Elementary Education Act 1870

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The Elementary Education Act 1870,[1] commonly known as Forster's Education Act, set the framework for schooling of all children between the ages of 5 and 12 in England and Wales. It was drafted by William Forster, a Liberal MP, and it was introduced on 17 February 1870 after campaigning by the National Education League, although not entirely to their requirements. In Birmingham, Joseph Chamberlain, not yet a Member of Parliament, was a prominent campaigner on the issue. However, like many grassroots Liberals he opposed the bill because it was open to the possibility of subsidising Church of England schools with local ratepayers' money.[2]

It was one of the Elementary Education Acts 1870 to 1893.[3][4]

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Need

A driving force behind the Act was a perceived need for Britain to remain competitive in the world by being at the forefront of manufacture and improvement.

The Act was not taken up in all areas and would be more firmly enforced through later reforms. There were objections to the concept of universal education. One was because many people remained hostile to the idea of mass education. They claimed it would make labouring classes 'think' and that these classes would think of their lives as dissatisfying and possibly encourage them to revolt.[5] Others feared that handing children to a central authority could lead to indoctrination. Some poor people feared that mass education would equip people to defraud or mislead those without an education. Another reason was the vested interests of the Church and other social groups. The churches were funded by the state with public money to provide education for the poor and these churches did not want to lose that influence on youth.

The Act established the foundations of English elementary education. The state (Gladstonian Liberalism) became increasingly involved and after 1880 attendance was made compulsory for children until they were 13 years old, with various exemptions.
The Act was passed partly in response to political factors (such as the need to educate the citizens recently enfranchised by the Reform Act 1867 to vote wisely). It also came about due to demands for reform from industrialists, who feared Britain's status in world trade was being threatened by the lack of an effective education system. The spectacular military successes of the Prussian army in the Austro-Prussian War prompted Gladstone to consider the military benefits of an Education Act; as he remarked, "Undoubtedly, the conduct of the campaign, on the German side, has given a marked triumph to the cause of systematic popular education".

Principles

Under the 1870 Education Act:

Local authorities were required to make returns of the number of children in their area and existing educational provision. This was done by comparing the results of a census of existing school places with the number of children of school age recorded in the Census. If there was a shortfall, a school board for the district would be created.

These Boards were to provide elementary education for children aged 5–13 (inclusive).

Board Members were elected by the ratepayers under a system of cumulative voting. (The number of Board Members was determined by the size of the population of the district.) Each voter could choose three (or more) Board Members from a list of candidates, and those with the highest number of votes were chosen for the existing number of seats available. A voter could cast all their votes for one person. This was known as 'plumping' and ensured that religious (and, later, political) minorities could ensure some representation on the Board. The franchise was different from national elections, since female householders could vote and stand for office.

The Boards financed themselves by a precept (a requisition) added to either the local poor rate or the municipal rate. They were also eligible to apply for capital funding in the form of a government loan.

Parents still had to pay fees for their children to attend schools.

Boards would pay the fees of children who were poor, even if they attended Church schools.

The Boards could make grants to existing Church Schools and erect their own board schools or elementary schools.

Boards could, if they deemed it necessary, create a by-law and table it before Parliament, to make attendance compulsory (unless there was an excuse, for example, sickness, or living more than three miles from a school, or unless they had been certified as reaching a certain standard of education – see below). In 1873, 40% of the population lived in compulsory attendance districts.

Religious teaching in board schools was restricted to non-denominational instruction, or none at all.

Parents had the right to withdraw their children from religious education. This applied even to church schools. Rate-supported schools were prohibited from using distinctive religious formularies.

All schools would be inspected, making use of the existing regime. The individual schools continued to be eligible for an annual government grant calculated on the basis of the inspection ('payment by results').[6]

Effects of the Act

Between 1870 and 1880, 3000–4000 schools were started or taken over by school boards. Rural boards, run by parishes, had only one or two schools to manage, but industrial town and city boards had many. Rural boards favoured economy and the release of children for agricultural labour. Town boards tended to be more rigorous
in their provisions, and by 1890 some had special facilities for gymnastics, art and crafts, and domestic science.

There were ongoing political clashes between the vested interests of Church, private schools and the National Education League followers. In some districts the creation of boards was delayed by local vote. In others, church leaders managed to be voted onto boards and restrict the building of board schools, or divert the school rate funds into church schools.

Education was not made compulsory immediately (not until 1880) since many factory owners feared the removal of children as a source of cheap labour. However, with the simple mathematics and English they were acquiring, factory owners now had workers who could read and make measurements.

Following continued campaigning by the National Education League, following the Elementary Education Act 1880, attendance to age 10 became compulsory everywhere in England and Wales. In 1891, elementary schooling became free in both board and voluntary (church) schools.

In Wales, this act is widely believed to be one of the most damaging pieces of legislation in the social history of the Welsh language, as children in Wales who very often knew no English were taught in English only.

**Commercial consequences**

As a direct response to this Education Act, the founding father of British popular journalism, George Newnes, began his career in publishing in 1881 when he founded *Tit-Bits*. This was a weekly magazine which took the form of a mini-encyclopedia of information to appeal to the new generations of young readers.

*Tit-Bits* reached a circulation of 700,000 by the end of the 19th century[7] and paved the way for popular journalism. Most significantly, the *Daily Mail* was founded by Alfred Harmsworth, a contributor to *Tit-Bits*, and the *Daily Express* was launched by Arthur Pearson, who worked at *Tit-Bits* for five years after winning a competition to get a job on the magazine.

**End of school boards**

The school boards were abolished by the *Balfour* Education Act 1902, which replaced them with around 300 local education authorities (LEAs), by which time there were 5,700 board schools (2.6 million pupils) and 14,000 voluntary schools (3 million pupils). The LEAs remit included secondary education for the first time.

**Standards of education**

In areas served by school boards that had implemented by-laws requiring attendance, compulsory attendance until age 13 was exempted if a child (being over age 10) had been certified by the inspector as satisfying the required standard for that board. The standards required varied between 4th Standard (example: Birmingham) and 6th Standard (example: Bolton).
The following are the six Standards of Education contained in the Revised code of Regulations, 1872

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>STANDARD I</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Reading</strong></td>
<td>One of the narratives next in order after monosyllables in an elementary reading book used in the school.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Writing</strong></td>
<td>Copy in manuscript character a line of print, and write from dictation a few common words.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Arithmetic</strong></td>
<td>Simple addition and subtraction of numbers of not more than four figures, and the multiplication table to multiplication by six.</td>
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<tr>
<th>STANDARD II</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Reading</strong></td>
<td>A short paragraph from an elementary reading book.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Writing</strong></td>
<td>A sentence from the same book, slowly read once, and then dictated in single words.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Arithmetic</strong></td>
<td>The multiplication table, and any simple rule as far as short division (inclusive).</td>
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<tr>
<th>STANDARD III</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Reading</strong></td>
<td>A short paragraph from a more advanced reading book.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Writing</strong></td>
<td>A sentence slowly dictated once by a few words at a time, from the same book.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Arithmetic</strong></td>
<td>Long division and compound rules (money).</td>
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<th>STANDARD IV</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Reading</strong></td>
<td>A few lines of poetry or prose, at the choice of the inspector.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Writing</strong></td>
<td>A sentence slowly dictated once, by a few words at a time, from a reading book, such as is used in the first class of the school.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Arithmetic</strong></td>
<td>Compound rules (common weights and measures).</td>
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<th>STANDARD V</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Reading</strong></td>
<td>A short ordinary paragraph in a newspaper, or other modern narrative.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Writing</strong></td>
<td>Another short ordinary paragraph in a newspaper, or other modern narrative, slowly dictated once by a few words at a time.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Arithmetic</strong></td>
<td>Practice and bills of parcels.</td>
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<tr>
<th>STANDARD VI</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Reading</strong></td>
<td>To read with fluency and expression.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Writing</strong></td>
<td>A short theme or letter, or an easy paraphrase.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Arithmetic</strong></td>
<td>Proportion and fractions (vulgar and decimal).</td>
</tr>
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**Scotland**

Although universal primary education had been established in Scotland by the Education Act of 1633, a similar act to the English Elementary Education Act was passed in 1872 for Scotland, the Education (Scotland) Act 1872. It required compulsory attendance from the start. It allowed post-elementary schools, but not public funding of them. There were around 1,000 boards in Scotland at the time they were eventually abolished.[8]

The 1872 Education Act brought in compulsory education for all children between 5 and 13, although fees still had to be paid until 1890. Teacher shortages continued and problems arose in areas where teachers who spoke no Gaelic attempted to teach children who had no English. Pupil-teachers could later qualify after attending Teacher Training College.

Local school boards made sure sufficient schools were built and that children attended them. After 1918, this became a county responsibility. State control increased the number of school inspectors after 1872. Medical and dental inspections were introduced after 1908, though reaching remote schools proved difficult. The leaving age was raised to 14 in 1883.
The new system was co-ordinated nationally by the Scotch Education Department with the curriculum emphasising the teaching of reading, writing, and arithmetic (the three ‘Rs’). The churches made a crucial contribution to the new system by handing over their schools without charge to the School Boards. At this time, the Free Church supported 548 schools across Scotland together with 584 teachers.

References

3. The Short Titles Act 1896, section 2(1) and Schedule 2

Further reading

- Collected reports and publications of the National Education League, Library of Birmingham, A370.8, z1103222

External links

- The Internet Archive – OCR scanned full text of The Elementary Education Act, 1870, with introduction, notes, and index, and appendix containing the incorporated statutes, W. Cunningham Glenn, 1870, Shaw & Sons, Fetter Lane.


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