

"Give us a cheap teacher"

Popular Estimation.—If we glance at the reports of the county commissioners, we shall have perhaps a more accurate idea of the condition of the daily public schools of New York, and the popular estimate of them. The following are extracts:

In many cases parents instruct the trustees to have school only so long as the public money lasts.*

The cry is continually going up, "Give us a cheap teacher."†

There is nothing so much dreaded in our school districts by those who patronize schools, as rate bills. Trustees (especially of country districts) very often take pains to procure the services of teachers at so low a rate as to require but little more than the public money to pay the school bill.‡

The wealth of the county, always sensitive and nervous upon the questions of taxation, is not arrayed in hostility to our present system of schools as it would be were taxes alone relied upon.§

How can we "run" our schools six months with just the public money, is a question as familiar as are common household words.||

Many parents keep their children at home as soon as they ascertain that the public money will not defray the expenses of the school. There appears to be an increasing determination on the part of trustees to reduce the expenses of the school so as to cover them with the public money.¶

I am of opinion that should the public money be wholly withheld, two-thirds of the schools would be permanently closed, not because the people are not abundantly able to maintain them, but on account of a want of interest in educational matters.**

Then as to attendance—

Sixty-seven per cent of the children attended school only four months or less during the year.

On days of visitation during the year, I found enrolled on the teachers' books 6,225 names, and at the same time I found but 3,884 present.††

Without any hesitation, I affirm that not 50 per cent. of the children of school age in this Assembly district, have entered a schoolhouse for the purpose of receiving instruction during the year, and that of the number who have been in school, no more than 25 per cent. have attended for a longer period than two months.‡‡

Of more than 8,000 children in the district, only a little more than half, as appears from reports, are ever taught at all, and a large proportion but a few days or weeks in a year.§§

Such is the irregularity of attendance that it takes an average of $10\frac{1}{2}$ years to give $3\frac{1}{2}$ years' schooling.||||

* Broome. † Cayuga, 2d District. ‡ Herkimer. § Oswego, 3d District.
|| Wyoming, 2d District. ¶ Cattaraugus. ** Suffolk (11th Rep.).
†† Chenango. ‡‡ Suffolk. §§ Ulster (3d Dist.). |||| Westchester.

If we were required to show that parents are not sufficiently interested in the education of their children to be willing to pay for it, what would be better evidence than the fact that “they are willing their children should attend four months in the year (only) if the public money lasts so long?” And if a school is wanted for six months, they would lower the grade of teaching till the teachers’ wages reach the level of the appropriation. If the expense can be defrayed otherwise than by taxing them, they will accept the opportunity and send their children two, four or six months accordingly. While, and so far as, this spirit pervades the mass of families in a district or State, the daily public school can never serve the purpose for which it is organized. There may be much that is imposing in the machinery of legislation and in the parade of official oversight and statistical returns, but so long as the advantages of the schools are not worth *to the people* all they ought to cost,—themselves being judges,—there is a radical defect in the system.

The idea is frequently presented in the reports that irregularity of attendance would be at once checked if absence involved any pecuniary loss. In other words, if an appreciable privilege were contingent on a certain measure of attendance (such as eligibility to some lucrative place or office), taxes would be cheerfully borne. *Theoretically* a public school confers a more valuable privilege.

Schoolhouses, &c.—In respect to *schoolhouses and out-buildings*, the reports are not silent. Many, perhaps most of them, refer in terms of warm commendation to changes for the better. We are disposed to think their condition is represented quite as favourably as facts will justify.

Fully one-half the schoolhouses have only the highway for a playground, and all the surroundings are gloomy and repulsive. Some are entirely destitute of out-buildings.*

Of 53 schoolhouses in this district, 14 are, in structure, in location, in furniture, a disgrace to an intelligent community. The people in these districts make much better provision for their cattle than for their children.†

Of 80 schoolhouses in Greene County, one-third are reported as “superlatively bad. Out-buildings scarce and in bad condition.”

The general character and condition of the schoolhouses in this county, with some few exceptions, are extremely bad. A large number of them are old and shockingly out of repair.‡

* Broome.

† Cayuga (First District).

‡ Hamilton.