

ESSEX COUNTY.

Charles M. Davis, Superintendent.

In conformity to the law, I have the honor to present the following report:

As soon as my appointment was confirmed in May last, I began to visit the trustees and schools placed under my charge, but was soon called from the work to settle the disputed boundaries of a number of districts in the county. The work grew on my hands until I decided to revise the whole matter and obey the directions given to superintendents by the State Board of Education in Circular No. 1, Section 11. To visit the districts, meet the boards of trustees, and correspond with the various clerks and others interested, has taken much time, which I wished to give to the schools and teachers; but I felt this work was of first importance.

The general principles upon which the division was made were—

First. That all the children in the county should belong to districts within the county.

Next. That as far as practicable, township lines should be boundaries of districts.

Last. That the districts should be large.

To give reasons for these positions would take too much time; they will, however, commend themselves to every one acquainted with the school law and its general working.

There were in one township (Millburn) two parts of districts connected, one with Union county, and the other with Morris. These were brought back and added to districts in Millburn. It was not always possible to observe township lines; but it was done whenever some good reason did not exist for the contrary course. I have endeavored to enlarge districts instead of dividing them. Small ones generally imply small schools, poor school-houses, and teachers of small capacities and attainments. One district, containing thirteen children, in which there had been no school during the year I added to its neighbor. In another, reporting twenty-nine children, there had been school but three months. I regretted that the way was not clear to treat this in the same way. In other cases, where the number is small, money to pay salaries has been raised by the payment of tuition fees or voluntary subscription by citizens of the district.

One new district has been formed. No. 1 (Woodside). So rapid has been the growth of this village within two years that it reports one hundred and fifty scholars, while its neighbor, No. 3 (Second River, in Belleville), from which it has been taken, reports but eighteen less than last year.

The work has been finished; forty-four districts and two parts of districts have been reduced to forty-two complete ones. A map of the county thus divided has been prepared; the boundaries of each district accurately defined and described, are now on file in my office, and copies have been furnished to most of the clerks. The views of the superintendent have been very generally approved by the school officers and friends of education, particularly in reference to the size of districts. In several townships the subject of still further consolidation is being discussed with considerable earnestness, so evident do its advantages appear.

While engaged in the above-mentioned work, I have necessarily not been able to give much attention to the schools themselves. Still, I have visited about half of them (several of these three or four times), and would have visited most of the others had they not been taking their summer vacation. I have met most of the teachers, and propose resuming visitation in a few weeks.

The Selection of Text-Books is by law committed to the trustees of each school, in connection with the county superintendent. My course of action in this important matter will be best understood by reference to the following circular letter:

Office of the
Superintendent of Schools for Essex Co., N. J.
Bloomfield, 1868.

To the Trustees of _____ School District No. _____, _____ Township :

GENTLEMEN—The school law of this State makes it your duty, in connection with the county superintendent, to prescribe a uniform series of text-books for the school or schools under your charge.

The superintendent, after careful consultation with a number of gentlemen of intelligence and experience in educational matters, has prepared the following list, from which your selections are to be made. In the higher branches of study, he desires a personal consultation; and will not approve of the introduction of text-books by teachers without his consent.

[Here follows the list of text-books recommended.]

In conclusion the superintendent would urge upon you the importance of giving your *personal* attention to the subject of *uniformity* in the text-books used in the schools under your charge.

CHARLES M. DAVIS,
County Superintendent.

Our School Accommodations are steadily improving. As the people feel more assured of the permanency of the law, they are willing to erect finer buildings for their schools. A number of old houses have been repaired and enlarged, and several new ones built, or are in the course of erection; while money has been voted in several districts for additional improvements. During the coming year at least four large brick school-houses will be built at an expense of from \$6,000 to \$20,000 apiece. A glance at the column "Value of school property" will show a large amount of money invested. I wish I could stop here; but the same column will show some property of little value. Some of these houses are unworthy of the name; small, unventilated, stifling in summer, and freezing in winter, they can only dwarf and enfeeble the body, and contract instead of educating the mind. In all cases the furniture and general arrangements within correspond in value, beauty and use with the building itself.

One other subject even delicacy must not prevent me from mentioning. Too often the outhouses are altogether unsuitable. Sometimes there is only one for both sexes; the teachers in such cases try to remedy the evil by giving the boys and the girls recess at different times. But before and after school, and at noon, they are in the yard together; and were it not so, the reasons why they should not frequent the same building are very obvious. In other cases different buildings are prepared, but in the same yard. And again, it is not uncommon to find two yards (one for each sex) conducting to different apartments of the same building. How easily and rapidly will a pure-minded child lose its delicacy of feeling under even the best of these circumstances?

The Interest of the People generally in the subject of education by the State is rapidly increasing. There is a pervading sentiment that the public school should give as good facilities for a common school education as the best private institutions in the land. And where there is even a remote prospect of this but slight objection is made to taxation for building houses or paying teachers. With a better understanding of the law, interest in the subject increases, and I believe that nothing is necessary to make our people unitedly earnest in the work but a full understanding on their part of what the law is, what it proposes and what it accomplishes where its provisions are carried out. That the law may be improved no one will deny but perhaps the time for amendment has not yet come. Its value consists not in the high character of the education it can give to a few, but in the thorough common school education it gives to the many. And I decide as to the comparative value of the schools under my charge by this test. That district does its work best where *every child* goes to school, and learns to read and write, and becomes acquainted with the ordinary processes of arithmetic, and the general principles of grammar and geography. My earnest wish and effort are, first of all, to get all our children into the schools; after they are there, to carry them as far forward in study as their time and circumstances will permit; but never to allow the primary and intermediate departments to receive less attention and labor than the High School.

After all this preparation of districts, houses and funds, the selection of trustees, and the interest of citizens, our work is in vain unless Good Teachers are placed over the schools. It will be a work of time to furnish our State with a corps of well-educated, intelligent and earnest teachers; but it can be done if our officers will employ only those who are suitable and will pay them remunerative salaries. In this, as in all other kinds of business, the supply will equal the demand both as to quantity and quality. In this county there are many intelligent teachers, and many boards of trustees are willing to pay a fair sum for services rendered. But there are others who offer but little pay, and get in return all that their money is worth.

I would like to call the attention of the district clerks to the importance of promptly sending in their reports, and making them full and complete. I have been compelled to return more than half the reports to the respective clerks for alteration or completion. And the first of October has come and finds three still wanting, although I have written repeatedly to the delinquents. Although I am instructed to fill up the blanks with last year's report, and withhold the State appropriation from such district next year, I prefer to exercise a little patience and present to you a complete report for the whole county. I believe all will do better next year.

The column of Children who attend no School shows one thousand three hundred and seventy-five in the county who are in this neglected condition. What can be done in such cases to induce

parents to send their children to school? Is compulsion necessary? or will persuasion accomplish it?

The subject of corporal punishment has been pretty thoroughly debated in the State. Practically its abolition does not work well in this county. There are occasional cases where the scholar would be benefited, and the teacher strengthened by its exercise.

Much inconvenience would be avoided if the school year and the fiscal year were the same. Perhaps the reasons for the one beginning in September and the other in April may be insurmountable; but if not, a change is very desirable.

The notice informing me that my appointment had been confirmed by the Board of Freeholders was accompanied by the following resolution passed by the Board:

“Resolved, That the school superintendent of Essex county be requested to present to this Board an annual report as to the manner in which his duties have been discharged.”

While this imposes some additional work I cheerfully comply, as it assures me of their interest in the cause, and also enables me to approach them in a body, and secure their co-operation in whatever will advance the work in their respective townships. I have as yet met with them but once to report progress, but shall continue to do so occasionally.