "provide a modern programme of education, competent administration and efficient control and accounting of school funds."<sup>1</sup> (4) Considerable powers, both of finance and administration, should be left to the present school sections, which are to be retained as the basic unit of attendance.

From these four principles, the Commission constructed two systems of administration, known briefly as the "provincial unit" and the "municipal unit". Of the two, the Commission unanimously recommended the provincial unit as the plan most likely to give effect to the

general principles. In making this decision, the Commission was influenced by the precarious financial condition of many municipalities, and by the glaring inequalities in the assessment of real and personal property in the various municipalities. It was felt that the two evils of excessive taxation on real and personal property and the inequitable system of assessment could only be cured by provincial action. The Province should, as is done in Great Britain, provide a considerable part of the funds for education from other sources than the property tax. But since the latter is to be retained in part the Report recommends that the Province insure equality "by a complete revision of the basis of assessment, under the direction of the Provincial Assessment Board."<sup>2</sup>

The Report then follows with a simple description of the provincial unit. In it the province and the municipalities jointly take over the responsibility of financing a minimum programme of education in the rural and village sections of the Province. The towns, unless they individually wish to be included in the system, would continue to operate their own schools and secure their revenue from the present sources. The "minimum programme" under the proposed plan is defined as "adequate common and high school education for each child under a professionally trained teacher in a school building provided with adequate supplies and equipment."<sup>3</sup> This programme is translated into financial terms by providing a salary scale for teachers and setting a minimum amount to be spent yearly on equipment and supplies. The scale recommended is: \$400 for a teacher in the first year of service; \$500 for an experienced teacher; and, \$700, \$900, and \$1100 for principals of two, three and four department schools. \$100 per year is allowed for equipment and supplies for each rural school and \$150 per classroom for each village school. The minimum salaries for teachers are exclusive of the provincial grant paid direct to them by the provincial treasury. Since this grant is graded according to class of license and years of service, it provides for the necessary increase in

salaries as teachers improve their qualifications and acquire more experience. The total cost of the minimum programme, exclusive of direct teachers' grants, is estimated at \$1,284,450 per year.

To administer this programme, it is recommended that municipal school boards be created with powers similar to those now held by school boards in towns. These municipal school boards would secure their funds from the following sources: (1) A uniform school tax on all property in the Province at a rate on each \$100 of assessment lower than the lowest average rate prevailing in any municipality before the plan went into operation. The rate would be approximately 1%. This tax, which replaces the present local school taxes, would be rated and collected by the municipalities, and placed at the disposal of the municipal boards. (2) The present municipal school fund of \$1.00 per head would be continued, and the balance remaining after the towns had received their share would be paid to the municipal school boards. (3) The remainder of the funds needed to support the minimum programme would be paid to the municipal school boards from a provincial equalization fund. Although the Report has not worked out the financing of the provincial unit in detail, the proportion coming from the three sources would be approximately: 40% from the uniform tax; 25% from the municipal fund; 35% from an equalization fund. Since the equalization fund is in addition to the direct grants paid to teachers from the provincial treasury, it may be seen that the share of the burden to be borne by the Province would be considerably increased, while the property tax would be reduced and made uniform throughout the Province.

The funds thus secured would be administered jointly by the municipal school boards and by the trustees of the local school sections. The latter would prepare the budgets based on the minimum scale described above, and submit them to the municipal boards for approval. Teachers' salaries would be paid directly by the municipal boards, and they would

also purchase centrally many of the materials requested by the sections. Some of the funds, however, would be returned to the trustees for the purchase of materials which could better be secured locally. Other administrative functions would be divided between the municipal boards and the trustees. The former would assume those duties for which their central position would be an advantage, such as the establishment and operation of circuits for special subjects, conveyance of pupils to school, and the operation of the rural high school to be described below. Trustees would continue to select the teacher, and care for school property. Under the plan recommended the school sections would be responsible for past and future capital expenditures, for any extensions to the minimum programme, and for the upkeep of school property. For these purposes, school taxes would be rated and collected locally by the trustees as at present.

It may be seen that the provincial unit (so-called) is really a system in which the Province, the municipality and the school section all take part. Two common misconceptions of the larger unit are thus cleared up. The school sections and the local school do not lose their identity, and no central bureaucracy is created. Each of the three authorities participating in school administration performs the task for which it is best fitted. The provincial Department of Education decides matters of general policy and provides grants from sources not available to the smaller units. Municipal boards relieve the trustees of the burden of collecting the general school tax and provide educational facilities which the isolated sections are unable to organize. The sections retain control of the matters of greatest interest to them—the acquisition and the care of school property and the appointment of teachers.

### The Municipal Unit.

As an alternative to the provincial unit, which to be successful would have to be fully instituted in all counties at once, the Report recommends the muni-

cipal unit. This plan differs from the one described in two essentials. It would be optional, and a municipal school tax would replace the general provincial tax of 1%. Otherwise, the *modus operandi* would be much the same. The minimum programme of education to be supported by the municipality would be the same, and the municipal school boards would be created to administer it. These boards would derive their funds from the same three sources—the present municipal school fund, a general school tax and the provincial equalization fund. School sections and trustees would be retained and given the same powers as under the provincial unit.

The most important change, of course, would be the method of determining the amount of the general school tax. Since the municipalities could enter the municipal unit one at a time, there would be no general revision of the assessment throughout the Province. The Commission, therefore, since it could not accept the present valuations as indices of the real ability of the municipalities to support education, could not recommend a levy at a fixed rate for all municipalities. Lacking a valid index of ability, they assumed as a working hypothesis that the total amounts at present being raised by the school sections in a municipality should be taken as one basis of the municipality's contribution. The other controlling factor recommended in the Report is that the amount of the general tax should be such "that if it were raised as a separate levy on the assessed valuation of the municipality as a whole, the rate would be less than the present school rate in a substantial majority of the sections"\*.

In many municipalities it would be possible to raise the full amount being raised by the sections in the past at a rate which would benefit a majority of the sections. This is possible for two reasons: (1) property in the municipality not included in the school sections would be included when the rate was set on the valuation of the municipality as a whole and (2) the yield from taxation in a few very wealthy sections which now have a low school rate would more than compen-

sate for the reduced yield in a great number of poor sections. If, however, it would not be possible to raise the full amount, and at the same time lower the rate in a majority of the sections, the municipal board would be given power to reduce the amount so that the rate might be lowered. This discretion was considered essential by the Commission in order that a majority of the sections in the municipality would benefit financially by the plan. One member of the Commission, however, felt that this discretionary power should not be given, and thought also that the method recommended by the majority did not insure a sufficient reduction of the tax burden on real estate. He therefore submitted a minority report recommending that the cost of the minimum programme be borne jointly by the Province and the municipality in a fixed proportion—40% from the Province and 60% from the municipality—in all cases. The majority were of the opinion that fixing the proportion in advance, regardless of the wealth of the municipality, would not be equitable.

The method of financing the municipal unit described above would allocate the cost of the minimum programme over the Province as a whole in approximately these proportions—58% from the municipal school tax, 25% from the present municipal school fund, and 17% from the provincial equalization fund. In addition, of course, the Province would continue to pay provincial grants to teachers. While this plan does not provide the same degree of equality and relief from taxation as does the provincial unit, it would nevertheless be a vast improvement over the present sectional system. The school taxes now levied by the sections at varying rates would be replaced by one municipal levy, at a rate uniform throughout the municipality. In practice, the municipal school tax, like the school tax in towns, would be included in the general municipal tax bill and thus the expenses of collection would be reduced by one half. With this saving, and with the amounts provided from the provincial equalization fund,

the municipalities would be able to employ better teachers and secure much needed equipment and supplies for the rural schools. The way would be paved for many educational improvements also—better transportation of pupils, training in the special subjects, and improved high school instruction. There is one advantage, too, in the municipal unit that even the provincial unit does not possess—the plan could be adopted at once by the municipalities which are ready for it without waiting for a province wide reorganization.

### Other Recommendations.

In the final sections are supplementary recommendations to round out the Report. The most important of these deals with high school education for the countryside. Although instruction would be improved by the employment of better teachers, it is not possible even for such teachers to do justice to high school work in an ungraded school. The Report recommends, therefore, that approximately seventy-five rural high schools be erected at central points throughout the Province. The buildings would be constructed by the Provincial Government, and operated by the municipal boards with the aid of special grants from the Province for conveyance, teachers' salaries and equipment. These schools, and the high school departments in the villages, would be staffed with university graduates trained in agriculture, who could give the whole school programme a "rural bias" and, where necessary, give specialized training in agriculture. A number of isolated rural sections, which could not be served by the village schools or the rural high schools, would continue to give high school work under the direction of carefully selected teachers.

Other recommendations deal with the composition of the municipal boards, and with the method whereby a municipality would indicate its intention to adopt the larger unit. An appointed Board, similar to the Boards of School Commissioners in towns was preferred by the Commission to one elected at large,—three members to be appointed

by the municipal council and three by the Province, with the municipal clerk as an ex officio member. The Inspector of Schools, paid by the Province, would be the Board's adviser in educational matters. A municipality would adopt a larger unit when the plan had been approved by a majority of the boards of trustees of the school sections and by the municipal council.

The Report ends with a final recom-

mendation that the provincial unit be adopted as soon as possible. If the municipal unit should be tried first, the Report suggests that when two-thirds of the municipalities have adopted it and proved its worth, legislation be enacted to provide for the creation of municipal school boards in the remaining municipalities, with the province as the financial unit for all.

## Occupational Assets of Unemployed Youth

By F. H. SEXTON

A SPECIAL vocational survey was carried out in the city of Halifax last summer under the provincial Department of Labour with the purpose of finding out whether or not an unemployed youth training project in trade apprenticeship was feasible. The data collected included facts relating to a large number of idle young people between the ages of 16 and 25 as well as information about the business and industrial activities of the city. The survey was wider in scope than the intensive investigation conducted previously by the Dalhousie Institute of Public Affairs, the results of which were published in *PUBLIC AFFAIRS*.\* The former was open to all idle young people within the age limits specified who voluntarily came to vocational interviewers for counsel and guidance and help toward occupational training. The latter confined itself to the youths who belonged to families receiving direct relief. The former secured personal data from 603 boys and 251 girls while the latter embraced 202 boys and 71 girls. A comparison between the two groups of young people leads to many interesting conclusions.

EDITOR'S NOTE: F. H. Sexton, LL.D., a member of the Council of the Institute of Public Affairs and of the Editorial Board of this journal, is President of the Nova Scotia Technical College.

\*"Youth on Relief" by L. Richter, *Public Affairs*, I, August, 1937.

The vocational survey was carried out to secure information about the youth who wished to enter such a program of training and to find out the kinds of occupations that would be offered by public spirited employers. A staff of nine competent interviewers was gathered together at the Nova Scotia Technical College and an announcement made to the public that the interviewers would be glad to receive applicants who wished advice and help toward occupational training. 850 young persons presented themselves for interviews. In each case a friendly relation was established and all pertinent personal data were recorded. The ambitions, interests, and plans of each person were sympathetically discussed and wise counsel was given on the best way they could be pursued. The interviews usually lasted from one to two hours. In general, the young persons were lamentably ignorant of the world's work, the requirements for success in an occupation they thought they would like to follow, and of their own particular assets for a position on a pay-roll. Some did not even know what definite duties their fathers had to perform each day for the wage that kept the family going. Most of them had only the faintest ideas of the best way to hunt for a job and of the way to present their personal assets in an inter-