

Excerpts from Commissioners' Report of Recommendations for Iowa School Laws, 1856

'Report of the Commissioners of Revision of the School Laws.

The undersigned, two of the commissioners appointed to revise the school laws of Iowa, under the act of the General Assembly passed July 14th, 1856, beg leave to report,

That they deeply regret the inability of the other commissioner, Mr. Bissell, to render his services in aid of their important enterprise. They were relying upon him to furnish them with that local knowledge so essential to all just and wise legislation. As his absence has entirely deprived them of this benefit, the General Assembly must perceive that the want of it must render their labors, to some extent, imperfect.

In undertaking the task assigned them in pursuance of this act, they have been fully aware, both of the difficulties in the way of its successful accomplishment, and of the vastly important results that await its proper performance. They found the previous legislation of this State upon this great subject, in the main, judicious in its provisions, but fragmentary in its character, lacking in general aims, and entirely wanting in unity or completeness.

In consulting the experience of other States upon this subject, they found a multitude of provisions; many of them analagous (sic) in character; some of them peculiar, based upon states and conditions of things not elsewhere existing; and all of them the gradual growths of time and necessity; the creation of exigencies that might themselves have ceased; and developed under influences that may have been temporary in their exercise...

p.192

Here, for the first time, a great State, situated in the centre of a mighty Union, possessing exhaustless resources of agricultural and mineral wealth, binding together its various parts by a net-work of iron, demands a system of public instruction adequate to the full development of its great physical resources, and of the intellect and moral power of its people. Such a system can only result from organization so perfectly constituted as never to conflict with each other; so harmonious in action as ever to furnish mutual aids; and so entire and complete as that one spirit shall pervade the whole. For the perfecting of such a system, your commissioners have found no adequate guides, in the experience of other States. They have, therefore, been compelled in many instances to rely upon their own sense of what provisions would prove sound and beneficial, when submitted to the touch-stone of practice.

The results of their labors are embodied in the act, or acts, herewith presented. They desire here simply to state a few of the principles upon which they have proceeded, and of the reasons by which they have been guided and governed.

These principles have been four in number.

1. That every youth in Iowa is entitled to receive an education in the elements of knowledge; that every one desiring it is entitled to have facilities afforded for a further progress; and that those originally endowed with large capacities should be stimulated to improve them by the cheering prospect of having their education furnished as a reward of their merit, scholarship, and good behavior, provided the State might thereafter secure to itself the benefit of their services.
2. That education, to be successful, must become a distinct and separate pursuit and business, having its own laws and principles; its own means and agencies; its own pervading spirit. That the human mind, although a living, spiritual organization, possessing inherent active tendencies, requires, nevertheless, to be tutored and trained in accordance with method and system, to produce the full and complete development of all its powers and capacities.
3. That as property, material wealth, owes its existence to mind, it ought, in return, to furnish adequate means by which the intellect and moral power of the State can be brought out and developed in all their varieties of application.
4. that to complete a perfect system of education, three elements are necessary. These are the organizing, the financial and the educational. The first two mentioned are only important as they affect the last, and the first is wholly expended in the advancement of the other two.

In regard to the financial department, the commissioners have been desirous of making a liberal provision for adequate common school instruction; and also to supply the growing wants for high Academic or Polytechnic schools to meet the demands of the future. They have developed upon the taxable property of the district the duty of furnishing school houses; of properly equipping them; of finding them in fuel; and of founding and sustaining district libraries; and of providing necessary apparatus. They have created a motive in the inhabitants of the district to do this, by subjecting their property to a county tax, and rendering their participation in it conditioned upon their having a school kept, and the proper returned made.

They have devolved upon the taxable property of the county the duty of raising for common school purposes, the same amount as that portion of the public school money which it receives by apportionment of the county superintendent. In doing this, they have only adopted the same principle as that which for almost forty years was acted upon by the State of New York, and under which the school system of that State has mainly grown up to its present state of prosperity. It was only abandoned in that State, when a more onerous system of taxation for

school purposes was required and substituted for it; while, in the State of Iowa, if a rigid economy is exercised, and the unsold lands judiciously managed in, regard to their sales, it may well be doubted whether such onerous system will ever be rendered necessary.

Your commissioners cannot regard any system of public instruction as complete, without some liberal provisions for institutions of learning higher than the primary school, where the simplest elements of knowledge only are taught. They have accordingly made a provision for a high, Academic, or Polytechnic School, as soon as the population of a county reaches the number of 20,000. This they have made a part of the common school system, being well satisfied that under that system, these higher institutions will meet with better encouragement, acquire greater strength and vigor, and dispense more certain benefit to the community, than under any other. A population of 20,000 would scarcely feel the pressure of the annual \$3,000 tax for six years, and of the \$1,000 tax annually thereafter, to found and sustain a high Academic or Polytechnic school, while the value of the educated mind, which would be annually reared into a higher style of life and action would transcend all powers of estimate, either as regards itself, or the pecuniary benefit it might confer upon the public...

p. 196

... You commissioners could not deem the educational system of any state complete without a liberal provision for Teachers Institutes. This feature gives to the system of Massachusetts and New York a decided superiority over those of other States, and from its highly beneficial effects as there displayed, any, necessity of its adoption. The provisions they have made for that purpose does not, however, contemplate their immediate organization. It is prospective, and only become operative when the wants, demands and necessities of education shall require it. The movement must first proceed from the teachers. They must bear their own expenses. Those incidentally incurred, for room lights, fuel &c., as also those for instruction, are to be borne by the States. The Legislature can, if they prefer, take the appropriation from the income of the common school funds, but the commissioners have deemed it a proper case for the State to furnish it from its own resources.

In the State of Massachusetts the places where these institutions are held have felt a sufficient interest in them to induce them to furnish gratuitously, board and accommodations to the teachers...

p. 197

... The entire system of public instruction which your commissioners here present, seeks the attainment of three leading objects.

The first is to render as universal, and as perfect as possible, the system of elementary or common school instruction.

The second, is to offer facilities in higher institutions for a much more advanced style of culture.

The third, to animate every youthful mind, and encourage to effort by holding out this higher style of culture as a reward for good conduct, strict application, and scholar-like attainments.

To secure the first of these objects, they have endeavored so to arrange the financial element as to enable the several districts, by amply compensating for services, to command those of the best qualified teachers. No common school system can ever succeed, where the compensation is so meagre as to encourage only those of the most ordinary talents and attainments to embark in it. Although the teacher should have higher aims and objects than mere pecuniary recompense, yet it must be obvious that the grade of compensation is not only important as furnishing a means of living, but also as indicating the high or low estimate which a community places upon the character of the service. Although the commissioners have endeavored to secure competency by examination and certificate, yet they have more confidence in being able to obtain it through an appreciating community, evidenced by a remuneration corresponding with the real importance of the services rendered...

p. 198

... Your Commissioners have also been largely influenced by the convictions derived from their own experience. That the cause of education is best promoted by affording those interested in it frequent opportunities of meeting together; of comparing their observed facts, and discussing the principles involved in them, as well as all other matters relating to the general subject. From this careful collection of facts, and free interchange of thoughts, in the reasonings to which they give rise, have often been evolved new plans, methods, and arrangements, which have been greatly promotive of educational interests. With this view your Commissioners have rendered it the duty of the several superintendents, and the presidents of district boards of directors, in their respective counties, to meet once in each year in council, providing also that the Superintendent of Public Instruction shall be present at as many of these meetings as possible. They have also required a similar meeting to be had each year between the Superintendent of Public Instruction and the several county superintendents, and also between the member of the State Board of Education. These provisions are, most of them, new, and the Commissioners anticipate good from their adoption...

p. 200

Your Commissioners now feel that their task is ended. In the spirit of their recommendation to enlist in this great cause the unpaid services of others, they beg to present this result of their labors free of all charge, except for necessary expenses. It only remains for them to await, with no small solicitude, that legislative action upon which, in their judgement, hang such important consequences for the future.

HORACE MANN,
AMOS DEAN,
Commissioners.