

Why Not Educational Experiment Stations?

Nobody Yet Knows the Best Way to Teach Public School Children, Says Dr. P. P. Claxton, Federal Commissioner of Education

EXPERTS of the schools have differed on many things at the conferences of the National Education Association, which for the last six days have turned New York City into a sort of great, sublimated normal school. The arguments have run on all topics from that of preparedness through military drill of pupils to the details of kindergarten management, but all have agreed that somehow, somewhere, the United States as a whole, as a Federal Government, should come into the scheme of the country's education. On the other hand, nobody explained just how or just where. It is a difficult matter the instant you try to get down to details. Whatever the point of departure, you are apt to run into the barrier of State rights before getting far beyond the general proposition that there should be something national about the schools, or at least that there should be some national source of stimulation or suggestion that will help all the schools in all the States.

The most tangible thing in this direction that developed in the course of the National Education Association's meetings was in the label they put on the address of Commissioner P. P. Claxton of the Federal Bureau of Education in the Department of the Interior. The Commissioner's paper was called "A National Program of Education." It was disappointing to anybody whose expectations of something definite had been aroused by the word "program."

But that was not Dr. Claxton's fault. His Bureau of Education has no authority whatever over the schools of the country, save those in the Territory of Alaska and a few Federal land-grant colleges. It cannot bring about uniformity, for example, by formulating a national program and then telling the States to adopt it. It has no authority over teachers or textbooks. It can do nothing to give to the country a certain sense of unanimity of thought by providing that at a given age all the children in all the States shall be studying the same things in about the same way, and so on through the course to the end that every June all the high school graduates on the Atlantic and Pacific coasts and in all the country between shall have something very definite in common, some touch of that sense of companionship which lasts a lifetime for those who can remember the same familiar stories in the some old school reading books, almost the pages on which they were, at any rate just how those pages looked and what the pictures were like. Those are only samples of the ways in which the United States cannot help.

When, in the course of an interview after his speech, Commissioner Claxton was asked if it would be a good thing for the country if uniformity in details were possible he replied:

"You mean if this country were France and we had a central, administrative control of its public education. No, I do not think it would be better than what we have. It would not be flexible enough. The State or the county administration is much closer to the actual work than the Federal Government could ever hope to be. It is true, of course, that in this or that section the schools might be better under Government supervision than they are under local control and management. But

the accumulated experiences of all the local and State school bodies of the country will give us a better understanding of what we need than could be obtained from any scheme of national administration. The local democracy will make our schools stronger than central control ever could.

"Nevertheless there should be a National program, and such a thing is being worked out gradually. The schools of the country agree now on many things, although not officially, and to that extent we are getting something of beneficial uniformity. The National Education Association is helping very much in this direction. The United States Bureau of Education at Washington, I believe, is helping more than any other agency, not as an adminis-

It is our work to tell any State, any part of the country, just what any other State is doing with its schools. We are already engaged in the making of surveys in North Dakota, Washington State, Delaware, Tennessee, and various other States which will be at the service of all other Commonwealths in the Union. In this way we are gradually lifting up a national educational polity. It will be a pretty poor State that will not contribute something now peculiar to itself that will be worth while for general adoption.

"Another phase of the Federal Government's educational work is in propaganda. Although the bureau can force nothing upon the country, it has the right and it is its business to urge the spread of that which is good. For example, we are trying now to institute a national movement in behalf of a longer school year with a minimum of one hundred and sixty days of teaching throughout the country. There are a

"The National Bureau also believes that the public school course should be divided into two periods, six years in the elementary school and six years in the high school, and we would have every child go through the high school. The term of six years would make possible some alternate arrangement of work and school to solve the problem of the families of small means in which the child must contribute something toward the general fund for support. We must coordinate the schools and the industries of each community so that boys can be paired, and girls, too, one of each couple spending two weeks, or whatever time is most suitable, in the school while the partner is in the shop or store or office, and they will take turn and turn about till both have gone through high school, earning money throughout the course and without upsetting the discipline of the school or of the industrial establishment of their employer.

"These are some of the tangible things about public school education and management that the United States Government believes in, and it has the right to urge them upon the country by sending agents to address State Legislatures and by other methods of propaganda.

"Perhaps the bureau's greatest field of usefulness, at least the one in which there is the greatest amount of room for pioneer work, is in experimental education. We have little or no scientific knowledge. Does it ever occur to you that nobody really knows the best way to teach a child? There are countless theories and opinions, good, bad, and indifferent, but the world has not yet provided the means for putting any of them to a real test to determine universal value or the lack of it. There is no standard to which educators the world over can subscribe because nothing has ever been tried long enough or under sufficiently varying conditions to give us something fundamental.

"There is a 'best way' to do most everything else under heaven, a standard way with modifications to fit different conditions. It may be the best way to raise wheat or potatoes or to breed pigs or poultry and the men who do those things intelligently all know those best ways and know how to apply the same principles and methods under their local conditions. But as yet the world has no 'best way,' no underlying principle upon which to base a system of education.

"There must be such a thing, and I am not forgetting the fact that no two children are alike and no two teachers, that you cannot reduce mental activities and capacities to cut and dried formulae as you do the action of soil and climate on a kernel of wheat. But the necessity of greater intelligence in the use of a principle and the need of more varied modifications in its application do not mean that such a principle does not exist. We simply have not found it. We must find it and the only way is to search for it.

"For that end we need educational experiment stations just as we have agricultural experiment stations, and the United States should establish and operate them. If a million dollars were at the disposal of the National Bureau of Education I would select several good schools in various parts of the country that would try the experiments that seemed worth trying through a period of years. To spend Government money on such an undertaking for a short time would be to waste the money without learning anything that could be depended upon. It should run through several generations of the school and through the administrations of several teachers to eliminate from the result all accidents of personalities. The test would not be entirely complete until the children experimented upon had grown up and shown the results of their schooling.

"A series of such experiments, spreading over many years, would in the end give the United States a big flexible scheme of education adapted to any child in any school in any community."



trative organization, which it cannot be, but as a great clearing house for the best thought of the entire world on all phases of education.

"To be such a clearing house is one of the chief functions of the National Bureau. Its usefulness will increase as the public, especially the teaching public of the country and the world, becomes familiar with the fact that the country has such a bureau.

"We want to gather the best opinions there are available on the subject of teaching children. Remember we have very little definite knowledge on the subject, and we can't have till we have gathered these opinions and tested them over periods of years and under all the varied conditions under which the work of the public school must be done. Of course, the function of the bureau that naturally grows out of its taking in and absorbing the best opinion available is to give out something.

"In other words, the United States, through this department of education, stands ready to give advice to all askers.

few isolated sections in the country today in which the pupil gets only sixty days of schooling in each twelvemonth. In others, the maximum is eighty days. There is an evil that affects the country as a whole, for it is certainly a matter of national concern that there should be equality of opportunity for school training, independently of details. Another piece of national propaganda undertaken by the bureau is in behalf of larger units of school administration. Outside of New England, where the township jurisdiction is fitted to the conditions, the county is the best unit for the management of the work. This is certainly true of the South and Middle West, where the county is such an important political unit in the management of all affairs of local government. The county should supersede the school district. Some counties are poor and some are rich, but the inequality there, when it comes to the providing of school funds, is not so great as it is among the different small school districts, and, with the county control, lack of means can be more easily remedied by increase of necessary State aid.