

HOUSE.....

.....No. 36.

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# REPORT

ON THE

PETITION OF N. T. LEONARD,  
AND OTHERS.

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## Commonwealth of Massachusetts.

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HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES, 1 March, 1838.

The Committee of Education, to whom was referred the Memorial of N. T. Leonard and many other citizens of the town of Westfield, having given due consideration to the subjects therein represented, respectfully

### REPORT,

That the evils arising from the multiplicity of books in use at the common schools in a single town, are completely within the power of its school committee to control, and may therefore be cured at their discretion. Without deciding, that a considerable proportion of the books for such schools, which have recently issued, should not be regarded as valuable, the committee readily assent to the other part of the memorialists' representation on this matter, that too heavy a burden is imposed upon teachers, when they are required to use a great number of different school books in the same school, and thereby compelled to adopt a multiplication of classes, to the positive detriment of the pupils.

The committee also agree with the petitioners, that, if all the books employed in the schools of the Commonwealth by pupils of the same age, capacity and intelligence, were of the same kind, they might be procured at

much less expense; and that a teacher, who had been one year engaged in one school, would, the next year, be better qualified for instruction in the same or other school, from the books being the same and few in number. But, in the prescription of a remedy for these complaints, we apprehend that, at present, insurmountable difficulties lie in the course suggested by the memorial. It prays, that the law be so amended that the board of education shall prescribe the books to be used in our common schools, and that any town neglecting to introduce the books so prescribed, shall forfeit its portion of the school fund.

If such a mode of obtaining uniformity might not produce more injury than benefit to the cause of instruction in the common schools, it appears to the committee necessary that its introduction should at least be gradual. It should not be so precipitated upon our towns, as to withdraw forthwith, from their most valuable and competent officers, the regulation of a subject of so high and general importance. What period of years shall be required to reach this condition of uniformity through all parts of the Commonwealth, may not now be easily computed; but such invariable processes would be less conveniently introduced in Massachusetts than in other states of this Union, where no system of popular instruction has ever been established, or under a government acting only on principles proper to an absolute monarchy, and with the simplicity of military discipline. The banishment of diversity should first be effected in a narrow section, or a county at most—but that will be no small trouble; and perhaps long continued exertion of all the friends of improvement will be requisite, at first, to overcome, in a circuit of four or five towns, what seems almost a natural tendency, in different minds of even the happiest consti-

tution, to arrive at different results. If we had already attained to such partial consent in each of twenty or forty nearly equal portions of our people by concerted action, the adoption of either of the plans, ever so arbitrarily directed by the Legislature, might, indeed, be more beneficial than no regulation at all, of which the memorialists lament the consequence. Yet, until they carry into execution the existing provisions of law, under which the decision respecting school books is exclusively at the discretion of their own officers, it may be doubted, if the discretion of another tribunal, devising a plan for uniformity, would meet with adequate respect and obedience. To enforce obedience may, however, be easy enough, after a gradual approach to perfection of these provisions is gained from action of many enlightened minds bestowed on them; but, in our present condition, it might probably give great dissatisfaction, and, we fear, the penalty of forfeiting the town's portion of the school fund would seem an odious one. If the desire of the petitioners should impose on the board of education the duty of prescribing the books for common schools, it might hardly be expected of them to fulfil such important service, without some years consultation with teachers, and examination of the various elementary works employed by these teachers. Adoption of one among a dozen or more now in use, would of course produce great change in those district schools where it was unknown before; and should this change be ultimately regarded as a great improvement, if it be not acceptable at its introduction, more harm than benefit would follow. We must make haste slowly in universal changes.

Of the other subject of complaint, for which the memorial desires the Legislature to supply a relief, that is,

the frequent rotation of the school committees by election in many towns. This committee readily expresses its concurrence in the opinions of the petitioners. That such frequent change may have an ill influence upon the system of common schools, both by rendering their committees less efficient in the examination of schools and teachers, as also by preventing uniformity in the qualifications in different years required of candidates for the office of teachers, is certainly a natural result. But the continuance of such injurious effects may be prevented by the voluntary action of each town; and we much fear, that the remedy suggested in the memorial, "that, after the first election of school committees, those chosen shall hold their offices for three years, and those chosen at the first election to hold for one, two and three years, to be classed in such manner as the towns or the Legislature may determine," would be termed rather an arbitrary enactment than a useful regulation. Custom, in our town elections, should not lightly be altered. At present, there is equal freedom from restraint in the choice of these officers as of town treasurers; and if our fellow citizens are led, by judicious regard to their pecuniary interests, to retain for a series of years, by annual elections, the most competent treasurer, the increasing attention in all parts of our land given to the cause of education will soon bring the common sagacity to a similar course in their selection of school committees. Sure we are, that these inhabitants of Westfield are upon the right track for reform, when they have discovered the occasion of their own and others' deficiency; nor will the committee entertain a doubt, that, in most of our towns, the exercise of the usual good sense which regulates the administration of their prudential affairs, will gradually lead

to the correction of these errors, in a manner much more effectual than it could be produced by law. Too much regulation would be far worse than too little, because deficiency may be supplied, but unpopular acts of legislation would be disobeyed, or grudgingly carried into effect, in our municipal republics.

In view of the probable consequences of either of the measures urged in the memorial, the committee conclude, that it is not expedient to legislate thereon.

JAS. SAVAGE.

*Per order.*

