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ACADEMIC EXAMINATIONS AND ACADEMIC FUNDS

An address

BY

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*Commissioner of Education of the State of New York*

AT THE

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OF THE

State of New York

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## ACADEMIC EXAMINATIONS AND ACADEMIC FUNDS

*Mr Chancellor and Ladies and Gentlemen:*

No other State gives anything like the amount of money that New York State gives to the upbuilding of secondary schools. Our people give \$65,000,000 each year for education and \$7,850,000 for the annual maintenance of our 800 schools of secondary grade. But that is not what is now in mind. Reference is now made to the funds distributed by *the State government* to encourage the scholarship in and the expansion of the high schools and academies. The State began the policy even before she began to appropriate State school moneys for the elementary schools. She has maintained the policy with uniform sagacity and steadily enlarging generosity. The State support of the academic schools is more liberal than the State support of the elementary schools. The schools of approved academic standing receive academic funds in liberal addition to the distributive share which they get as common schools from the State school funds. This is right because they are much more expensive and because the elementary school system and all of the educational interests of the State are very dependent upon them. The special fund given by the State government for promoting the excellence of these advanced schools, which have come to be the vital connecting link between the elementary schools and the colleges and universities, and which have come to be the scarcely less vital link between the elementary schools and real success in our complex intellectual and industrial activities, is more than a half million dollars annually. This has been going on a long time and I make free to say that I think it should have been more uniformly effective than it has.

The precise basis upon which this fund is allotted is left to the sound judgment of the Board of Regents. It goes without saying that it must be given in recognition and encouragement of scholarship. This has not always been as easy as the inexperienced may suppose. When the academic schools were few, before and for some time following the development of the public high schools, and when the appropriations were not large, the academic funds were apportioned upon the educational pedigrees of the teachers, the studies taught, the architecture of the schoolhouse, and the general reputation of the school. It seemed the only way. Then it was discovered that a better way for finding out about the work of a school is to examine the students. The teachers were not examined as the

teachers in the elementary schools were; there has been no special certificate for high school teachers; and it is the truth that they have often shown less altitudinal competency for their work than the teachers of the elementary schools have for theirs. And up to the later eighties there were no means by which the Regents could even partially inspect the secondary schools.

This developed a system of academic examinations which for many years, except for two or three brief periods, has been the basis of distribution of academic funds. This examinations system is quite exceptional in our country. So are the State academic appropriations. Both distinguish our State. There are some who seem frightened by the fact that other states do not do as we do. I am not one of them. There is no other State that is as great as New York, either in educational experience, authority, or resources. We will base our judgments upon our own situations and act upon what we think.

For many years prior to 1900 the funds were apportioned according to the number of pupils who passed the examinations and, for reasons which are well known and need not here be discussed, the examinations were steadily extended, enlarged, intensified and complicated. The trend of the examinations system led to pedagogic abuses, and doubtless to something worse at times, in order to enlarge a school's share in the funds. There were those who would rather trust to the report of an academic inspector than to the answers which their students would make to the examination questions. In the meantime, inspectors had multiplied and the inspecting system had grown.

Accordingly, it was determined in 1900 to distribute the funds in proportion to the attendance at each school of academic pupils, without reference to their passing examinations, when the University inspectors reported that the admission requirements of the school were equivalent to those required for the preliminary certificate. This relieved schools from the necessity of submitting their students to examination in order to share in the funds. It is true that the examinations have continued to be used in nearly or quite all schools using them before. The number of schools using them has enlarged notwithstanding the abolition of the requirement. That evidences the common estimate of their value. In some formerly using the examinations it has led to only partial use, to jugglery, and to other

abuses; and some schools which never used the examinations have come to share in the fund without the State having any very exact knowledge of their work.

History has only repeated itself. Two or three times in the unfolding of our academic history the Regents relaxed the requirement that schools must submit to the examinations in order to share in the funds, only to meet with disagreeable but stern facts which soon convinced them that they must go back to it again if they would protect their funds and realize their expectations. A careful inquiry which has been in progress since our educational reorganization brought the officers of the Education Department and the Regents in April last to feel that it was necessary to return to the requirement that all schools claiming a share in the funds must use the examinations. This has stirred some circumscribed but fervid remarks. In one or two instances these have gone the length of opposing all examinations on the ground that they are narrowing, dwarfing, misleading, mechanical, uninspirational, juiceless, and about everything else bad in education that the excessively pedagogical and the prematurely over-spiritual are able to think of.

Of course we must have freedom in the schools, but before that the schools must have the elements which need and can exercise freedom. Of course the imagination must be developed in education, but imagination which does not connect with earth claims restraint, or leads to madness. Of course spirituality must have its free opportunity in the schools, but there are a good many of us who think that the honest capacity to do things in this world must be the vital basis of the spirituality which will be of the most worth in Heaven. Schools on earth must, in the first instance at all events, reckon with the things of earth.

There is nothing so sacred about a system of examinations as to forbid its being discussed, criticized, condemned, modified or abandoned if sense has the right of way and reasons are convincing. It has been apparent to me for many years that our State educational interests would be promoted by the fresh discussion of and some decisive changes in our examinations system. The action taken in April and amplified in June, to which some exception has been taken, resulted from much fresh consideration of the matter by the officers of the Department and the Board of Regents. It was not at all impulsive. The advisability of what was done is not doubted and the reasons for it are not wanting.

If it is a matter of any interest, it may be said that my personal feelings concerning the Regents examinations were expressed in the Board of Regents twenty years ago when I said, "I believe in these examinations heartily. So long as they express the best teaching they are all right. They contain the elements of educational uplift. I oppose multiplying, extending and intensifying them. If that course is persisted in they will break down because they ought to. A good thing may be worked to death." My view is the same now as then, although my official relations with the Board of Regents have materially changed. Since our present relations were established my influence has been for simplifying the examinations, for reducing the number of the examinations, for reducing the length of the question papers, for avoiding so far as possible any hurtful consequences which may be merely incident to them, for making them representative of the best teaching, and not only responsive but helpful to the best progress in education. But I am not ignorant of the educational value of good examinations, nor of the need of examining students to find out about schools, nor of the desirability of recurring tests and permanent and continuing records to bring schools up and keep them up to their best. The value of proper examinations is no longer open to discussion in education. I think we can make as good examinations in New York as any other people can make, and that we can make such examinations both the aid and test of good work, without subjecting ourselves to the hurts which obtuseness in multiplying, extending and intensifying the examinations may bring upon us. I see no reason why State appropriations should not be allotted on the basis of good work, judged by all of the best tests, nor why the State's tests should not be applied alike to all who desire to share in the State's gifts to good scholarship. In all of this the Board of Regents and the Commissioner of Education are in entire accord.

The Education Department makes an academic syllabus each five years for the general guidance of the academic schools. It requires no self-assurance to say in this presence that the syllabus is of inestimable value to academic schools. Practically all of our 800 schools of academic grade are greatly advantaged by it. They are not afflicted by it. They welcome it. They feel that it is theirs; that they make it; that it is the joint product of the best thinking of leading academic teachers and the Department



officials and is better than any one person or any one school could prepare. It is in use in a hundred cities outside of the State.

This syllabus not only guides and inspires the teaching in the secondary schools, but it becomes the basis and limits the scope of the academic examinations. These examinations, held semiannually, are the State's tests of the work of the schools, and the standings which pupils gain in them have recognized educational value for teachers certificates, for admission to advanced schools and to examinations leading to the learned professions. They ought to be and perhaps may be accepted as scholarship tests for admission to the State civil service, and to the county and municipal civil service throughout the State. The certificates have educational values commonly understood in the State and widely recognized throughout the country.

But the State does not say that any school *must* follow this syllabus or take these examinations. It does not distribute money on the basis of success in the examinations. It does not punish any student for failure. It *does* say that any school which claims the State's money must submit to the State's tests. And it does say that the higher educational standards and requirements for which it assumes responsibility must be completely met in some definite and exact manner for which it is able to vouch.

Of course there are excellent people who assert their opposition to all examinations beyond those of the class teacher — which are not examinations at all as we understand the term. These good friends grow radiant about mental reach, resourcefulness and grasp, about liberty in teaching, about spiritual expansion and the unfolding of the soul. They are rather interesting enthusiasts, if it is after dinner, and one has nothing else to do, and spontaneous humor runs low, and it isn't time to go home. But we all have our limitations, and the truth is that one who is so ebullient on that kind of thing must of necessity be wanting in perspective, in the sense and the strength and the adapting that are necessary to do real work in a real world, in the knowledge and the procedure which make for uniform efficiency in a system of schools.

The sustained effort and the substantial accomplishments of the world have come from men and women who have been trained to see some things clearly rather than all things faintly, and to do definite tasks as well as speculate about diversified industries. Out of

this training and this exactness and the effort incident thereto, there come the fiber and texture and application and endurance which make sure of accomplishing things even though things are hard.

The really competent have no fear of fair examinations. The ability to pass set examinations within the scope of the work pretended to have been done is a fundamental factor in educational competency. Any student who is sixteen years of age, half way through the secondary schools, and can not tell what he knows of a subject which he has covered, and tell it in a reasonable form in a rational examination limited by the scope of his term's work, and set by others than his teachers, has been badly trained. He has been wasting his time and doubtless some teachers have been unwittingly consenting to it. If he has to go to work, the ability to pass an examination is an acquisition exceedingly desirable; if he is to go to college or to a professional or technical school, it is vital. If he can not begin to do it by the time he is half way through high school, there is little prospect that he will ever do it. If he can never do it he will be at least a partial and very likely a complete failure.

We are going to continue the inspections, but at the best they can be only occasional. With a self-satisfied or antagonistic principal it is almost impossible for them to accomplish much. Under any circumstances they are often easy-going, meaningless and without much result. They can not be like a sheriff's search or a legislative investigation of an insurance company. They have to be accompanied with much caution, and a great deal of politeness, and perhaps some conviviality of a scholarly kind. We are trying to make them wiser and firmer and kindlier and more potential, and to accomplish it we are going to check up on the inspector by ascertaining whether what he has been saying and doing about the school is evidenced by the work of the pupils.

We shall continue to read courses of study, continue to see how many teachers in a secondary school have done any work above what they are teaching, continue to regard pedigree and general repute, and even to listen to the philosophy of pedagogical emotionalists. We will talk about all this with as little prevarication as possible and all of the politeness we have. But when a New York State secondary school claims a right to share in an appropriation made

to build up secondary schools we are going to see what the upper class students of that school can do in our examinations, so as to know by the best tests known to educational experience what kind of work that school is really doing. We are not going to pay money in proportion to the number of students who pass; we are not going to drive students to suicide by forcing such as are on the verge of collapse into an examination; we are not going to hang all hope for this world and the next upon passing a single examination; we are not going to set any more irrational examinations than we can prevent; we are not even going to withdraw appropriations because a considerable percentage of students do not pass. We *are* going to test the work of the school and when the test shows weak or worthless work we are going to help the authorities of that school to make it better, if they will let us and if there is enough fiber in the management to build upon; but if they will not let us, or if there is nothing to build upon, we are going to remember our responsibility to the State and the community most interested and tell the constituency of that school that there is something the matter with it, and what it is.

The tests shall be uniformly applied. There shall be no evasion and no favoritism. Sharing in the State's bounty, definitely intended to be an encouragement to sound scholarship in advanced schools, shall be upon equal terms. The tests must be easy enough for the schools which are large and strong: those which are neither may rightfully object to tests which the more conspicuous do not have to meet. And, truth to tell, it sometimes develops that the size of a schoolhouse and the claims of trustees and teachers are not always conclusive of the character of the school.

Any who are unwilling to use the examinations can be accommodated by foregoing the appropriations, but the duty which the State Education Department owes to the common interests and to all of the people of the State will require that even in such case the Department officers shall ascertain the facts in the best way open to them, and afford information to any who may be interested.

But the requirement that all schools expecting to share in the appropriations must use the examinations was accompanied by several other modifications of the rules, which have long been under consideration and are decisively in the direction of simplicity and relaxation. If each school sharing in the State funds must be ex-

amined, each school doing so must feel the examinations much less than heretofore.

It was enacted that the examinations should not be mandatory in any school except in the last two years of the course; that success in passing the State examinations shall not be necessary for the promotion of pupils from grade to grade in or for the graduation of pupils from schools that prefer to determine such advancements by their own local standards; and that the principal of a school may, for physical or mental reasons satisfactory to himself, but to be reported to the State Department, excuse a pupil from taking any examination.

It was definitely announced that, apart from the schools showing the Department what their children can do in an examination, from assuring some definite preparation for admission to the normal schools and the training classes, and to colleges and professional examinations, and from protecting the standards and certificates which the State guarantees, the legal power shall be reserved to a community to indulge in just as much "freedom" as it enjoys, and have just as poor schools as self-satisfied theorists are able to make that community content with. They can even do that and be law honest, but let no one think that it carries moral right. No American community has moral right to any but the best schools it can have.

The educational authorities of the State of New York are agreed in declaring their unqualified belief in the necessity of well-defined and not too complex courses of work in the secondary schools, in some exact measuring of the results of instruction, and in the pedagogical value of examinations covering the work done, and set by others than the instructors, provided such examinations are representative of the best teaching and freely responsive to educational progress.

The whole world is relative. The highest competency for one task is marked incompetency for another. This is so, even though the tasks are both educational. It is no reflection upon persons for whom I have the highest personal and official respect to say that our academic examinations ought to be prepared, or at least approved, by men and women who may not be disposed to accept employment in a State Department; who are doing, or are in every-day association with, the best teaching, and who have outlook,

energy and discrimination equal to the highest intellectual and educational demands of the foremost State of the Union.

In passing from the old way of preparing examinations, let us not be unjust to the people who have heretofore done the work. It has been encompassed by many troubles. It is easy enough for a teacher to think that he could make a better examination paper than another does. It is easy enough to think one question should have been omitted and another admitted. It is easy enough for teachers to differ about the values of answers. Teachers get their recreation out of such differences. It remains to be seen whether the examinations will be prepared better hereafter than heretofore. And while we are finding out let us be considerate of the men and women who have been doing it very conscientiously and very satisfactorily in the years that are gone.

We are now going to see if we can not do much better through a New York State Examinations Board, for which the Board of Regents provided at the June meeting, in the following language:

“This board shall consist of twenty persons — the Commissioner of Education, the three Assistant Commissioners, and the Chief of the Examinations Division shall be *ex officio* members, and the Commissioner of Education shall be chairman. Fifteen other members shall be appointed by the Board of Regents, ordinarily at the time of the University Convocation, five of whom shall represent the colleges and universities, five the high schools and academies, and five the city superintendents. Only such persons as are engaged in teaching or in supervision in this State shall be members of the board. The appointive members shall serve for five years but the first appointees for each group shall serve for one, two, three, four and five years, as designated by the Board of Regents.”

“The functions of the Examinations Board shall be to appoint, with the approval of the Commissioner of Education, committees to prepare question papers for State examinations, and to advise with the Commissioner in respect to the form and contents of syllabuses covering the subjects of study in the elementary and secondary schools.”

“This board shall serve without compensation, but the ordinary expenses incident to attendance upon meetings called by the Commissioner of Education shall be paid by the State.”

“The committees appointed by the State Examinations Board to prepare question papers shall consist of three persons each. One

of each committee shall be an officer of the Education Department; the other two members, for preacademic subjects shall be principals of elementary schools, and for academic subjects a college teacher and a secondary school teacher. Each teacher shall serve for one year and shall receive from the State the necessary expenses in attending meetings of his committee in each year and an annual honorarium as follows: on preacademic subjects, English, Latin, Greek, history with civics and economics, mathematics, biologic science, and commercial subjects, \$50; on German, French, Spanish and drawing, \$40; on physics, chemistry and physical geography, \$30."

Yesterday the Board of Regents appointed the first State Examinations Board as follows:

### Colleges

President Nicholas Murray Butler of Columbia University, to serve  
5 years

President Rush Rhees of the University of Rochester, to serve  
4 years

Chancellor James R. Day of Syracuse University, to serve 3 years

President David W. Hearn of the College of St Francis Xavier, to  
serve 2 years

President A. V. V. Raymond of Union University, to serve 1 year

### Secondary schools

Associate City Superintendent Edward L. Stevens, in charge of  
high schools, New York City, to serve 5 years

Principal Walter B. Gunnison, Erasmus Hall High School, Brook-  
lyn, to serve 4 years

Principal Frank H. Rollins, Stuyvesant High School, Manhattan,  
to serve 3 years

Principal Frank D. Boynton, Ithaca High School, Ithaca, to serve  
2 years

Principal L. F. Hodge, Franklin Academy, Malone, to serve 1 year

### Elementary schools

Superintendent William Henry Maxwell, New York City, to serve  
5 years

Superintendent Henry P. Emerson, Buffalo, to serve 4 years

Superintendent A. B. Blodgett, Syracuse, to serve 3 years

Superintendent Charles E. Gorton, Yonkers, to serve 2 years  
Superintendent Richard A. Searing, North Tonawanda, to serve  
1 year

Since initiating this action the great city of New York, where the examinations have never been used because the high schools are new and the superintendent and other officials have never been satisfied with the method of preparing the examination papers, has determined to come into the examinations system. We are glad of it for we need the aid of the men and women who are at the head of the school system in that great city in giving trend to the examinations and uplift and energy to all of the educational activities of the State. And they need us. It begins to look as though we are going to have an educational oneness beyond our highest expectations. If it be so we shall gain educational power beyond our fondest dreams.

When argument in this matter is about over and the attempt to organize an opposing propaganda has failed, the broad allegation is made that unification in this State has been accompanied by narrowness, autocracy, bureaucracy, inconsistency, and some other possible ailments. The charge comes on schedule time. It is the stock argument of the man in education whose ideas or ambitions do not prevail. It can not often be noticed, generally because it is not worth while, and particularly because a State administration which refuses to be insipid and is something more than polite, one which takes the initiative and resists attack, is held, for that very reason, to furnish added proof of its selfish arrogance and its insane purpose to overthrow all educational freedom.

As between initiating movements which the few will call over-reaching, and the insipidity which kills all energy and the nervelessness which destroys all opportunity, the present administration will elect the former. And just now I, for one and for once, welcome the charge that has been made because it provides a substantial reason for pointing to steps in the direction of democracy, local educational freedom, and liberalized State policies, which have been taken in our State affairs since the reorganization of the State educational administration:

We have absolutely withdrawn all State directions about, or responsibility for, examinations in the elementary schools.

We have given complete responsibility for admission to the secondary schools to the local authorities.

We are excluding mere academic work from the normal schools and giving it over to local high schools and academies.

We have been making the elementary syllabus less directory, less minute in its prescriptions, and less difficult in accomplishment.

We have given over the whole foundation of teachers certificates to the local academic schools.

We have commenced to give all college graduates, even though they have no teaching experience, teachers certificates without examination.

We are now excusing all high schools from requiring their pupils to take any examination whatever before the pupils are half way through the high school course; we are leaving it to local principals to say whether any pupil of any age is unfit to take an examination, for physical or mental reasons; we are leaving the standards of promotion in and graduation from all academic schools to the local authorities, so far as they wish it so; and if there are any people in New York who possess a school which they think ought not to have any exact standards or respond to any known tests, and if they will relinquish their claim upon the State's moneys, we will have to let them go their own sweet way until their experiences bring them to their senses.

We are now turning over the whole matter of giving trend and setting limitations to the work of the schools, and of determining the examinations to be held in the schools, to leading teachers of the State, in the State Examinations Board.

Instructions have been given to Department officials and employees to travel no more than is required by the clear demands of the service. They are not desired to be present at the occasional but not unusual functions of a school, for it ought not to be assumed that such functions can not easily occur without representation from the Department.

The Department officials have likewise been directed never to meddle with school elections or with the settlement of contested questions in local assemblages beyond declaring the terms of the school law and the manifest interests of education in the State. They have had the same directions concerning the elections and policies of the voluntary associations; they are not desired to do more in these associations than keep themselves well advised, give such



information as may be desired, and engage reasonably in the open and public discussion of questions of general educational concern.

We have demanded that all political or partizan hands shall be taken off the Department and off the schools, and that unselfish friends of the schools and particularly the officers and teachers of the schools shall be unhampered in their free opportunity to compound their experiences and their opinions and give trend and buoyancy to the educational activities of each city or district.

No step has been taken which can fairly be held to disclose a thought of being exclusive, dictatorial, improperly ambitious, or which points to a purpose to develop the mechanical side of mere administration, the vicious power of officialism. There is nothing that we so much want as that every city and school district in the State may be able and disposed to develop the fullest measure of educational capacity and independence. There is nothing to which we are, and I am, so much opposed as Department policies which will repress or retard such development. No one knows better than I that the glory of New York education is to be assured through the independent manliness and womanliness of the teachers in the schools and through the strength of the separate schools.

But there is another side to it. So complex and involved is the work of the modern schools that many of the people — the unprofessional people, at least — are often unable to discriminate between good schools and poor ones. They commonly think they have excellent schools when they often have very poor ones. Something worse than that is often true, and particularly true of secondary schools. School boards and teachers are often unable to put any fair estimate upon the excellence of their own schools, and they sometimes block the efforts of their more intelligent constituents who know that the schools are not as good as they ought to be and are anxious to make them better. There is no block to the advance of a school so effective as that which is not infrequently interposed by dull or conceited officers and teachers of the school. The State Department owes something to the people of a city or school district, as well as something to the officers and teachers, and there is an administration here which does not intend to let many communities be beguiled into thinking that they have the very best schools when in fact they have very poor schools, without having something to say about it. And we must have something to say about it, even though some officers and teachers may be troubled by what we say.

Let us be understood in so important a matter. There is no one in the State educational administration, I am sure, who would not be ashamed of any policy or any attitude of the State which will not make a good teacher feel stronger and more independent in his school room, and which will not make every city and school district feel that it has an educational autonomy of its own, and an educational salvation of its own to work out. There is no one here who would not give every help to every teacher who is capable of being helped. There is no one here who would not stand by and protect every teacher, no matter how high or how humble, who is unjustly opposed by the world, flesh, and devil factors in our democratic civilization. But we are opposed to narrowness and conceit. We are for the people, and the children, and the schools, as well as for the teachers. We can not protect one against himself when he is justly criticized or opposed. We are to help the teacher if he will be helped, and we are to help the schools whether or no, peacefully if we can, and through a contest if we must. We must give the best teaching and real progress their utmost opportunity to influence the educational career of the State.

All that we have done is in the direction of democracy in learning and the same treatment for all by the State. We will be patient, even slow. We will hear everybody to the utmost limit of time and strength. But we assert that there are established values and recognized standards in education; and that even a State may have come to know something of them, and may therefore exercise the right to apply them to all the secondary schools which it encourages with unparalleled liberality, without being justly charged with subverting the cherished liberties of the people. After hearing every one with all patience; after free discussions in the associations and in the press; with every disposition to wait reasonably for the consolidation of opinion; with entire confidence that there is no likelihood of serious divergence in our final judgments upon important matters, and refusing to spend much time over little matters, the administration will take the responsibility which the law and the logic of the situation place upon it. And one man with a sane proposition, or one young girl school teacher with a just cause, shall have more weight here than forty men with foibles who have conceived the notion that coercion may be the product of combination.

For myself, returning to the subject and coming to a conclusion, I take the responsibility of saying that the secondary schools of New York have multiplied very rapidly. Some have been so much stimulated and have grown so rapidly that they are weak. More than half of them are without college graduates as principals. The colleges must do more for us. The boards of education must be more discriminating. The teachers themselves must realize that preparation for the secondary schools must be stronger. It is hard to say this but we must say it if we would mend it. Many of these schools are below the grade. It is vital that all be brought up to standard. It can be done. A school, particularly a high school, does not have to be a big one in order to be a good one.

If all of our middle schools can now be made thoroughly good, if we can make sure that they are being taught by liberally educated teachers, and that the course really prepares for college or for the higher grades of work, we shall have at once given uplift to both the colleges and the elementary school system. We have the instruments, the Second Assistant Commissioner in the Department and the men and women upon the field; we have the money, both centrally and generally. We can do this, and we are going to do it. We ask the help of every one of you. We will give you our help. We will not be overbearing or inconsiderate. We will be kindly but we shall be firm. We will not in any case humiliate you before your people unless your own obstinacy and their high interests make it necessary. In any case we will try to do our duty and we confidently rely upon all honest and intelligent friends of the schools to help us. We have no purpose and no ambitions but to make an educational administration that shall be worthy of and acceptable to the Empire State. *If it is in us to do that, we will not be turned aside from doing it.*

If we can uniformly grade up these secondary schools from Olean to Oyster Bay, and if we can in the next year or two establish supervision in the farming regions that is reasonably equivalent to that which is now enjoyed in the cities and larger villages, we shall have an educational system that will be worthy of having its chief seats in a four million dollar State Educational Building. We have something to do beyond securing the appropriations for the finest education building in the world. We are to occupy such a building worthily.





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