

REMARKS
OF
WILLIAM WOOD, ESQ.
ON
Assuming the Presidency
OF THE
BOARD OF EDUCATION

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REMARKS.

GENTLEMEN OF THE BOARD OF EDUCATION :

A wise man has said that we ought to "expect the unexpected," but I am very sure that if any one had said to me, at this time last year, that I should occupy the position in which you have to-day so kindly placed me, it would have seemed utterly incredible; yet, nevertheless, here I am. And I hope I may be pardoned for a little excusable egotism if I should state to you my experience with regard to my somewhat extended connection with the Board of Education.

The first time that I had the honor of standing here it was as President *pro tempore* in May, 1869, when a new Board was inaugurated, and I suppose that the words I then spoke somewhat horrified the friends of a higher education by my declaring that the function of the State was solely to receive children and give to them an education which should make them thoroughly acquainted with reading, writing and arithmetic, but they forgot that from that proposition flow a great many corollaries, which, by the thorough teaching of these preliminary studies, are brought into practical effect. There was the mistake of those who thought I was opposed to the higher education, and I think that my whole course in this Board showed that, far from being adverse to higher education, I have always advocated it for

teachers to aid in bringing about the very results which I say it is the duty of the State to obtain before all others.

When I entered this Board I was in a somewhat hopeless minority, but I was the first of that minority who became chairman of one of the standing committees. Further, on the 6th of February, 1873, my colleagues asked me to go up to Albany, and, with the then Commissioner, but now Alderman Lewis, to do what I could to defeat the very bill under which this Board now lives and moves and has its being; and on that day it was the most *unexpected* thing possible that I should ever again have a seat in this Board, and certainly beyond all expectation that I should be elected its President. On the 4th of April, 1873, we, who were sometimes nick-named the "Twelve Apostles," were summarily turned out of our places, and had we been in reality the twelve apostles, we would not have fared one whit better, as it was entirely an affair of party. Then I said, in order that my successors may not think that I intend to poach upon their manor, or do anything to render their position with regard to the public schools irksome, I shall not enter a common school for a year, and I kept my vow. I was offered a commissionership in November, 1874, in this Board, but for reasons outside of it I could not accept the offer; but when, by a sad visitation of Providence a way was opened up for me last spring to resume the position which I had vacated in 1873, as Chairman of the Committee on the Normal College, I returned to the Board. But I did so with some hesitancy, and with some misgivings, as of all the gentlemen composing the Board I knew only four, and I felt that I had been misrepresented and to some extent maligned, and therefore I hesitated about even then accepting a commissionership. But I was too much attached to our system of Common Schools, and especially to the Normal College portion of it, to resist the temptation, and so I returned to the Board, and it gives me the very greatest pleasure to say that from the moment I entered it I have received nothing but

courtesy and kindness, and now this crowning act of your confidence has placed me here. Our late President, however, very frankly and honestly stated to me that he had done what he could to prevent my obtaining a seat in the Board. He said he had no personal objection to me, although he had known me for more than thirty years, but his policy was opposed to mine; and so, gentlemen, I do not look upon this position as any personal triumph, but as the triumph of the great principle of progress, the triumph of advancement, in opposition to that of stagnation, and possibly even of retrogression.

But, gentlemen, a truce to personal matters. With regard to the Common Schools of New York; there is no one to whom I yield in my admiration of the beauty of the *theory* of the common school system; we see the children entering, first, the Primary Schools, thence promoted to the Grammar Schools, from which the boys enter the College of the City of New York, and the girls the Normal College.

Nothing in theory can possibly be finer or better. But when we come to look at the practical working, then, as there are spots in the sun (and astronomers say that there are pretty big ones), we find that at the entrance of our educational system, where perfection is most needed, there is a very large blot, and it is just over the Primary Departments and Schools. The children in the Primary Schools constitute two-thirds of the whole number that attend the Common Schools—one-third being in the Grammar Schools, and two-thirds in the Primary. The following figures are interesting: The average number of children in the Primary Departments and Schools for the year ending the 31st of December, 1875, was 61,779, against 36,572 in the Grammar Schools. The total number of children, December 31st, 1875, 98,351, against, at the same date in 1874, 95,897, showing an increase during the year 1875 of 2,454.

Now, the first fault in the Primary School system is, that the

children are allowed to enter far too young; the law says that they may enter at *four*. I think children should not be allowed to enter any school until they are six years old. After visiting all the Primary Schools and Departments, I am sure that the Legislature could never have intended that the Public Schools should be simply *public nurseries*, as they are; and the sooner that the law is changed and the admission of children under six years of age prohibited, the better for the children and the better for the schools.

Then again, while there are two-thirds of all the children under instruction in the Primary Schools, the salaries of the teachers are *lower* than in the Grammar Schools, and in proportion to the scholars, the teachers are fewer. And what is all this but *class legislation* of the very worst sort, and that, too, against the poorest class of the people in the city of New York? Those who attend the Primary Schools and never go beyond them (and one-half of those who do enter never get into the Grammar Schools) have no opportunity of receiving instruction in after life; while those who go to the Grammar Schools are generally the children of parents who can afford to give them an education outside of the Common Schools if their education is not completed in them; and hence I say that the first duty devolving upon this Board is to overhaul the condition of the Primary Schools. They have not only fewer teachers in proportion to scholars, but the Primary Departments are in the lower parts of the buildings; they are not so nicely fitted up as the Grammar Schools, and the ventilation and light are not as good. Now, all these things ought to be remedied, and the Primary Schools and Departments properly ventilated, properly lighted, and supplied with a competent corps of teachers; not teachers who, after they have acquired the art of teaching in the Primary Schools, are immediately taken away from them and promoted to the Grammar Schools, where the salaries are higher, and, I think, the work easier and more interesting. I hope this important matter will engage your attention; it is *the most important matter connected with the entire school system*.

With regard to the Grammar Schools, I must say that they have my admiration; in both the boys' and girls' departments there is a great deal that gives pleasure to every one who is interested in the great cause of Common School instruction. Perhaps, though, even there, it would be well if the studies were simplified, and some of them stricken out altogether. It would be well if the study of Grammar, and the analysing of sentences in a poll-parrot fashion, which nine-tenths of the children do not understand, and which therefore does them no good whatever, were so stricken out, except for the highest grade, and the time so saved were devoted to cultivating a taste for literature; then, I think, a very great improvement would take place in the education afforded by the Grammar Schools.

Besides, gentlemen, you will also have to deal with the question of the foreign languages in the Grammar Schools. There is now on the table of the Board a resolution that the teaching of French and German should be restricted to the three upper grades in the Grammar Schools; that resolution waits for a two-third majority to carry it into effect, and to this the attention of the Commissioners should be directed without delay. As a mere intellectual exercise, I have no objection to the teaching of these branches, although it be of little practical use. But if it should be found that even the limiting of these languages to the three upper grades interferes with the proper study of English, it seems to me that they should be excluded altogether from the Common Schools. I am of opinion that our scholars should be thoroughly acquainted with their own noble English language, and by making them thoroughly acquainted with it, we shall also make them the very best kind of American citizens.

The next subject for consideration is the *Normal College*; in it I have always taken the deepest interest. I am confident that it is now doing a vast and noble service in educating an accomplished corps of teachers under the able management of President Hunter. To that college this year there has been added a chair of French and I have no doubt that in future that

fine language will be more studied than it has hitherto been. Everything is going on in the Normal College as well as heart could desire; but I think it would be only fair to the young women there, who are being educated for teachers, to arrange that they should have the same advantage with regard to the length of the curriculum as their brothers have in the College of the City of New York, and that a full year ought to be added to that curriculum, for it is not fair to expect that young women of seventeen, going out as teachers into the schools after only three years training in the Normal College, should be able to compete on equal terms with young men of twenty-one who have had five years study in the College of the City of New York. I hope this important matter will have the attention of the Board at its earliest convenience.

I should have said, in speaking of the Grammar Schools, that, if it be desired to simplify the course of study in them, there will be found on pages 524 to 527 of the Journal of the 22d November, 1871, a system of studies which was prepared and digested by practical educators of the very highest character; and the Board could not do better, in my opinion, than follow out the course which is there laid down.

As to the Normal College graduates. I am told and believe that there are 70 teachers teaching in our common Schools who entered the Normal College but never graduated. This is a most unjust thing to the graduates of the Normal College who have gone through their course, and have passed a most severe ordeal of examination; and the sooner some by-law is passed by this Board which shall prevent a recurrence of such a state of matters, the better for the College, and, what is even of more consequence, the better for the schools of the city.

And, gentlemen, there is another matter in regard to the Normal College. Up to last year there was always a difficulty in having the license to teach coincident with the diploma of the Col-

lege. Thanks chiefly to the exertions of ex-Commissioner Townsend, last June, an agreement was entered into between the President of the Normal College and the City Superintendent, by which the Normal College examinations were made to suffice for both purposes, and by which agreement the College graduates received their licences to teach at the same time that they obtained their diplomas. I ask that the agreement I have referred to be taken from the files of the Committee on Normal College, and be shaped into a by-law of this Board. But further than this, it appears to me, that the diploma of the College of the city of New York or the diploma of the Normal College should give to an individual holding either, without any further examination, the power of teaching in all the Common Schools of this city, and the sooner you come to such a conclusion, and obtain the requisite legislation to effect the desired result, the better will it be for the schools and for the Colleges.

With regard to the subject of music, the Board that went out of existence on the 31st of December last has left you a legacy which you will find somewhat troublesome. No one can be appointed by you under the actually existing by-law as a special teacher of music excepting a Director and eight Assistant Directors, and yet it is not likely that any of these can be appointed. It will be well, at an early date, therefore, to see if some other plan cannot be devised, and the existing by-law changed. Though we spend \$21,000 per annum on the teaching of music, I fear that our musical results are very far behind those of the city of Boston, and I think steps ought to be taken to put us on a par with that city in this respect.

With regard to the Evening Schools, I am happy to say, that as far as I have learned, they are this year somewhat better conducted than they have hitherto been. As to the Evening *High School*, I can speak from personal observation, as I have been there repeatedly during the last three months. Every genuine lover of popular education must have his heart gratified by seeing the numerous

attendance of young men from fifteen and up to middle age—men of forty or fifty—attending that school in all sorts of weather, and receiving the supplementary education which the denied or neglected opportunities of their younger days may have rendered necessary. And I think it will be well for the appropriate Committee to direct its attention to the Evening High School, so that there shall be no interference with regard to examining its scholars; for all these scholars are grown up and independent. They go there voluntarily; the school has all its professors and teachers selected directly by the Evening School Committee, and they may be changed every year, if needful; and there is no necessity for other supervision than that which is provided for by the internal arrangements of the school. It has flourished entirely upon its own merits, and I hope that some by-law will be passed by the Board to carry into effect this suggestion, and so sustain in its pristine condition this admirable institution

Now, gentlemen, with regard to our own high and sacred trust—for I do say from the bottom of my heart that it is a *most sacred* trust—we have a tendency, I am afraid, (troubled, as we are, with the multitude of details which must necessarily crave our constant attention) to lose sight of those great principles which underlie the whole system of Common School Education, and in attending to the details, we forget to look to the thorough education, intellectually and morally, of the immense number of children (nearly one hundred thousand,) of this city who are almost wholly dependent upon this Board to see that they receive a suitable education. In attending to the “mint, anise and cummin” of Supplies and Buildings, don’t let us forget “the weightier matters of the law, judgment, mercy and truth,”—moral and intellectual training.

Gentlemen, I have to apologize for detaining you so long, but you can at least console yourselves with this reflection, that by putting me in this position you have effectually closed my mouth for the rest of this year.