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THE CRUCIAL TEST

OF THE

PUBLIC SCHOOL SYSTEM.

By ANDREW S. DRAPER, LL. D.,
PRESIDENT OF THE UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS.

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THE CRUCIAL TEST OF THE PUBLIC SCHOOL SYSTEM.

The public school system is nearer the breaking point in the large cities than it has ever been before anywhere in the country or at any time in its history. The question is up whether the schools shall cease to be the schools of all the people of the great cities, and a negative decision upon that question would open the dyke which is the security of the public educational system of the country.

Is my statement unwarrantably strong? Let us discuss that question from the point of view of the citizen. There is a public school within reach of every home in your city. All residents, with or without children, have to support it. It is wholly managed by public authority. Education is compulsory. Having children, you must send them to this school regardless of its defects, or pay twice for the privilege of sending them to a private one which you think competent to teach them, if such an one can be found. This school is to be tested by trial. Your children commence attendance. In a little time you find that attendance cannot be regular and long-continued without the impairment of health. Investigation shows that there is reason enough for this. There is not enough breathing space and sunlight. There is too close contact with other children who are unclean. The hygienic conditions are bad. It is a struggle between a little life and unhealthful surroundings. You are a fool, or worse, if you do not bear a hand in that struggle and take care of the most

precious possession the Almighty has permitted to come into your keeping.

Or, you may find that the teacher is unworthy of companionship with a well-bred child and incapable of teaching him. The child may know many things which it is very important to know better than the teacher knows them. The child may shrink from association with the teacher for reasons which you can readily see; or, the teacher may be a good enough person, and ordinarily is, and yet may not know how to teach. You have learned something of what teaching is. You know that before a child can be taught he must come into agreeable and self-respecting relations with the teacher, and you see that this is impossible. You know, also, that before the school can be of any permanent advantage to the child, there must be originality, elasticity, and freedom on the part of the teacher, and you see that these are either not present, or not presented.

The situation preys upon your mind. Your child is involved. Its physical and mental health are at stake. You seek redress. Going to the teacher, you see that she is not disposed, or is not allowed, to hold much converse with you. She refers you to the principal. He means rightly, but does not view things through your end of the telescope. He resents your imputations or is powerless to give you relief. You might as well go down to the sea and talk to the waves. You go to the superintendent. At times he can help you, and if he can he will; but again, he would have to walk right into the jaws of official death to redress your wrongs. He has met many another on a similar errand. He sympathizes with you. He will treat you with civility, with patience, and with diplomacy. You may rely upon it that he will refrain from telling you all he knows. Your troubles grow and your exasperation waxes yet

stronger. You go to the members of the board of education, only to find that they dispute your allegations, shuffle out of the responsibility, are unable or unwilling to afford relief.

By this time you have realized that there are some serious difficulties encompassing the public school system, and that the officers of the schools are farther from the citizens' reach than you had supposed. It is much more of a matter than you had imagined to secure public instruction for your child under conditions which will promote his physical, mental, and moral health. You may be able to pay twice for his schooling, but you are not able to submit serenely to an imposition inflicted in the name of all that is good by a government which you have always supposed you had a part in directing. This will lead you to think a little more deeply. You must have some rights in this matter. Not only taxation and representation go together; taxation and rights go together. And what is the right of the citizen in the public schools? It certainly is not the mere privilege of paying for their support, or of voting for persons who select other persons who appoint still other persons to manage the business and teach the schools. The sum of the citizen's right in the schools is to have the business managed prudently and wisely, and the children taught sensibly and scientifically. And when this right is violated and there are no adequate and ready means of redress, the system is in danger of breaking, and it ought to break.

The officers and teachers of the schools will say and think that such troubles are not common, but citizens of intelligence who give these matters attention, and parents who see the results of the schools in the lives of their children, will say that they are common. The point of vision necessarily has much to do with the outlook. It would be better if the

points of vision could be exchanged now and then. The troubles which I have indicated are not rare in large cities. They are so common that they have already exerted a powerful influence to drive the well-to-do people out of relations with the common schools. And by the well-to-do I do not mean the independently rich, but the great, self-respecting, comfortable class, who earn their living and pay their debts, who have made homes which are both dependent and independent, and who give substance and balance to the social and governmental organization. If the time comes when the common schools are sustained only or mainly to keep the foreigners and the slums from destroying us, then the character of the schools and the chief glory of the American plan of government and of education will be gone; for that plan contemplates the intellectual and moral advancement of the whole mass as much as individual and physical security. If we permit the schools to become the schools of the poor alone, we permit what we have struggled heroically to prevent since the beginning of the government,—what in each generation we have succeeded in preventing through radical changes in our plans and theories. I believe we shall succeed again, but I likewise believe that our great system of public free schools is being put to its crucial test in the great cities of the land.

Now, what is causing this trouble? You will anticipate me, but in a few sentences I will try to state the causes:—

1. The conditions of life become more diversified and more intense in the great cities, and it is therefore more difficult to hold the children in common association.

2. The demands upon a teaching force, by reason of the large schools, the widely different circumstances of the children, the many branches taught,

and the better knowledge of many parents as to what constitutes good teaching, are much greater than in smaller places; while the difficulties in the way of securing a teaching force of reasonable social standing and adequate teaching power are also unfortunately greater.

3. The multiplication of numbers in the teaching force, and particularly the extent to which inexperienced and unprepared persons are received into it, and the practical impossibility of getting rid of inefficient teachers, make it necessary to impose severe limitations upon the freedom of the whole force in order to prevent the useless ones from doing harm. This stifles individuality, which is the essence of good teaching.

4. The amount of money paid to support the schools of a great city sharpens the cupidity of the non-productive sponges and cormorants of society. There is greater opportunity and keener appetite for plunder. The spirit of misrule common in the municipal government in our large cities springs from social and political conditions. The people are more generous and alert about the management of the schools than about the business affairs of their city housekeeping, but the same general conditions affect the schools.

5. The plan of organization and the system of administration have become altogether inadequate to affairs of so great magnitude. The business has outgrown the organization for managing it. In primitive times you can manage affairs without much regard to fundamental principles, because every one has knowledge of what is going on, and mistakes can be quickly seen and corrected, but it is not so in great enterprises. In our great city school systems there is little distinction between legislative and executive functions, no centralization of responsibility and

accountability. Novices are toying with high powers of government and managing vast properties, before which the most experienced and conservative stand in awe. There is but little appreciation of the difficulties of developing a competent, right-spirited, self-respecting teaching force, and the temple is being profaned by money changers. The organization is so constituted that it resists the contributing citizen looking for live teaching for his children, more than the poor unfortunate who is in quest of a place, or the pillager who is looking for plunder.

Now, I must exploit these troubles in the two most important directions before discussing the remedies. Your city is expending millions of dollars each year upon the schools. The wise and safe expenditure of this money, so that it shall secure the ends which the people who give it have the right to demand, places a tremendous responsibility somewhere. The business operations incident thereto are involved and innumerable. Integrity, expertness, experience, and alertness are all imperative, or the money is filched, and the ends for which it was raised are defeated. The city owns millions upon millions of real estate devoted to school purposes. It is putting in millions more each year. Some of us know how difficult it is to care for a small interest in real estate where our own self-interest is sufficient to make us attend to it. How infinitely more involved is the problem of maintaining in good physical and healthful condition hundreds of buildings subject to the hard usage which falls upon schoolhouses! Then, there is the matter of selecting new sites and erecting new buildings. The first calls for ripe judgment as to the probable directions of the city's growth; the last calls for all the good qualities in the heavens above, as well as upon the earth beneath, to prevent fraud and secure

to the people what belongs to them. The whole business is encompassed by self-seekers.

You might as well turn the banks of the city over to the ward primaries and expect to keep them out of the hands of receivers, or let political committees name the directors of the railroads and expect trains to run upon time and dividends to be paid on quarter days, as to put all of this vast business of the schools into inexperienced hands, chosen in a similar way, and expect it to be conservatively and safely managed, so that you will not be robbed and your schools will be properly housed.

If it is difficult to manage the business of the schools, it is infinitely more so to secure life-giving instruction. It is strange that we need to remind ourselves now and then that the end for which the schools exist is not to gratify contractors or provide places, but to supply instruction. If anything has stood in the way of the fullest development of the schools, it has been apparent readiness to accept everything that passed under the name of instruction; and the most gratifying sign in the educational heavens is the closer discrimination with which the people are beginning to look upon what is done in the schools. And when the people begin to determine the differing values of instruction they come to the great question of the organization and supervision of the teaching force.

There are more persons who want to teach school than there are schools to be taught. All the world sympathizes with the young persons who are trying to be respectable and are looking for honorable employment. All of the well-disposed will help such persons to places when they can, without much reference to adaptation to position. They think, and not strangely, that the other people must look out for

that. This is markedly so if the young person is a young woman.

We must take one course or the other in regard to the teaching service of the public schools. We may stand indifferent and let church politicians, club politicians, school politicians, or politicians who are not described by a qualifying adjective, neighbors, friends, or relatives, push people with no fibre and little preparation into teacher's positions. We may pay little heed to culture and social standing; leave the force with little intellectual nourishment and no inspiration; promise a life-tenure to all who get in, regardless of qualification or spirit; exert little control and leave the members of the body to combine for selfish ends and defy the best sentiment of the people whose most precious interests they are ostensibly chosen to promote. We all know what the result will be. With the passing years there will be no growth in scholarship, or general culture, or force of character, or disciplinary power, or teaching ability. Without such growth there can be, of course, no public school progress. Iron-clad rules will be imposed to keep up a show of authority and prevent marked excesses, but the schools will have little vitality and less respect, the teaching will be woodeny, and matters may be expected to grow worse and worse, with the certainty of not being disappointed.

Or, we may guard admissions, train beginners, lead and inspire the common thought, pay according to the expertness of service, promote upon the basis of merit, expel the undeserving, and envelop the whole vast enterprise in a professional atmosphere, and energize it with pedagogical life. Then we may relax rules, encourage originality without danger, and expect that the spirit of the force will improve; that the teachers will stand higher in the sentiment of the city; that there will be kindness in the management and

life in the instruction; that the children will be fascinated, and that their minds and souls will thrill with new life, which will be felt in the homes and give substantial and enduring support to the better life of the city.

There is no problem of larger proportions than that of supervising and leading a teaching force numbering thousands of persons. The object is not to secure some good teaching; that could hardly be avoided; it is to prevent all bad teaching. This depends upon the individuality of each teacher and the harmony and enthusiasm of the whole body. The superintendent's office must know the qualities of every teacher in the system. High school diplomas, college diplomas, normal diplomas, give but inadequate assurance of good teaching. Adaptation is all-important; the spirit is vital. The superintendent's office must not only inspect, it must lead. It must be considerate and sympathetic, helpful and inspiring. It must have authority and it must act justly. Appointments, and promotions, and dismissals must be made with a clear head, a kind heart, and a strong hand, without fear or favor, but with a determination to prevent all bad teaching and lift the whole force to the highest plane possible. It is truly surprising how the common sentiment of a teaching force fixes the status of each of its own members, and how surely that sentiment knows whether the acts of officials spring from merit or from influence. In one case the force will be without energy, self-confidence, steadiness, or public respect. In the other case it will be characterized by fraternal respect and mutual regard, and it will show power and versatility, which will uplift the life and shape the character of the city.

Now, how is all this to be brought about? Well, I think I know enough about it to be confident in the opinion that it cannot be effected without a radical

change in plan and organization. The whole plan must be rearranged so that the citizen who finds a child in an unwholesome schoolroom, or under a clumsy or dyspeptic teacher, can go down town and find the man who is responsible for it, and who can cure the trouble in a day. It must be so readjusted that officials shall be required to do things which they may be supposed to be capable of doing, and kept from meddling with matters about which they know little and cannot learn much for years. The system must be so organized that officials of whom great things are expected will have opportunity and encouragement to do good work, and will be able to see the results of capable and conscientious work and get something of the reward therefor in the esteem of the people about them.

There is no good reason why the cities of New York, or Philadelphia, or Chicago should not save money in school expenses and at the same time see the physical condition of the property improve, the financial statement look healthier, and the teaching advanced in quality and tone, if they would make a school organization in accord with the principles which the world's experiences have shown to be imperative to the conduct of all good enterprises and the enforcement of the rights of the people who are interested in those enterprises.

Let me indicate the specific steps which I think should be taken. First, the school board should be a legislative body only and have no executive functions. It should not be so large in numbers as to become a public debating school. It should be representative of the whole city, and by no committee assignments, or other official action, should members become interested in, or representative of, one section more than another. It should legislate upon the policy and general development of the school system, and it

should control, in a general way, the expenditures, so far as to make provision for the buildings and their care, and for a needed number of teachers and their suitable compensation. All of its acts should be expressed by resolutions in its published records. But it should have nothing to do with letting contracts or making appointments, at least beyond seeing that expenditures are within appropriations, and beyond naming its own clerk and the best available men for heads of the two great departments of which I shall immediately speak.

All details of administration should be separated into two great executive departments; one to manage the business affairs and the other the instruction. The heads of these departments may be appointed by the board, but their terms should be long and perhaps indefinite, and their powers should be wholly independent and fully prescribed by statute.

The business department should have charge of all the property interests of the system. It should make the contracts and see to their execution, appoint janitors and remove them, and be held responsible for the condition of the property. The head of this department must be a business man of good experience and well-known independence and probity, who is strongly sympathetic with the noble ends for which the public schools stand.

The department of instruction should be headed by a superintendent who is an expert in pedagogical science and in administration. He should have absolute power of appointment, assignment to position and removal of teachers, and sufficient assistance to have full and constant knowledge of what is being done in every schoolroom in the city. Whether the law provides for it or not, he and his assistants will act as a board. This board will not be a body dangerous to the liberties of a free people. There will not

be one chance of their doing injustice to a teacher, to a hundred chances that they will leave undone disagreeable things which should be done in the interests of better teaching. The superintendent and his advisers should be placed in dignified positions. They should be men and women with a teacher's kindly nature and kingly spirit, who are capable of upholding the dignity of their positions, and they should be as secure in those positions as the members of the supreme court of the state.

The affairs of the school should be wholly separated from municipal business and the school organization should have no connection whatever with municipal politics. There is no ground for any connection between the two. The public school system rests upon the taxing power of the state, and that is wholly within the control of the law-making power. The state is bound to see that schools are maintained in every part of the state. The school system is a state system administered in the American fashion through representatives chosen by the people in their local assemblages, or in any other way the state may direct. But these officers do not cease to be representatives of a state system, and there is every reason why their tenure and their powers should be wholly independent of municipal boards and officers.

How shall the school board be chosen? Ah! that is the great question. If such a plan of organization as we have been considering is adopted, that question loses some of its significance, however. Troubles in school administration seldom come from the presence of vicious characters on school boards; they arise from a confusion of powers and prerogatives, and from a disposition which men seem to have, to direct matters the most about which they know the least. When powers are based upon principles, the troubles will largely disappear. Nevertheless, I do not forget the

Greek maxim: "No law is a good law unless it has good executors." It is for the people of each community to ask the legislature to open the way which promises to result in the selection of citizens who are representative of the thrift and energy, the best thought and the higher life of the city, as members of the board of education.

In a word, we are to take the general course which experience leads all intelligent people to take concerning the administration of great enterprises, in order to justify the theories upon which they are acting, and make sure of the ends for which they are striving. We must do all business upon a business basis. We must departmentalize the work; build up the administrative organization on bed-rock principles; confer needed authority upon officials, give them positions of character and dignity, afford them security, direct their proceedings by law, and punish them if they disregard the directions. There are men and women who will not scramble for these positions, but who would fill them capably and conscientiously; and they can be found. It is for the substantial sentiment of the city to tear down social, religious, political, and all other kinds of fences, bring contributing citizens together, lay aside everything but the common good, lay plans which are more scientific and find representatives to carry them out.

It is well that we should all recall the one great aim of the public school system; it is to hold us together, secure the safety of a wide-open suffrage, and assure the progress of the whole population. Child study, entrance requirements, and all the other things which we are discussing in our educational conventions, are only incidental. We are not to proffer gifts to the people nor hold them down by great armies. The law-making power is to enable them to educate themselves. The public school system is our protection.



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We must not forget what a vast undertaking our experiment in government really is. We must not shut our eyes to the world's experience. History does not record a similar experiment which has been permanently successful. The public school system is the one institution which is more completely representative of the American plan, spirit, and purpose than any other we have. It can continue to be the instrument of our security and the star of our hope only so long as it continues to hold the interest and confidence of all the people whose interest and confidence are material to its support.

There is not so much occasion to worry about the foreigners. They assimilate with our people with remarkable facility. As a rule they are anxious for education for their children. The schools translate their children in three or four years. If you doubt it, investigate and you will see. The slums are not much of a menace to the safety of the republic; the police will hold them in check whenever the necessity arises, if there is civic spirit enough to keep the police right. But the great industrial and professional class of American citizens must be satisfied with what is done in the schools, and they are not going to be, and they ought not to be, easily satisfied. They will have healthful schoolhouses, they will have a curriculum with less confusion in it, and they will have clean-cut, scientific teaching by persons with whom they are glad to have their children come in contact, and whom they would be glad to see in their homes, or this public school system, with its enormous cost, will go to the wall. It is the ark of our safety. The alternative is impossible.