

THE NEED OF A CONSTRUCTIVE EDUCATIONAL POLICY FOR NORTH CAROLINA

Prof. Chas. L. Coon Says We Have a Patched-Up School System for North Carolina and One That Does Not Trust the People—County Boards of Education Responsible Only to Machine Politicians—The Textbook Commission a Bad Mistake—Politicians Interrupt the speaker.

The annual address of President Chas. L. Coon, of the North Carolina Teachers Assembly, was delivered before a large audience in the Auditorium in Raleigh Thursday night. Prof. Coon is superintendent of the graded schools in Wilson, and was connected with Superintendent Joyner's office in Raleigh a few years previous. Mr. Coon stated some facts in his Raleigh speech which did not please some of the politicians in the back of the hall, and they howled him down before he had quite finished his address.

His address follows: "No individual deserves to live after he loses the power of self-criticism. If we teachers cannot endure honest criticism, both from within and without our profession, then we need to be born again and that speedily."

"I am to talk on 'The Need of a Constructive Educational Policy for North Carolina,' and, with due apology to Aesop and George Adee, I direct your attention to my subject and point of view as follows:

"Once upon a time, before the days of the ready-made clothing stores and their cheap wares, there was a North Carolina schoolmaster who found himself in dire need of a new pair of trousers. This indigent pedagogue, thinking himself too poor to secure the cloth and to have the necessary trousers made by a tailor, accepted a small patch of cloth which a kind friend proffered him in his poverty, as a nucleus for the beginning of the much-needed garment. By and by, other friends moved by philanthropic feelings, began to contribute pieces of cloth of different dimensions and various colors. Soon enough cloth was in hand to make the trousers, and they were pieced together. But when the teacher wore his new trousers of many colors to school the next day the children could not restrain their merriment. After several days of fruitless effort to control his little school, the teacher was compelled to throw away the trousers, which had been so generously provided, and to restore to his former threadbare garment. And now the poor schoolmaster had to begin all over again to obtain the much-needed new pair of trousers!

School System a Patchwork.

"Here is the interpretation of this fable. The schoolmaster represents our well-meaning pedagogues and educational leaders. The friends who contributed the cloth for the trousers represent the Legislature and our school officials. And the patched-up trousers stand for the present school system, which the teachers and the Legislature have devised, with all its diverse and discordant elements. The school children stand for the people of the State. And what happened to the schoolmaster's piecemeal trousers is what the people will finally make happen to our school system, which has been patched together with so much expenditure of time, money and energy. Permit me now to finish the picture with some detailed local coloring matter.

"This is a time when the people must be trusted and given large responsibilities. It is time when the people's representatives are held to stricter account than ever before for their conduct of public affairs. But we have here in North Carolina patched-up a system of school administration which does not trust the people and which the people cannot hold responsible for efficiency. Our county boards of education are responsible primarily to the party machinery which happens to be in power and not primarily responsible to all the people these boards are supposed to serve. Generally they are elected by the Legislature on the recommendation of the county Democratic executive committee or the county Democratic party representatives in the law-making body; sometimes (only in Democratic counties) they are elected by the people after nomination in a party convention. These boards so selected appoint all the local school officials, except in the independent towns and districts, a vast army for numbers in each county. Everybody knows that it is simply impossible for the work of these numerous officials to be harmonious and efficient or that any one can be held responsible for the failures of their administration. Yet every few years since the Civil War we have seen futile attempts made to organize these school officers in the hope that the evils of this 'multitude of counsellors' may be mitigated at least. Of course we must all admire the sublime optimism of those who are now engaged in this task, even if at the same time we must smile at their simplicity and lack of judgment.

Political Game Played.

"The county boards have the power to select almost any one to the office of county superintendent, and there is no help. We have, as a result, preacher, lawyer, doctor, editor and various other kinds of school superintendents. What little restraint

there is placed upon the county boards as to their choice of county superintendents does not apply to the town boards. These boards are patches on the educational garment, of a hue and a color all their own. They are usually independent of any restraint. And these boards, both county and town, may select superintendents who have had some training for their responsible duties or not, just as they choose. What would you say to electing an editor, lawyer, preacher or teach superintendent of health to minister to the physical wants of convicts, jail-birds and the inmates of the county homes? Or what would be thought of selecting a teacher to act as judge of the Superior Court or superintendent of one of our cotton factories?

A Social Tragedy.

"It is a social tragedy that we often permit the selection of men to supervise the work of teaching who cannot possibly do the teaching they supervise, poor as that teaching so often is. They cannot even lead their untrained teachers, however good their intentions may be. This condition reminds me of the Northampton county applicant for a teacher's certificate who made a glorious failure in spelling. But nothing daunted by the failure the would-be pedagogue said to the superintendent who was conducting the examination: 'My dear sir, you must remember that the children will not know whether I can spell or not, because, you see, I am going to hold the book, not the children!'

"And we have 200 different standards for entrance upon teaching—100 county and 100 town superintendents license teachers. But every one of these men has different standards and deals which guide him in the licensing of teachers. This is simply another way of saying that we really have no mental or professional standards for entrance upon teaching, which can be stated in plain terms which all may understand. We know that if one superintendent will not license me I can easily find one who will. At best, I am only a teacher in spots. I may be a teacher saint in Murphy today, but accused in Manteo tomorrow. I may be thought worthy of a monument in Durham, but in Asheville I may not be fit to teach at all. If I am so bereft of knowledge and pedagogy that no superintendent will license me, then I can teach a private school. And there is no one to hinder or make me afraid. Stop a moment and think. Teaching children may be a private business in this State, under no legal restrictions. But doctoring pigs and cows and horses is not!

"I am not intending to say that definite and uniform standards for entrance upon teaching will solve all our educational ills; but everybody knows that our utter lack of any tangible standards for entrance upon teaching results in filling up our profession with untrained teachers, without skill, who come into competition with those who are skilled, with the result that the skilled must teach for the wages of the unskilled majority. I use the term wages advisedly, because North Carolina teachers—most of them—are simply hired persons who do not even have a word to say about what their salaries shall be, this having been conventionally attended to by the county boards of education and other school officials.

"And then we frequently require impossible tasks of the teachers we do license. Only the other day the daily papers carried the news item that three teachers in one of our leading cities had more than 250 children to teach. It is well known that we have a ruling of the State Department of Education that there must be an enrollment of 65 children before two teachers can be employed, if State aid is given for a four months' school. So it happens that in more than half the counties of this State one teacher must attempt to teach as many as 65 children in seven grades, if it is demanded of her. And everybody who cares to know will find many teachers everywhere who have seven grades to teach, and who must, in addition, often try to teach some high school subjects, imposed on them by the local school officials.

"And now again let me emphasize the fact that we have no efficient method of making new teachers in this good State and that those we do make are often surrounded by conditions which render real teaching a sheer impossibility. Under no circumstances ought any teacher be required to teach more than 35 children in three or four children in dren in three or four different grades. To require more work of one human being is little less than tyranny on the one hand and a crime against childhood on the other. We can no longer plead poverty to excuse such conditions. And shall there forever be no help for teachers and for children, no way out of the wilderness?

"Some of us are put to sleep by the siren song of higher school taxes as the only remedy. But the higher


taxes are slow to arrive. The average salary of the North Carolina teacher ten years ago was worth as much as the average salary today. The public has been levying higher taxes these ten years. And the teachers who actually come in contact with the children are still economic, political and professional dependents, with small individuality and less independence, and who must work under conditions which cannot inspire them or those they teach. Instead of dealing with these questions in a statesmanlike way the General Assembly of 1911 actually raised the maximum salary of second-grade teachers to a higher figure than the average salary of all teachers in 1910. And then we are told about our great educational progress when we complain of low salaries for good first-grade teachers!

"Who does not know that such conditions are a constant invitation to the best teachers to leave our ranks? And when they do leave we express a few regrets and gently fold our hands and again go to sleep in Zion, until the next professional luminary leaves the ranks, or the Attorney General announces that no woman under our laws can be a superintendent of schools, vote in a school election even, or hold a school office

of any kind, or have any part in the selection of school books. The public is perfectly willing for women teachers to attempt to train its future citizens, only these women teachers must not exercise the civic duties they are supposed to instill in others. It does seem to me we could convince the public of the fact that our school laws are not made in the public interest as long as any sorry man teacher, for instance, can serve as county or city superintendent, while the best woman teacher in the State is ineligible!

"But no matter how perfect might be our machinery for licensing teachers and for the efficient administration of their work, we must have some consistent, harmonious plan for training teachers. Here again the State has accepted some patches which well-meaning friends have proposed. The Normal College has contributed its patch, so has the University and the other State schools. And some of the denominational colleges are generously offering their patches. But all the patches are of different colors. In the confusion Asheville and other towns are proposing to add still more patches. Without in the least discounting the great work all these schools are doing, possibly you will

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not excise me for saying that the farmer; they are making it not going to St. that it is going to be, and already is, multi-colored, and that some of the children whose eyes are a bit keener and who came earlier than the others are already beginning to laugh at the teacher's variegated trousers, as he saunters down the road to the schoolhouse. (To be concluded next week.)

This paper is thoroughly satisfied with the present State Republican organization, thank you.—Lincoln Times.

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