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A Plea for the Town System of Public Schools

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THESIS.

A Plea for the Town System of Public Schools.

Ruth Hortense James.

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A Plea for the Town System of Public Schools.

The wealth of a state is in proportion to the education which its children receive. Therefore it is for the highest interest of the units which make up a state, to see that the public education is the best that can be had. Horace Mann, a great educator, gives this definition of a public school, "A free, straight, solid pathway, by means of which every child can walk directly up from the ignorance of an infant to the primary duties of a man, and acquire an invincible will to discharge them." Every citizen should hold himself responsible for the public schools of his state and rest only when they have reached that condition.

In many different forms we meet with the fact that when a thing ceases to go the upward way, it pursues the downward until it no longer serves its purpose. Our forefathers established the district school system which answered well the demands of the past. Conditions were favorable for its growth and it grew. We are now living in a different age, one necessitating radical changes of policy, and nowhere is change more needed than in the educational system of country towns.

When the district system flourished, the country consisted

of prosperous farms upon which lived large families. Around the farm many interests were centered. Since then new outlooks have opened. The very thought of former times has changed. Many deserted or rundown farms are found, owing to the fact that, discontented with the advantages gained from a country life there has been a tendency on the part of the youthful population to migrate to the city. This has been brought about by a striving to satisfy the desires of rational human nature. Want of association with fellow beings, lack of events, and above all meagre educational advantages, have combined to cause rural depopulation. There is a craving for a class of interests not material, an artistic and aesthetic side of one's nature which demands cultivation.

The gratification of these tastes must be looked after if the country is to be kept inhabited. The method is through educational privileges equal to those furnished in the city. The district system, so well adapted to the past, has been outgrown and is no longer in harmony with the age because it does not furnish equal opportunities and enlightenment for all. The interests of the city and country are identical and no discrimination in educational privileges should be shown. There is no reason why a child living in the country is not entitled to as good an education as his city brother. In an age when results

are proportionate to co-operative and organized energy, it occurs that the rural districts have the highest school tax and the most meagre returns for expenditure. Suppose a genius were born in the country. His school advantages are such that he may never be found out, and the state may lose a name that would have made it famous in history. Many buried talents are due to the present school system.

The country school as it exists to-day has for its educational unit the district. Whatever free education is obtained comes from the district school. A school district is such an aggregation of farms and families as circumstances suggest. Many of these districts have low property valuation, consequently the tax is very high. Wealth is not always found where it is most needed for educational purposes. The units of taxation are too small. If the tax were assessed upon the entire town valuation no one would find it burdensome, and equal advantages would be received by all.

The schoolhouses are small, one-roomed structures, often not kept in repair or in the best state of cleanness, owing to the fact that the teacher must do the janitor work, or pay for it out of her low wages. In the schoolroom, we find one teacher with from ten to thirty pupils of all grades of advancement from the beginner of five to those who have had seven or eight

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years' schooling and have attained the age of fifteen or more years. There must be many recitations and consequently short ones. The school supplies are antiquated and insufficient. Under such circumstances one could not expect to find the best class of teachers: they are usually of limited education, training and experience. Grading has been tried in these district schools but with little success, for it brings into the same classes pupils of such diverse qualifications that they hinder instead of help one another. Most of the work carried on is taken directly from text-books and does not appeal to the average child. Many children, more especially the boys, go to school, not because they are interested, but because of compulsory attendance, required by the state, and drop out as soon as the law allows.

The districts are too small for economical administration on the part of the town. One superintendent with from ten to fifteen schools and a salary of from fifty to one hundred dollars, could not be expected to do much for each school. The many districts absorb the educational energy of the people, and we find them in a state of easy satisfaction with no high educational ideal.

Schoolmeetings are collections of school officers and individuals, representing themselves personally rather than the

people. Accustomed to the independence of individual effort, the people refuse to delegate authority, even to gain the higher end dependent upon organization. They are restive under supervision. Trustee-ship with the privilege of hiring teachers has had results. Often that office is sought for the money it will yield. The trustee system brings about favoritism; frequent changes of the trustee means change of teachers. The whole attitude of the district school conforms to the character of the place in which it happens to be situated.

There is no efficient motive in the present system of education. The country school as it exists does not meet the requirements that the future years are to make of a citizen. The time is at hand when every phase of life will demand a specialized training. We have arrived at two roads, each having its own idea of education: one of the past, the other of the future.

De Quincy in one of his essays, describes these two ideas of education. The first consists of -"The poor machinery of spelling-books and grammars." This is the kind for which we are expending time and money in the common district schools of to-day. The second, the broader, more modern idea of education, he describes as- "That mighty system of central forces hidden in the deep bosom of human life, which by passion, by strife, by temptation, by energies of resistance, works forever upon

children, resting not night or day any more than the mighty wheels of day and night themselves, whose moments like spokes, are forever glimmering as they revolve. A purpose as broad as the nature of the child and determined by it."

The tendency of the times is toward a universal diffusion of education, and a complete system from the first grade to the high school in the country as well as in the city. The Americanizing element of equality and fraternity is abroad in the land and is steadily applying itself to the education of the country. Instead of merely seeing a child with so much printed matter to learn, the modern school regards him as in the process of becoming a citizen. It looks beyond the present and inquires what demands the future will make upon him in his relation to modern life. It thinks of the child as having body, mind and soul. It sees the mind as a sum of undeveloped capacities and powers, and aims to direct the unfolding of it for the perfection of each, that the body may be a fit instrument for the mind and the mind for the soul. Its mission is to turn out a man fully summed in all his powers for the primary duties of life. There is a crying need of moral education to give strength of character to our future citizens and ensure right conduct.

Anyone taking pains to examine the country schools will see that their pupils are not receiving this kind of education,

though they furnish a glorious opportunity for it. Country children are thirsting for new ideas and are acutely alive to anything of interest connected with school work. The public education shapes the destiny of human souls in a great measure, therefore it should have some definite aim. At present the outcome of a child's education is left largely to chance.

The time has come when a centralizing of forces is necessary for economy of administration and efficiency in school work. The state has formed a plan for the centralization of these small schools by means of transportation. This system is called the town system and makes the town the educational unit. In practice it has been a success. It reduces expense in most cases, wipes out tardiness, largely eliminates avoidable absence, and provides as good schools for country children as can be had in any city.

The district school of one teacher and from six to thirty pupils of all ages and grades of advancement yields place to the union school, with its group of primary and grammar rooms, arranged in an ascending scale. Each class contains pupils of the same degree of advancement, and gives time for class recitations of from ten to twenty minutes each. The association in school work with pupils of his own capacity is highly beneficial to the child. It teaches him deeper and more inde-

pendent habits of thinking. If a child is reciting in a class of twenty or more pupils substantially equal in ability, he learns as much by comparing his own ideas and thoughts with those of his fellow classmates as he derives from his teacher. A recitation like this reveals many points of view, and the child learns to rely upon himself as well as upon text-books. The school committee make a contract with some resident of the town who provides a comfortable conveyance, with a responsible driver. The transportation is carefully looked after by the committee, who see that it is made safe to the health, manners and morals of the children. The carriage starts from the farther end of the route, drives along the main road, and on important branch roads, taking up the children practically at their own doors, delivers them in good season at the school-house, and at the close of the session returns them safely to their homes. The children avoid serious exposure in bad weather. They are in as good a schoolhouse with as good teaching, as good appointments and equipments as are found in the city. There is excellent grading, and all for less expense to the town than the maintenance of the poorest kind of school in the backwoods.

The system opens up great possibilities in useful and practical education. New subjects might be introduced into the

school work, such as music, drawing and nature study. Courses of study would be arranged. The school would thus strive to cultivate the powers of observation and reasoning, together with the power of expression, since the average child sadly needs a vocabulary. Another great addition would be a school garden, where the children could demonstrate their lessons in the grouping of species, also watch and study their plots from an agricultural point of view. Many children might be led to adopt farming as a livelihood with such a practical and interesting course.

In an act passed by the legislature of Rhode Island, May, 1898, the object of which was to secure a more uniform high standard in the public schools of the state, the first two sections provided for the consolidation of the small districts and schools and read as follows. "In case any town shall consolidate three or more ungraded schools, and instead thereof establish and maintain a graded school of two or more departments with an average number belonging of not less than twenty pupils for each department; the state shall pay to such town, one hundred dollars annually for each department of said school towards the support thereof." Two or more towns may also unite schools and receive the state support.

Another section reads that the school committee of any

town shall have authority to provide at their discretion, transportation of pupils to and from school. At present Rhode Island makes an annual appropriation of 120,000 dollars for the support of its public schools. The educators of the state have hoped that by offering to increase this amount to graded schools many towns would be led to adopt the town system. The system itself was the result of the earnest study and effort of many of the worlds best educators, men like Horace Mann, of Massachusetts, who gave his life and fortune to the study of public education.

Summing up the advantages to be derived from the adoption of the town system, we find that there would be better grading and classification of pupils; the pupils would be placed where they could do school work to the best advantage; the various subjects of study would be carefully selected and much more time would be given to recitations. This system affords an opportunity for thorough work in special branches; opens the door to more weeks of schooling and paves the way for a town highschool. It ensures the employment and retention of better teachers. The work of the supervisor is more effective, his plans and efforts can be concentrated upon something tangible. It adds the stimulating influence of large classes with the resulting enthusiasm and generous rivalry. It furnishes the

broader companionship and culture that comes from associating with large numbers, and frees country children from any distinguishing awkwardness of manner or address. It results in better attendance of pupils, as has been proved by experience in towns where the plan has been tried. It leads to better equipment in everything, reference books, charts, and other apparatus. All these results would naturally follow a concentration of money and effort.

Aside from the strictly educational, many public advantages would be outgrowths of this system-- good roads, local industries, school libraries and the like. Many families would move into a town to enjoy these advantages; and farms coming upon the market would have a more ready sale.

The principal objection to the adoption of this system is that it is something new. The people dislike to change from the old way of doing things. It takes a hard push to get out of the rut. The district school, with its recollections of childhood, holds a warm place in the hearts of many people. They object to the removal of an ancient landmark. But the district school will live on in sentiment and story as a beautiful recollection of bygone days around which are centered many other pleasant memories. The adoption of the town system would be at a painful cost of sentiment, but the progress of an age

cannot be checked by a sentiment.

Depreciation in the value of farms in the districts where the schools are closed is offered as an objection. But we have seen that an increase in the educational advantages would increase the value of farms. Then, too, some parents dislike to send their children so far from home. Other objections are insufficient and unfit clothing, unsuitable conveyance or driver the distance to be traveled in cold or stormy weather, lack of proper oversight during the noon hour, danger to health and morals.

All the above mentioned objections are readily disposed of by proper forethought. The proper clothing of the children would be the same with any system. It should be seen to that the conveyance and driver are carefully looked after by a constituted person. The driver must have authority to maintain discipline in the carriage. The oversight of the children during the noon hour is committed to the care of a responsible teacher. As for the harm done to the children, it is far better not to rob them of those stern qualities or of that fine fibre of independence that is going to mean so much to them in after life. Transportation has been successful wherever judiciously tried. The financial side of the question has caused much opposition. A sum of money is needed to put the plan into

operation. But the money is secondary to the great principal of equity and actual gain in education. It is as true of a town as it is of a family; the best way to save money is to educate the children.

A good illustration of the attitude of Rhode Island towns toward this question is taken from the records of the town meeting at Barrington, April, 1901. The matter of adopting the town system was brought before the citizens. Several spoke in favor of the project but it was lost at the polls. The transportation question and objections to additional expense, overbalanced what seemed to be a general impression that graded schools would be a benefit to the town. The ruling objection was the expense. Some regarded the proposition in the light of an experiment. One spoke of the good results in Massachusetts. Another was opposed to children under ten years of age attending a graded school. Mention was also made of the supposed dangers of transportation and of the number of years it took to develop the present system. At the polls the vote resulted twenty-five in favor and seventy-one against.

The fact that the best educators of the world have approved the plan should convince many. W. T. Harris, U. S. School Commissioner, says. "It has been frequently demonstrated and generally concluded, that it would be better both on economical

and pedagogical grounds to unite the many small and weak schools of a town into a few strong, well-equipped, well-conducted graded schools, located at convenient points."

No argument is so convincing as authentic evidence. The town system has been tried with good results in eight states of the Union. The most interesting and typical of these is Massachusetts, where the town system worked itself up from small and experimental beginnings to its present high standing. It was first tried in the town of Concord, Massachusetts, and the results were carefully observed and found to be good. Many other towns followed and in 1882 Massachusetts abolished her district school system. The record of approval in Massachusetts is seventy per cent in favor to thirty per cent opposed. Fifteen per cent of the towns report the cost as the same and the results better, eight per cent the cost more but results better, sixty per cent the cost less and results better. The reports say that the money saved by consolidation pays largely if not fully for transportation. In Massachusetts the plan was made a success only by the untiring labor and sacrifice of men devoted to the cause. The school boards never lost sight of their goal nor relaxed their efforts to reach it. They worked to enlighten the public and in that way create a sentiment in favor of a more elevated standard in public education. The movement was

never allowed to drop for a moment from the view of the people. Now a report from over two hundred towns shows that the effects of consolidation are good in every way.

At present twelve Rhode Island towns are conducting their schools under the town system. Ten of these have changed from the district to the town system. The results have proved economical to the towns and beneficial to the children: all are pleased. A report from one of these towns reads, "There has been an appreciable financial saving. The arrangements have been a positive convenience. The year shows an added incentive to do good work from competition with others. We report an all around progress as a result of the adoption of the town system."

After many years of earnest effort to better the public education, the state advises the adoption of the town system. It now lies with the citizens to make life in the country attractive to their enterprising sons and daughters in educational advantages. But there is a danger in depending too much on local and personal responsiveness. The cause needs live enthusiastic men, who are in sympathy with educational progress and in touch with the common people. There are obstacles now in the way which have been overcome and may be again.

Too many are satisfied to educate their children as their

grandparents were educated; when their aim should be to prepare them to meet the emergencies of future years. They content themselves with the fact that men have gone forth from these district schools to eminent success in the city. This is of course true, but many, many more have gone forth to an unequal struggle with their better educated city brothers, and met with a life of failure and defeat.

When the adoption of the town system has been brought about in every Rhode Island town, we shall find resulting therefrom handsome school buildings, united management by experts, and the best quality of teachers-- teachers who keep in touch with the intellectual life of the age through conventions, summer schools, teachers' meetings, books and periodicals. Then whatever is done for the world at large in the philosophy of education, in courses of study, in sanitation and school architecture, will be done for the country school. We shall find coming from these schools a better physically, mentally, and morally equipped class of citizens, prepared to fight the battles of life in such a manner as to reflect honor upon the town that educated them, thus bringing to that town a rich return for all its expenditure.