

The Primary School

The Government has always realized that, in addition to adequate buildings, there are four things essential to a good primary education—

- (a) Smaller classes ;
- (b) Good supplies of equipment, including books ;
- (c) Freedom of teachers from unnecessary external restrictions ; and
- (d) A training that will enable them to make the best possible use of that freedom and to meet the greatly extended demand now made upon them.

The war has seriously interfered with the Government's plans for providing these essentials, but, even so, progress has been by no means negligible over the past ten years.

(1) The five-year-olds were readmitted to school in 1936.

(2) Two training colleges, which had been closed in the depression were reopened in 1936. In 1945 there were no fewer than 1,448 teachers in training, in addition to the certificated returned servicemen taking refresher courses. In normal times only about 600 are needed each year for replacements. This apparent overproduction, which has gone on for several years, has been intended to meet the needs arising from the raising of the school age and to reduce the size of classes. During the war the majority of the trainees have been women, and it is difficult to foresee what the rate of retirement due to marriage will be during the next year or two. This, combined with the number of returned servicemen taking refresher courses or full-time rehabilitation bursaries, promises to cause a temporary shortage of teachers in 1946. It would be possible to meet the situation by denying returned-soldier teachers these special rights, but I am convinced that no one would wish this done. In spite of the threatened temporary shortage, the Government introduced regulations during the year giving a new staffing schedule for 1946 that will add a total of about 450 new teachers to the larger schools where the classes are biggest. Should the shortage of teachers make it impossible to put this new staffing schedule into full operation immediately, it will yet provide permanent positions to which soldier teachers can return on demobilization. It would be very undesirable to risk keeping large numbers of returned men in relieving positions through a lack of permanent posts.

(3) The Proficiency Examination was abolished in 1937. This gave the teachers for the first time the necessary freedom to adapt their curricula and methods to the individual child, to local needs, and to the changing demands of the modern world. It was, moreover, an important step towards full professional responsibility for the teacher. Like all major changes, the abolition of the Proficiency Certificate brought its own problems with it, and intensified the need for better equipment, smaller classes, and fuller training for teachers. I dealt in my last annual report (E.—1, 1945, pages 3–4) with the precautions being taken by the Department to maintain and improve academic standards in the schools. I know of no one, however, who is familiar with the work of the primary schools and who would willingly reinstate the old Proficiency Examination.

(4) The capitation grant for primary schools was increased by 50 per cent. in 1936, by £8,000 in 1942, and by £24,000 in 1945–46, and more money will be provided as it is found necessary.

(5) The syllabus of instruction is being systematically reviewed by committees representative of the Department, of teachers' organizations, and, in most cases, of private schools, with the object of bringing it into line with modern needs and laying down minimal prescriptions in the basic subjects. A new arithmetic syllabus was adopted in 1944, and new syllabuses in health education and English in 1945. Last year, in addition, the Committee on History and Geography brought down its draft report, which is now under consideration by the teachers' organizations. In 1945 new committees were set up on spelling and pre-reading activities. In 1946 other committees will begin work in children's reading and school needlework.

(6) The policy is to prepare text-books, based on the new syllabuses, for free distribution to all primary schools, private as well as State. Excellent arithmetic text-books up to Form I are already in the schools, and the preparation of English texts