

What is Wrong With Our Schools?

By ALEX S. MOWAT

SO much has been said recently about what is wrong with Nova Scotia's schools (some of it I have said myself) that it might be as well to begin this article by asking first what is right with our schools. For it is a mistake to suppose that everything is wrong with them. On the contrary the best Nova Scotian schools are very good indeed. Further, in many places there have been significant advances in the last ten years. New and modern school buildings have been erected. A new and better Course of Studies has been put into operation. The attendance of children at school has improved. Free school books have been granted to all children in the common school grades, and there is a growing realisation of the value of Handwork and Domestic Science in the school. The extent of public interest in education is shown in the growth of a flourishing Home and School movement. Evidence of all these merits you can see any day if you visit the proper school. But you will have to be rather careful what school you visit, or you will stumble upon the dark side of the picture. Some parts of it are very dark indeed.

All in all, I think it is fair to say that not more than one-half of Nova Scotia's school children enjoy an education at all adequate to this modern age, and that for at least one-seventh of them educational facilities are quite inadequate and in some cases practically non-existent.

For the schools of Nova Scotia suffer under two great handicaps. First, they fail to provide High School education of a sufficiently varied type; and second, they are operating under an outworn and outmoded system which permits the grossest inequalities of educational opportunity to exist and effectively prevents the reforms necessary for their removal.

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The first of those problems I treated of in an earlier article in PUBLIC AFFAIRS.¹ The second and more serious is the subject of this.

The plain fact is that in Nova Scotia we are trying to conduct our education under a system set up seventy-five years ago. Some parts of the machinery are still sound. With care and good guidance they have lasted well and still give good service. Other parts have sagged or gone stiff and rusty. Others have broken down altogether. Others never worked well from the beginning and limp increasingly with time. Even the best engineers in the world cannot make such machinery go satisfactorily. In fact, miracles are being performed, and the engineers are making the rusty old wheels and chains do things you would scarcely believe. But still the machinery creaks and groans and heaves and at times stalls completely. Altogether mere maintenance and repairs take up far too much of the administrators' time.

The first and chief thing that is wrong with our schools is that the main machine for controlling them is hopelessly antiquated. Like the model T Ford it still runs, proud of its antiquity and its endurance. But modern streamlined models leave it standing still. There is nothing that Nova Scotia needs more than new educational machinery.

Let us take the old machinery apart and have a look at it. In its essentials it is not elaborate nor difficult to understand, though the patches, repairs and additions of the years have made it excessively complicated in detail. There are three main kinds of parts. First—the Council of Public Instruction. Of these there is one, which acts as a sort of flywheel to keep the whole machine moving. Second—the District Boards

1. PUBLIC AFFAIRS, Vol. IV, No. 1, p. 28. "Problems of High School Education in Nova Scotia."

of School Commissioners. Of these there are thirty-two. They merely act as regulators for parts of the third type, rubbing off rough corners, taking out some parts and occasionally adding others. Third—the School Sections. Of these there were 1774 in 1940. Those are the most interesting as well as the most important of the parts. On them falls most of the stress and strain of the everyday working of the plant. About 1,500 of them are quite small and pretty much alike. It is not unusual for one of those to become very worn or to break in pieces altogether. The rest are somewhat larger and more knobbly and stand the strain better. A reduction in the number of working parts and an increase in their size is clearly what is most needed to ensure smooth working.

To drop the metaphor, the present educational system may briefly be explained as follows.

The whole of inhabited Nova Scotia is divided into upwards of 1,750 School Sections. (The numbers of active sections varies somewhat with circumstances from year to year but has not been less than 1,750 in the past ten years). They are more or less equal in area, though not in population. Their size was determined in the first place by the distance which little children could walk to school, and they are therefore each roughly 3 or 4 miles across. In each is a school (in the towns and cities frequently more than one). The idea of the founders of the system clearly was the laudable one of putting an education within reach of every child in the province. Unfortunately, the system of control adopted for those schools, though probably the best possible in 1864, is now the main hindrance to educational progress in the province. For each of those tiny sections is a unit independent of all the others, making out its own educational budget, electing its own School Trustees, levying, and collecting its own school rates, owning and repairing and equipping its own school, building a new school when necessary, and appointing and paying its own teacher or teachers.

The 32 District Boards of School Commissioners settle boundary disputes between sections, alter boundaries and create new sections if necessary. They also decide which sections are entitled to special assistance from the Municipal Fund.

The Council of Public Instruction consists of the members of the Executive Council of the Provincial Legislature. Through the Provincial Department of Education the Council exercises a general supervision over education in the province, pays grants to teachers and sections, inspects the schools, prescribes courses of study and textbooks, licenses teachers and trains them in the Normal College.

About sixty per cent of the total expenditure on public education is made by the Sections, each from its own resources. About ten per cent comes from the municipalities which collect a school tax with their other taxes and pay it over to the Sections. The remaining thirty per cent comes from the Provincial Treasury through the Council of Public Instruction. Of this over fifty per cent is paid as Provincial Aid or pensions directly to the teachers and only about fifteen per cent goes to help the sections.

The main weakness of this system lies in the enormous differences between the Sections, who are expected to shoulder the main burden of educational expenditure. Some are rich; some are extremely poor. Some contain a population large enough to provide adequate and varied courses for children throughout their school life; most have a population so small that they employ one teacher only for all the children old and young. Some are interested in their schools; with others the only thought is to keep down the school tax as much as possible. As a result the amount and quality of the education in the schools varies to an almost incredible extent. If your child happens to be born and brought up in the right place he will be housed in a modern school building, taught by competent teachers, using modern apparatus and methods, in classes of a reasonable size, and will probably receive a training

comparable to that which he might obtain anywhere in Canada. But if he happens to be born in the wrong place, he will be housed in a ramshackle building, ill-heated, ill-ventilated, and ill-lit, perhaps leaky in wet weather, with no apparatus save a blackboard and a few battered books. In the schoolroom with him will be 50, 60, perhaps even 100 scholars of all ages. His teacher may have had some training or she may not, but she is certainly not capable of instructing a group of children in all the various stages from Grade 1 to high school level. She may be regularly paid by the section; sometimes her salary is in arrears; and she almost certainly intends to leave the Section at the end of the session. Under such circumstances a teacher's interest in her work tends to flag and vanish, and children learn little and heartily dislike school. About one in six or seven of Nova Scotian children have their schooling under such circumstances. Such inequalities of opportunity should not be allowed to exist in a democratic country.

Another weakness of the present system is the inefficiency of the sectional administration in rural areas. The reports of the Inspectors of Schools bear eloquent witness to this. Evasion of school taxes is widespread. In some cases trustees have not paid their own rates, and cannot therefore very well ask others to pay. Fire insurance on school buildings is frequently inadequate or non-existent. No proper accounts are kept, tax-rolls are not posted; and money is wasted in piecemeal and haphazard buying of supplies. There is a quite unnecessary multiplicity of school officials who in the rural areas outnumber the teachers by three to one or four to one if the secretaries to trustees are counted. When we remember that the everyday administration of the schools, including the collection of taxes, devolves upon those officials who are unpaid and carry out their duties in their spare time the inefficiency of management is perhaps not to be wondered at.

These weaknesses of our educational system have long existed and have long

been well known. As long ago as 1928 the Superintendent of Education described the sectional system of financial support for education as "inefficient, wasteful, inequitable, and hopelessly out of date". But nothing effective has been done by way of remedy. True, there are grants to "remote" sections and grants to "assisted" sections but those together amount to only \$45,000 from all sources. A Provincial Equalisation Fund of *at least* ten times that amount is required. Certain grants made by the Province, such as those in aid of Domestic Science and Manual Training actually *increase* differences in educational opportunity since only the wealthier and more populous sections are able to take advantage of them.

Provincial Aid to teachers in its present form does not and cannot help matters. On the average it amounted only to \$155 per teacher in 1940 and it is neither designed nor intended to equalize salaries. Consolidation of schools is likewise no solution to the problem. For under present conditions consolidation can take place only with the consent of the sections involved; and no wealthy section is willingly going to unite with a poor section in order to equalize educational opportunity. On the contrary there have been instances where a section has split into two, one rich and one poor, thus making inequalities greater than before. Besides, poor sections generally border on other poor sections and rich on rich. Nor, it seems, can we look for improved financial standing in the sections. For although Inspectors have been urging better business methods on trustees and secretaries, and although the law for the collection of school taxes has recently been strengthened, yet in 1940 there was an *increase* in arrears of teachers' salaries of \$23,000.

It cannot be too strongly emphasized that piecemeal methods of attacking the problem have been unsuccessful in the past and will provide no solution in the future. The thing must be attacked at its root. Where that attack must be made is now well known. Every one of

the Annual Reports of the Superintendent of Education since 1926 has advocated the adoption of a larger unit of administration in education. The Provincial Government, realising the urgency of the matter, in 1938 appointed a Commission "to examine fully the various types of school administration, with a view to the adoption of a unit larger than the present sectional organisation prevailing throughout the province." That Commission reported in 1939. Their recommendations are definite and clear. Briefly, they recommended that the cities and towns continue as at present unless they wish to come into the larger unit; but that the rural and village sections throughout the whole province be regarded as a single unit for school finance. A uniform assessment of property and income would be made and a uniform school tax imposed, which would be supplemented by a provincial school equalisation fund. There would be a minimum salary scale paid to all teachers. The school sections would not be abolished but remain as an attendance unit with powers to supplement the minimum school program if they desired.

There is no doubt that the adoption of some such scheme would make the administration of education in the pro-

vince much more efficient and would abolish the present gross inequalities. It has won the approval of many provincial organisations, and the praise of many citizens. Those who still remain doubtful I would advise to read the Report of the Commission on the Larger School Unit and perhaps along with it the latest Report of the Superintendent of Education, both of which are obtainable from the King's Printer, Halifax. To those who still hesitate I would simply point out that if democracy means anything it means equality of opportunity for all children, and that under the present system our children don't have it. Long ago, in 1864, when Nova Scotia adopted a system of free schools, she adopted also the principle that rich and poor, high born and low born, those with children and those without, should pay their share according to their ability in the education of the new generation. This principle can only be carried into effect by the adoption of some such scheme as that outlined in the Report of the Commission on the Larger Unit.

We know the disease, we see its debilitating effects, we have the remedy to our hand. It remains, by legislation, to apply it.

Land Settlement in Nova Scotia

By EDITH C. BLAIR

THE need for rehabilitating thousands of soldiers at the end of the present conflict has prompted the many followers of the "back to the land" movement to advocate comprehensive land settlement programs. In times like ours when the big cities and industrial centres are bombed; food is scarce in many parts of the world and our belief in the blessings of city born civilisation shaken, life in the country and the peaceful occupation of the farmer seem to promise peace and

security. People are apt to overlook the realities and are deceived by a false romanticism which is not the proper basis for the hard tasks of the farmer. It may therefore be worthwhile to point out that on two similar occasions in the past, land settlement programs have been launched in Nova Scotia which have been rather unsuccessful and it may even be more important to examine the reasons which have been responsible for this lack of success.

Up to the first great war land settlement was treated in Canada as a problem of

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