

Public Schools Make Progress Since 1900

More Children Attending Classes; Better Facilities; Longer Terms; Better Schools and More Money Expended

Editor's Note — The excerpts quoted from the State Superintendent's Report have been presented in order to show something of the situation with respect to public education at the beginning of this century, fifty years ago. The beginning of a good many aspects of our present day school system are seen back there under Mebane. The problems which he had were very great indeed. We have made advancement worthy of note; yet, as we all know, there are many other "battles" to be won before all the boys and girls of this State are provided with adequate opportunities for growth and for the fullest in democratic living.

Fifty years is not such a long period of time in the life of a State. Within this short span of years—from 1899-1900 to 1949-50—the public schools of the State, have made such tremendous progress that if one didn't remember or have the data, he would be inclined to disbelieve that they were really so inadequate, so inefficient, and so poorly operated on so little money.

The facts are available, however. The Biennial Report of the Superintendent of Public Instruction gives statistical data concerning the public schools fifty years ago (1899-1900). State Superintendent Charles H. Mebane not only pointed out some of the weaknesses of the program then in operation, but he also made recommendations for correcting many of the apparent deficiencies.

Speaking of the training of teachers he said: "We now have no uniformity of requirements. In some counties the standard of requirement is exceedingly low, and perhaps in a county nearby the standard is good. We want the standard good in all counties."

School Funds
School funds were not always accounted for properly, according to State Superintendent Mebane. He didn't like the item, "Paid for other purposes," for which thousands and thousands of dollars have been spent. He thought that these purposes should

be published in the counties. School funds were often mixed with other funds, and "used or borrowed for this purpose or that purpose." "This loose management of the school fund has gone on for twenty years," he said. In order to remedy this situation Mebane pled for a separate treasurer for the county board of education. As to county superintendents, the State Superintendent stated that "the public schools have been in the galling grasp of the court-house politicians for twenty years in some of the counties." He recommended that "we elect the county superintendent by the teachers and educators of the county." He also said that "no man should be eligible to the office of county superintendent unless he is a graduate from some college, or if not a graduate, he shall, at least, first be requested to take the examinations for a life certificate, and if not competent to pass this examination he shall not be eligible to this important office."

And the pay which a superintendent received! He must have thought it ridiculous, for he said: "What man in North Carolina who does about \$60,000 worth of business a year will want a superintendent of his business to whom he pays only \$128? This is what Wake County did last year after deducting the fees turned in for private examinations. What think ye, Gentlemen of the Legislature, of the metropolitan county of North Carolina paying its county superintendent \$128?"

"We want the best brain and the best talent to be had in this work of the county superintendent, and we must pay for it if we get it, and we may as well recognize this fact, and suit our foolishness about this public school work in its various departments."

Mebane thought also of the superintendent as a supervisor. "Men and women who fashion and mould the character of our future citizenship; men and women whose work, whether good or bad, will last when houses and bridges are crumbled into dust; men and women whose work will last throughout eternity itself; yet we are not only not willing for these laborers

to work without supervision, but in many counties our county boards of education actually refuse to send out the Supervisor (superintendent) to even take a peep at the work that is being done in the public schools."

Mebane also had something to say about township trustees and school committeemen. There are "too many officers, too many that have a 'little brief authority'," he said. He advocated three men in each township to have management and control of all the public schools, or abolish the township trustees and have the county board of education apportion the

funds per capita to the townships. He also stated that a committeeman or trustee should not be eligible to the office unless he could read and write; "and most important of all," he said, "he should be in favor of public education and public taxes for schools, if not, he will be an absolute failure as a school official."

Mebane favored the township as the unit in the county, because with this unit it was easier to vote a special tax for schools. The repeal by the Legislature of 1899 of the Acts of 1897 in regard to townships that had voted upon themselves a special tax was

called "one of the most serious mistakes."

School Term
Mebane was against the practice of split terms as was done in some places. "The best teacher in the whole State could accomplish very little in two months, and then go back after a lapse of six months and teach two months or six weeks more," he said. Oftentimes the second teacher would be a different teacher.

Textbooks
Mebane had a lot to say about textbooks. It seemed that many children did not have them. This was due to careless and indifferent parents in many cases and to poverty in others. "The books cost the children of this State too much money," he said. He thought the adoption procedure was

mainly the cause of this. He made a number of suggestions to remedy the situation, among which was the adoption by the State Board of Examiners for the whole State. This would enable the publisher to give a cheaper price. He cited practices in other states, and printed a series of extracts from letters from superintendents of other states as to textbook adoptions.

How Shall We Educate?
A good part of Mebane's 73-page portion of his Biennial Report dealing with recommendations is devoted to the question: How shall we educate? We must have more money before we can ever hope to educate the great mass of our people, was his answer. A second question: Where are we to get the money? took longer to (Continued on Page Twelve)

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