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 all times but the National Education Association, which for the last six days has been meeting in New York City as a sort of sublimated normal school. The arguments have run on all topics from the way through military drill of pupils to the details of kindergarten management, but all have agreed that somehow, somehow, 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 some control over the schools, or at least that there should be some national source of stimulation or suggestion that would 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," and this was disappointing to anybody whose expectations of something definite had been aroused by the word "program." But that was not what Commissioner Claxton had in mind. 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 grants 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 this country the united and surety of unity 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 fashion. By the end of the year there is still not a single fundamental course of study in English literature taught in any two States.

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 prosperous and the Federal Government had the administrative control of its public education. No. I do not think it would be better than it is, but it would be more flexible. The State or the county administration is much closer to the actual work than the Federal Government will ever hope to be. It is true, of course, that in this or that section the schools might be better under Government supervision because the other side is 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 the study of national administrative policy. 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 important 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 administrator, but by the advice of its staff of experts to the school boards. It is in our work to tell any State, any part of the country, just what any other State is doing with its schools. We are already passing on the results of successes all over the North Dakota, Washington, Delaware, Tennessee, and various other States which will be the service of other Commonwealths in the Union. In this way we are gradually lifting up a national educational policy. It will be a pretty poor State that will not contribute something new peculiar to itself that will be adopted elsewhere for general application.

"Another phase of the Federal Government's educational work is in propaganda. Although we are not doing anything upon the country, it has the right and it is in its business to urge the spread of that which is good. For example, we are now trying to start in the nation a movement in behalf of a school year with a minimum of one hundred and sixty days of teaching throughout the country. There are a 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 a matter of national concern that there should be equality of opportunity for school training, independently of details. Another phase of national propaganda under 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 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 school districts within the school county, and, with the county control, lack of means can be more evenly distributed by increase of necessary State aid.

"The National Bureau also believes that the public schools should be divided into two periods, six years in the elementary school and six years in the high school. Between these times an intermediate grade child goes through the high school. In this way there would be a greater chance of seeing a more definite and more complete arrangement of work and training. There would also be a chance, under New York State, to have some alternate arrangement of work and training. The proper work for the first three years of intermediate school and the work for the last three years would be better ordered. And, with a high school to which the intermediate schools would be paralleled, and girls, too, one of every child 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 turns and teach about both have gone through high school, earning money throughout the year and without upsetting the discipline of the school or of the industrial establishment of the factory. Clearly all these know the best ways and know how to apply the same principles of administration under the local conditions. But as yet the world has no "best way," to the understanding of principle upon which to base a plan of education.

"There must be such a thing, and I am not forgetting the fact that two children are alike and no two teachers, that you cannot take the same text-book and capacities to cut and dried formulas as you do the action of soul and climate on a frame 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 do not know it.

"For that end we need educational experimental stations just as we have agricultural experimental stations, and the United States should establish and operate such stations. The counties and State 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 best to us for two or three years. To spend Government money on such an undertaking for a short time would be to waste the money without increasing the scientific value of results upon which we can put. It should run through several generations of the school and through the administration of these schools, and eliminate from the result all accidents, personnel, etc., and we shall more surely complete until the children are well trained and have shown the results of their schooling.

"A series of such experiments, spreading over a period of years, would give the United States a better flexible scheme of education and would give the United States a better flexible scheme of education, and would show the United States a better flexible scheme of education for the child in any school in any community.”