

THE PUBLIC SCHOOL SYSTEM.

EDITOR CONSERVATIVE:

In your issue of August 29, you say, "There seems to be a quite general opinion that the public schools are very uncommon, and that they commonly teach a little of too many things which are not absolutely necessary to success in everyday life and not enough of the few fundamental things—like reading, spelling, arithmetic and geography—which are essential to even moderate success in the humblest avocations. . . . The trend of the practical thinkers of this day and generation is toward technical education. . . . To learn to make a decent living is to be educated."

In the same issue you also commend a letter from Miss McDermott, wherein she says that agriculture should be taught in the public schools, by putting in the right kind of nature study work; pupils might be taught to plant fruit trees, etc., including care, pruning, grafting, etc., of varieties suited to the climate.

You say her letter treats of a very vital and entirely new proposition. I presume you are not aware of the fact that at the late session of the legislature a bill was enacted into law making "the elements of agriculture, including a fair knowledge of the structure and habits of the common plants, insects, birds and quadrupeds," a requirement for a teacher's second grade certificate after July 1, 1903. The bill was endorsed by the State Board of Agriculture and by many of the most prominent school people of the state. I say that it was made a "requirement" for a teacher's certificate.

The school laws of Nebraska require that provision shall be made by the proper local school authorities for instructing the pupils in all schools supported by public money, or under state control, in physiology and hygiene, with special reference to the effects of alcoholic drinks and other stimulants and narcotics upon the human system, but this is the only subject that is required by law to be taught in the public schools of the state. Each district board has the power to cause pupils to be taught in such branches and classified in such grades or departments as may seem best adapted to a course of study which the school boards of any county shall establish by the consent and advice of the county superintendent thereof. In nearly all the common school districts of the state each board has adopted its own course, or they work without adoption, with the expectation that the teacher will teach the branches in which she has been examined for a certificate, viz., orthography, reading, penmanship, geography, arithmetic, physiology, English composition, English grammar, and United States history, and sometimes

civil government, book-keeping and drawing.

You say, "First readers for children can in words of one syllable impart valuable knowledge just as well as to inform the urchin to "see the r-a-t!" The cat-and-rat and cap-and-pan readers gave way some years ago to others that deal with leaves and fruit and flowers and birds. I quote from several: "I see an oak leaf." "I have a red apple." "I can roll an orange." "Do not harm the robin."

It has been charged that our schools of today teach less thoroughly than those of long ago, that we attempt too many subjects and give but a smattering of each. We may seem to be tending somewhat in that direction, but the pressure is from without,—not from within the schools. The medical men demand that a regular system of physical training be used; the G. A. R. want military science and drill; the turnverein ask for gymnastics; the clergymen insist that morality be inculcated by line and precept; the W. C. T. U. has succeeded in introducing formal teaching of the effects of alcohol, tobacco, narcotics and stimulants; the women's clubs beg for domestic science, the sewing guilds for needle-work, the trades for manual training, the business world for stenography and typewriting, the editors for current events, the artists for picture study the musical world for music, and the farmer for the elements of agriculture.

One of the gravest problems presented to our rural school teachers and their county superintendents is the desire of many school boards and patrons to introduce into the rural schools high school subjects. School people generally understand that these subjects cannot be taught there without great detriment to the work and instruction of the little folks, but in my rounds this summer I have found many places where it is demanded of the teachers that they instruct classes in algebra, civics, and physical geography, in addition to thirty or more classes in reading, arithmetic, spelling, geography, etc.

The demands of our modern civilization are great. Two or three generations ago it was not necessary for the youth to study the sciences—there was but little known of them to study. Today the well-educated youth must be familiar with modern machinery, with common business practice, with affairs of state, and the latest scientific discoveries. With the telegraph and cable connecting all the cities of the world, with the telephone soon to connect all its farm houses, with steam-ships and steam-cars and electric cars connecting all its cities, great and small, with million-dollar bridges spanning all its great rivers, and with its vast commercial enterprises, there is no end or limit

to the practical knowledge that may be gathered. The amount of it appals one, and I am fain to believe that the nearer our schools keep to the rudiments and the elements, to careful training and right habits, both of discipline and study, the better they are.

You endorse technical education and agriculture, others endorse various things. Who is to be the judge? Must the school people teach everything that is demanded?

It is true there is poor and indifferent work as well as excellent work done in the school rooms of Nebraska, but this is true in every state of the Union, in every country of the world, and it always has been true. There is always good, bad and indifferent work in every other walk and avocation of life, in every trade and other profession, and with less excuse for it; for in many of the trades and the other professions there is more regular, systematic and professional training for the work than we find for teaching. In the 8,000 school rooms in Nebraska this month we will find nearly 2,500 teachers who have had no experience whatever, and not more than 350 of this number have had any special training for the work. A few other statistics gathered from the last reports made to the state department of public instruction may be interesting and valuable in discussion, but it is my purpose to present the statistics only and leave the discussion to others. I will give the figures in round numbers with one, two or three ciphers that comparison may be more easily made in simple ratios.

Nebraska employs annually over 9,000 teachers, including only 2,000 male teachers. They are employed for an average of 27 weeks in the year at an average salary of less than \$38 for each four weeks. Think of it! The average yearly salary of teachers in this state is \$255, and only this morning a teacher informed me that her room rent and board cost her \$312 per annum. It is true she receives a salary much above the average, but it is also true that many receive a salary far below the average. Less than 1,000 of our teachers hold first grade county certificates, about 5,500 hold second grade certificates and 1,000 hold third grade certificates. The others hold professional life certificates or university or normal school diplomas. The 90 county superintendents in the state receive annually a total compensation of \$80,000. The average life of a Nebraska school teacher as a teacher, is three years. Each year we find in our school rooms about 2,500 who have had no experience whatever, 1,800 who have taught one year, 1,200 who have taught two years, 800 who have taught three years, 500 who have taught four years, and about 2,000 who have taught five years or more.

There are 6,700 school districts in the