

SCHOOL REPORTS AND SCHOOL EFFICIENCY

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School reports and school efficiency by David S. Snedden & William H. Allen

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DAVID S. SNEDDEN & WILLIAM H. ALLEN

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BY
DAVID S. SNEDDEN, PH.D.

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20/29

FOR
THE NEW YORK COMMITTEE ON PHYSICAL
WELFARE OF SCHOOL CHILDREN

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INTRODUCTION

THE origin of this study of school reports dates back to 1904, when the board of education of New York City announced that for want of funds it must curtail its vacation and night schools, recreation centers and popular lectures.

Representatives of several civic organizations met to discuss what seemed to them a wrong to the children and parents of congested districts. Without exception they sided with the school authorities against the fiscal authorities who had demanded school retrenchment. They were about to vote a protest when one delegate asked how many people would be injured by cutting off the so-called social features of the schools. No one knew; nor did any one know whether there was any truth in the Comptroller's statement that the board of education had money enough to do its intended work without curtailment if it would use economically the funds already voted it. The protest was deferred and a Committee on Facts appointed.

An investigation was conducted by the Association for Improving the Condition of the Poor, which had supported the first vacation schools in 1894, six in 1895 and 1896, and ten in 1897. The attempt to show from official reports that due economy was being employed proved futile. In the absence of proof of economy and efficiency on the part of the schools that had spent the money, it was obviously impossible to charge with bad faith or error those who demanded retrenchment. Thus an inquiry, started (1904) for the purpose of increasing the school appropriation, ended in an

appeal (1905) to the board of education to get more service for the moneys received, and to adopt records and reports that would "arouse public sentiment when the occasion demands" and "defend the educational value and the cost of any and all of your educational policies."

The adoption of business methods in a few instances by different committees resulted promptly in savings here of \$200,000, there of \$300,000, now of \$13,000 on lead pencils, again of \$113,000 on coal, these savings being used for additional service. In 1906 the board of education finally adopted resolutions admitting the need for improved accounting, and instructed its auditing department to institute necessary changes.

During the period 1904 to 1906 several grave questions of school policy agitated the public mind, — part time *vs.* full day; "fads and frills"; free meals; flexible grading; promotion by subject; teachers' salaries. Almost without exception these questions were discussed on theoretical and personal grounds, just as if New York had been without experience. When supposed facts were offered in evidence, they were controverted. Reports did not help settle controversy as to fact. No one ever knew what the truth was; it was simply known that this or that side won or that the leaders of two sides had "come together."

When year after year the board of education was given a million or two less than it asked for, it seemed clear that the children of New York City were paying a very high price for want of information as to school conditions on the part of school board, fiscal authorities, newspapers, and volunteers anxious to increase school efficiency. Would the same method of settling school questions according to theory, personality, or compromise be used in meeting the demand for free lunches, for free eyeglasses, for material relief at school, for a revised curriculum, for less home study, for correction of physical defects, for industrial training fitted to the child

and to industry? With the conviction that reasoning from fact to policy would improve policy, enhance the efficiency of the schools, increase their support, and settle questions so that they would stay settled until conditions changed,— the New York Association for Improving the Condition of the Poor obtained funds for a three-years trial of the fact method of interpreting school needs and school merit. The Committee on Physical Welfare of School Children was organized in May, 1906, to undertake the following programme:

1. Study of the Physical Welfare of School Children.
 - (a) Examination of board of health records of children needing medical, dental, or ocular care, and better nourishment.
 - (b) Home visitation of such children, in order to ascertain whether their need arises from deficient income or from other causes.
 - (c) Effort to secure proper treatment, either from parents, or from free clinics or other established agencies.
 - (d) Effort to secure proper physical surroundings of children while at school,—playgrounds, baths, etc.
2. Effort to secure establishment of such a system of school records and reports as will disclose automatically significant school facts,—*e.g.* regarding backward pupils, truancy, regularity of attendance, registered children not attending, sickness, physical defects, etc.
3. Effort to utilize information regarding school needs so as to stimulate public interest and thus aid in securing adequate appropriations to meet school needs.

At the end of the first year three studies are ready for publication: