

MINUTES OF EVIDENCE.

THURSDAY, 10TH NOVEMBER, 1887.—(Mr. J. G. WILSON, Chairman.)

Rev. J. W. HABENS, Inspector-General of Schools, in attendance and examined.

1. *The Chairman.*] You have seen, Mr. Habens, the order of reference?—I have.

2. Would you like to make any statement with regard to it; such, for instance, as would give the Committee information with regard to raising the school-age?—I should prefer that the Chairman should ask me questions, for the order of reference is so wide that I might not always be able to know, in giving the Committee information, whether I was going in a direction that would be useful to the Committee.

3. Then I shall ask you what would be the effect of raising the school-age from five years to seven?—That must to a certain extent be a matter of estimate founded upon statistics. The statistics that would be a basis for such an estimate appear on page 4 of the last report under Table D, where it is shown that, of the children in attendance at the end of last year, nearly 20 per cent.—actually 19·77—were under seven years of age. It cannot, however, be assumed that by raising the school-age to seven there would be a saving of 19·77, for no one can say whether the children between seven and five are the more regular in attendance or the older children, and payment of capitation is not made according to the number on the roll but according to the average attendance.

4. Are there no comparative tables showing the regular attendance?—There are no statistics to show the exact number of attendances of children under seven years of age in the schools, but I think it may be assumed that the proportion would be about 19·77 per cent., which is the proportion of children under seven on the rolls.

5. You are aware that there is a proposal to raise the school-age from five to six years?—The only estimate that I could get would be an approximate one, based upon the supposition that, of the children at school between five and seven, one-half are under and one-half over six. I have no means of arriving at the truth more accurately by any other supposition.

6. Do you not think that as they grow older the larger would be the proportion attending school?—I have considered that aspect of the question, but I am unable to arrive at any basis, except the division of the number into two equal parts. Whether such a division affords a perfectly fair estimate or not I have no means of knowing. I may state that during my last round of inspection I made a point of asking the headmasters of large schools if they could give me any idea whether the attendance of the infant classes was more regular or less regular than that of the older classes. I was not able to obtain from them anything like a definite answer. Such was the result of my inquiry of men who have the whole subject practically before their eyes.

7. What means has the department of ascertaining accurately the ages of the children attending the schools? You will, perhaps, have observed that it was given out in a debate which occurred in the House yesterday, that if there was an exclusion at a certain age, there would be a considerable number of children coming forward and claiming to be older than they really were, so as to secure the payment of capitation. My question is as to what means you have of ascertaining accurately the ages of children: do you require that certificates of registration of birth should be produced?—I would refer you to the regulation made by Order in Council of the 5th July, 1887. The sixth section of the first part of that Order in Council relates to the quarterly return of attendances from each school. That paper is on the table. I am referring more particularly to the form of the return. According to this form a statement is made by the headmaster of the school with respect to the ages of the children. The number of pupils on the roll is analysed, so that there is a statement of the ages of the children between five and seven, between seven and ten, between ten and thirteen, between thirteen and fifteen, and above fifteen. This return is signed by the principal teacher of the school and countersigned by the Chairman of the School Committee. But the regulation does not prescribe how the headmaster shall satisfy himself with respect to the age of each of the children.

8. What do you think is the general effect of discipline and teaching on these younger children?—Considering the early age at which the children of the artisan and the labourer ordinarily leave school, I am of opinion that it is necessary to admit such children to school at an early age in order that their school-course may be of reasonable length; and that, in schools which are sufficiently organized to provide instruction upon proper methods for children between five and seven years of age, such children derive a very great benefit from the discipline and instruction which they receive, and are thereby prepared for the severer methods of instruction that will follow in the more advanced classes. I think it should also be remembered that the children of the same class, if they are not at school at an early age, are likely to receive a practical education out-of-doors that, however advantageous it may be to them from a physical point of view, is perhaps very detrimental from a moral and intellectual point of view. I may add that, if we regard the example set by England in this matter, the English Government recognises the attendance of children just above three years of age as entitling the schools they attend to grants from the Treasury.