

ESSEX COUNTY.

M. H. C. Vail, Superintendent.

*To Addison B. Poland, State Superintendent:*

SIR—In submitting this my fourth annual report, which the State Board of Education in their wisdom have decided shall be my last, I fain would have promulgated some features the formulation of which I had been engaged upon from the beginning of my work as county superintendent, and which I had trusted would have added not a little to the growth and prosperity as well as increasing the growing popularity of our public schools, the tenor of which I must necessarily refrain from mentioning, since their scope and extent would depend almost entirely upon my own personal efforts for their introduction.

That this should be my fourth annual report in a term of three years may appear an anomaly, but yet it is as certainly a fact, which came about in this wise. My predecessor having taken the extraordinary precaution of ordering all the collectors, district clerks with principals and teachers to send their annual reports to myself, thus forcing upon me, as his successor, the necessity of making his report to your predecessor, which work I finally succeeded in carrying to completion through the kindly assistance of Mr. J. Brognard Betts, who yet fills most acceptably the trying place of Assistant State Superintendent of Public Instruction, and just here I do not think it improper to interpolate my thanks for the many kindnesses received from your honor, and the polite attentions I have received during the past three years from everybody connected with the office.

*Condition of the Schools.*—That I am able to report a general advancement in all the schools in Essex county, and in all the departments of the same, is gratifying in the extreme, and taken as a whole, the marvelous growth and progress of the schools and what has been achieved along all the lines of our grand public school system, the past three years, will mark an epoch in their history ; not because of the work of any one individual official, nor because of the superior work or sleepless vigilance of any one individual or set of teachers; not because of the liberality of the people, the taxpayers of any one district, but simply because it has been the era of good feeling that the result possible from one united, lofty, determined purpose to secure that possible best, has been obtained.

*School-Houses.*—The logic of good results obtainable through the magnetic influence of good school-houses has had a most emphatic demonstration in Essex county. To be sure we had many good school-houses in this county when I was called upon to assume the direction of public school affairs; but along with these there were some which might be termed medium, and again others fit only for condemnation and destruction. Notably of the latter class, the little barn of an affair at White Oak Ridge, District No. 24, Millburn township, around which gathered (in all probability) more unpleasant neighborhood and family feud recollections than around any other single structure in the county. On my first visit to this No. 24 I found but three pupils under instruction and an almost broken-hearted young woman, who informed me that her home was quite near the battlefield of Gettysburg, was apparently doing her best under the most discouraging surroundings to conduct the school. With the little ones crouching like frightened rabbits, the discouraged woman related the sorrowful condition of affairs while tears coursed down her wan cheeks, and I learned that the district clerk was not on speaking terms with the trustees, and that they were not on speaking terms with each other ; that a church fight was yet under way, which began several years before, and herself had been set down a Romanist because she wore a simple, little gold cross on her bosom—a present from her mother ; that, in short, the

leading spirits of the neighborhood were suffering from woes they knew not the nature of, and they all concentrated in and about the little, old cow- shed of a school-house.

Had I been county superintendent for twenty-three years, six months and a day, as had my fortunate predecessor, I might have winked at it all and left them to fight the battle out in their own way, but as I was new and had naught but the honestly- earned title of M.D. to my name, I had my way—that is, I condemned the house and forbid its occupancy for school purposes any longer. Result: In six months a new house was greeted, the neighborhood held a love-feast at its dedication, the school fight and church troubles had ended ; thirty bright children occupied places in the modern seats, and the sweet- sounding notes of an organ, touched by the fingers of a happy teacher, were heard resounding in harmony with voices never heard before. Where the wild birds had done all the singing for years, sweet- voiced school children are now giving them a respite.

*Lyons Farms.*—The little stone jug of an affair which had done duty for more than a century in the school- house line was another of those heirlooms, and which naturally fell to my lot through the kindly forbearance of my predecessor, but which right early fell under my condemnation. Result: One of the prettiest and most convenient school-houses in the State, a largely- increased scholarship and an additional teacher to help on the good work. In this connection, although a trifle singular, it is pleasant to relate the fact that the love of the people has caused them to preserve the little stone building, which dates back to the time when the great Washington paused at its door and its pupils heard the rifle crack, three miles away, when the heroic Parson Caldwell rushed into the old Springfield church, gathered his arms full of Watts' hymn-books for wadding, and, as he passed them to the soldiers, shouted “Give 'em Watts, boys ! Give 'em Watts !” There are still other instances which might be related, but enough has been said to abundantly prove that there is such a science as school-house psychology. Did I desire to go further and prove how beautifully and truly beneficent are new and comfortable school-houses, and how salutarily they affect the schools, and how, for the pride of the young in the school-house he attends and the seat he adores goes toward the advancement of his scholarship, you have only to refer to the thousands of bright examples ready for presentation wherever the pride of the architect and the skill of the mechanic and artisan crown the hilltop and adorn the valley.

*Manual Training and Kindergarten.*—Again I am able to report progress in this beautiful line of public school instruction. Since my last report, East Orange has joined the ranks of the rapidly- swelling army of schools where the pupils have the wicket- gates to the realities of life and the business of the world thrown open before them. “No step backward” is the motto in this county. As yet, Montclair is the only school where I am able to report the school-kitchen open to the young misses, where they may take lessons in cooking and baking and good coffee-making, but other schools are making ready the little *bijou* of kitchens where the young misses can wrestle with high-art cooking. No one can fully understand the far-reaching benefits of teaching along these lines till they come to a full realization of the fact how very few of the children from the common schools have opportunity to further pursue education. The kindergarten has come to stay. This I am pleased to report.

*Arbor Day.*—A growing love for Arbor day among all the schools is slowly forcing upon the people a realization of how much it means to the country and the world. This is because they are beginning to understand it better. The reports from each principal of the several schools, all of which I sent to your office, show pretty conclusively that the science of forestry is being accepted as a living theme.

*Teachers' Institute.*—The teachers' institute of last year was well attended, and proved one of the most interesting since my connection with the schools, the presence of yourself and Prof. Brumbaugh adding immense zest to the occasion.

*The New School Law.*—Although I had personal objections to and certain misgivings as to the beneficent character of the new School law, yet, like the faithful lieutenant I determined to be, I set my best energies at work in its adaptation to the schools, and trust results will prove that I made few mistakes, and that the new machinery was running with commendable smoothness when I was asked to give place to another.

*Teachers.*—My last reports, which are in your hands, show pretty conclusively that the more than two hundred teachers engaged in this county have done a work of which we may all feel proud. Our close proximity to the schools of pedagogy and the training colleges of New York and Brooklyn, has lent advantages which many of the teachers have taken hold of. The sincere effort which they have, one and all, made to overcome truancy, absenteeism and tardiness has been markedly successful. This may be seen in regard to the two latter especially, in my reports. For their conscientious care of the young entrusted to them, for the progress in learning, which is everywhere abundantly manifest, I am truly thankful. For the past three years it has been my pleasant duty to mingle with, counsel and direct them in the pursuance of their work, and I may be permitted to say that there grew up between us an affectionate regard, and when the unearned and unexpected blow fell which severed the relations, every pupil felt the shock as it was transmitted through superintendent, principal and teacher, and many a tear of regret wet the eye that looked the word which the tongue could not speak—farewell.