

Register, July 26, 1911

EDUCATION BILL.

The reintroduction of the amending and consolidating Education Bill in the Assembly early in the present session affords a welcome proof of the interest of the Government in educational questions and its desire to place the measure on the statute book without delay. Since Mr. Coneybeer explained his proposals to the House in November last legislators and the public generally have had the opportunity to weigh them carefully, and to decide what ought to be done with them. Their minds on the matter would probably have been made up but for the official enquiry now being prosecuted relatively to higher education and the provision of means by which State school children may ultimately obtain University training. That investigation touches upon the conduct of primary education and the preparation of pupils for "higher" learning; and, if its scope is to be still more widely extended, as is proposed, it may throw the whole of the State system of education into the "melting-pot." Two or three years would conceivably be occupied in accumulating evidence dealing largely with personal questions and conflicting views regarding departmental management and rival methods of teaching. If a royal commission is thoroughly to overhaul our educational establishments with the view of preparing co-ordinated schemes of technical and higher instruction, and to correlate the various grades of schools, plausible reasons may be advanced for postponing the adoption of fresh legislation until the commission shall have issued its report. Yet no thoughtful person would dare to predict that the Minister would find it worth his while to hold his Bill in suspense, or that there is the least likelihood in the near future of any common agreement being reached by experts concerning the educational needs of the community.

In the educational field there is constant unrest. Nothing is taken for granted. Every theory, mode, and stage of preparation comes under review, and is searchingly criticised. The schools are necessarily costly, and the value received from them is often questioned. It is unsatisfactory that in South Australia the number of individual pupils (52,929) in attendance at the State schools last year was 400 fewer than in 1909, and that the daily average attendance (37,548) showed a decrease of 707. Complaints are sometimes made by employers and others that the instruction given does not appear to be efficient. The reply of teachers to this charge is usually that the curriculum is overcrowded, and that the period of school life of the children under their care is too brief. They claim, however, that the effect of the school work tells with most of the pupils to a much greater degree than formerly, and that failures are observable only in the cases of children who attend irregularly, or who are mentally dull or constitutionally incompetent. The object of the Education Bill is not to improve the quality of the teaching, but to provide teachers and pupils with fuller opportunities of imparting and receiving valuable knowledge and training, and incidentally to ensure to the taxpayers better

returns for their large and increasing investments in the most important of State undertakings. During the past 36 years the "compulsory" age has been 13 years, and the Bill proposes to make it 14 years. In New South Wales 14 years has been the law since 1882, and in Victoria it has been so since 1905. There is no ground for supposing that South Australians whose education is limited to that given by the State suffer any disadvantages compared with their eastern neighbours; but our boys and girls should greatly benefit by remaining at school another year, and being required to pass through the fifth class. By extending the schoolgoing age from 6 to 14, in place of from 7 to 13, the law will lessen the anxieties of teachers and enable them to accomplish vastly more useful work. It will also assist the children to take their proper place as citizens and industrialists.

The existing provision which permits of a weekly attendance of four days only is grossly abused. In the metropolitan area numbers of healthy children may be seen playing in the streets or open spaces during school hours. Although costly schools are open to them, and lessons are being given, they can with impunity waste one day weekly out of the five, and thus dislocate and delay the tasks of the teachers, besides hindering their own mental and moral training. The fault in such cases must be charged to negligent parents or guardians, but the duty of the State is clear. Unless reasonable excuse can be given for non-attendance, the children should be required to be present at all the lessons. Ample provision is apparently made in the Bill for the application of the compulsory principle mercifully, as well as justly. Sickness or poverty will be considered a sufficient misfortune for a parent to labour under without adding to his burdens by prosecuting him for the unavoidable absence of his child from school. In exceptional circumstances, if their health and educational interests were properly safeguarded, it should be possible for children to render temporary assistance in the home, in the garden, or on the farm. On the whole, however, the public will endorse the proposition that wealth can be produced in abundance in South Australia without child labour. The most contentious clauses in the Bill relate to the rights of private schools; but the Minister is justified in insisting on the principle that the discipline of those institutions and their standards of teaching, with the products of their work, shall be equal to those demanded of the State-supported schools. It would be a grave misfortune if private institutions became popular because of the facilities they afforded for allowing children to remain comparatively ignorant. Part VII. of the Bill introduces a notable departure in the direction of secondary and technical education. Pupils who have gained the fifth-class "primary" certificate will be offered the means of qualifying in various branches of knowledge, and of training the brain and the hands for service. Manual courses for boys will supply a branch of education which in the past has been neglected, and girls will appropriately be taught domestic economy. The Director of Education (Mr. A. Williams) has recorded that "it is of the utmost importance that the technical teaching

of the State should be put on sound lines, so that the maximum benefit can be secured for the money expended. I do not think," he adds, "that this result can be achieved unless the whole work is organized and controlled by a central authority, with full power of control." This conclusion accords with common-sense, but the Minister still shrinks from putting the advice into practice. Having proposed to assume the control of the country Schools of Mines, he ought, for the sake of giving completeness and harmony to his scheme, to include within it the School of Mines and Industries in Adelaide. The exception is obviously equally illogical and unaccountable.

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OUR EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM.

About one-eighth of the total population of the State is being instructed in the public and provisional schools. At the same time it is receiving impressions and passing the greater part of five days a week under influences that will produce permanent effects. As these operations take place at the most plastic period in the formation of character, and extend over a term of several years, nothing further is required to indicate their immense importance in relation to the life of the community. Reference was recently made in these columns to the generally encouraging character of the latest report of the Minister of Education, and the details it supplies amply sustain that favorable judgment. In a matter of this kind it is obvious that statistical records do not completely represent current conditions. They are furnished in sufficient measure, but, from its very nature, what is of the most vital importance eludes tabulation. One cannot schedule such things as aptitude for teaching, enthusiasm for a profession, consciousness of responsibility, interest in using opportunities, and a sympathetic spirit; yet it is on these that success depends far more than on material appliances and an up-to-date apparatus. The personnel of the system counts for infinitely more than the plant, essential though that may be, and possibly transforms what otherwise might degenerate into merely mechanical routine by the infusion of a living force. The only way to obtain a fairly correct estimate of the degree of efficiency attained, regarded in this aspect, and subjected to this test, is by means of impartial and expert observation. The supervision of the work ascertains its value, and its results are embodied in the inspectors' reports, which cover the entire area. These reports, as well as those of the Minister and the Director, are well worthy of careful study by anyone who would form a comprehensive opinion of the system as a whole. Through them it is possible to see, as it were, the machinery in

motion, its effectiveness, and its defects, the forces that sustain it as a going concern, and the satisfactory character or otherwise of its output. In addition to the data which form an indispensable basis for calculation, there is presented to us a kind of educational landscape, with its lights and shades.

In examining the mass of interesting material thus compiled for public information one of the first impressions produced is that of candor. There is distinct individuality in the inspectors' comments, which do not follow a stereotyped form, and vary materially in structure as well as style. No one is more likely to observe particulars in which there is room for improvement than those who cherish high ideals and have the opportunity of perceiving whereby they may be more fully impressed. Educational science is progressive, and there is no finality either in the principles accepted or in the