

MC 0659

BOX 1 FOLDER 21

Municipal Responsibility for Healthy
School-houses

1897

nil

Beery ✓

MUNICIPAL RESPONSIBILITY

FOR

HEALTHY SCHOOL-HOUSES.

MASS. INST. TECH.
19 JUL 1943
LIBRARY
CENTRAL

WITHDRAWN
M. I. T.
LIBRARIES

By Mrs. ELLEN H. RICHARDS.

[*Reprinted from Transactions of the American Public Health Association.*]

CONCORD:

PRINTED BY REPUBLICAN PRESS ASSOCIATION.

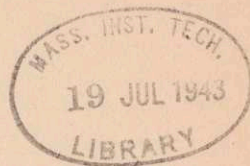
1897.

T-N
R514

MUNICIPAL RESPONSIBILITY

FOR

HEALTHY SCHOOL-HOUSES.



BY MRS. ELLEN H. RICHARDS.

[Reprinted from Transactions of the American Public Health Association.]

CONCORD:

PRINTED BY REPUBLICAN PRESS ASSOCIATION.

1897.

MRL
6-4-71

T-N
TR 514

MUNICIPAL RESPONSIBILITY FOR HEALTHY SCHOOL- HOUSES.¹

BY MRS. ELLEN H. RICHARDS.

It has come to pass in the development of the social order that the protection of the more or less helpless individuals of the community, children, women, and wage-earners, is secured by legal enactment carrying penalty for failure to comply with such laws.

The chivalry and justice of man cannot be depended upon in cases where self-interest in the acquisition of money or power is concerned.

As a consequence, the statute books of every country show an increasing number of employers' liability acts, of laws regulating the employment of children in mills, of women in mines, of regulations as to the amount of air per minute per man in coal mines, of the number of cubic feet of air-space per individual in dust-producing manufactures.

Furthermore, the state recognizes certain occupations as dangerous, and requires the employer of labor in these occupations to take all possible precautions for the health and safety of his employes, in order to reduce the danger to a minimum. The state holds the employer strictly responsible for neglect in complying with the law, whether such neglect is due to carelessness or to cupidity, and only when he can show that he has done all in his power toward this end is he free from claims for damages to individuals in his employ.

Most mine owners and manufacturers find it pays better in the end to conform to the legal requirements, for they not only suffer heavy loss when an accident does occur, but also the men are frequently in a position to demand higher wages or to refuse altogether to work under conditions known to be illegal.

The same sense of justice and recognition of the principles of social economy which regulate the quantity of air sent down the mine shaft to the miner, placed where he is powerless to help himself, should extend its interest to the teachers and children of our public schools, who are present in buildings belonging to the city and are under strict legal compulsion to remain in them a fixed number of hours per day, whatever their condition, under penalty of arrest for truancy or neglect of duty.

The facts of ownership of the building and of compulsory attendance, place the municipality under obligation to surround the scholars with the best of hygienic conditions.

While there may be a question whether the tendency to hold the indi-

¹Read at the Buffalo meeting of the American Public Health Association.

Teck Coll.

vidual employer of labor responsible is not liable to be pushed too far in the social struggle for power, there can be no question of the responsibility of a great and supposedly enlightened municipality, with all expert wisdom at its command, for the condition of the buildings it provides for its school children.

It is held to strict account if a broken bridge or a neglected road causes the injury or death of an individual, and a penalty is exacted for such failure in duty.

The death by drowning of four children at Castle Island last July caused exclamations of horror throughout the community and an instant attention to conditions existing at the time of the accident, and all good citizens applauded the mayor in his effort to so fix the responsibility that no such excuses as were plausibly made could be valid in the future.

In this same city the deaths of some 200 children during the year caused no ripple of excitement—for months no public attention was called to the conditions which probably led to this unnecessary sacrifice of human life—and even after the public press had given the note of warning, sounded with no uncertain sound by the mayor, the health authorities, and the director of physical training, a plea of expense, a squabble of petty politics, and a laxness of the sense of moral and legal responsibility, common among semi-official bodies, bid fair to allow the same conditions to continue for years to come as they have for years past.

The power behind the throne, the great tax-paying public, must be roused from its apathy in regard to sanitary matters, and must demand as a factor in education, the provision of buildings which fulfil the conditions known to be essential to health, and must hold the city officials strictly accountable for the neglect of such conditions.

The question of healthy school-houses has been agitated from time to time, and papers on the subject will be found in the reports of various state boards of health, notably of Massachusetts, 1871, Michigan, 1873, New York, 1882; and city boards have not been blind to the needs, as shown by the report of the Metropolitan Board of Health, New York, 1872, Board of Education, Philadelphia, 1875, City Board of Health, Boston, 1875, 1880, 1890.

Nevertheless, it is as true to-day as when the words were written in 1882, that "In numerous towns, villages, and cities, as shown in the report (N. Y. State Board of Health), there is a disgusting, degrading, and harmful neglect of sanitary cleanliness in and about the school buildings."

The further statement in the next clause is even more imperative to-day than it was then: "Such neglect of cleanliness and decency should be interfered with and prevented by local sanitary authority. The public health, the bodily welfare of the children and their moral safety alike require that this duty shall be attended to promptly and by peremptory orders, wherever necessary."

If any one doubts the statement that school-houses need to come under

the strict enforcement of the law, let him make a careful canvass in his own city and ascertain the efficiency of ventilation, the condition of the sanitary arrangements, and the degree of cleanliness as to floors and desks.

In a canvass of this kind made in Boston last year by the local branch of the Association of Collegiate Alumnae, fully one half of the school-houses were found to be in a condition deleterious to health, from one or all of the above causes.

In support of this statement is the report of the city board of health, that during the year the inspectors found 5,053 cases of throat troubles among the children, undoubtedly traceable to dust and poor ventilation, accompanied by under- or over-heating of the rooms. To this may be added the statement of the director of physical training, that the death rate of the teachers in the Boston schools is larger than that in any other city.

In 89 school buildings cases of contagious disease occurred; in 80, diphtheria; in 59, scarlet fever, and in 41, measles.

There is no reason to suppose that Boston is more lax in holding its officials to their responsibility than other cities, and facts and figures gathered there may doubtless be taken as typical of the conditions in many other places. Out of 186 school-houses examined by the Committee of Collegiate Alumnae the number of those having modern ventilation was only 16, and in only 13 the required amount of air per minute per pupil was found.

In 27 schools less than 150 cubic feet of initial air-space was provided, as against 250 required.

The legal requirement is a supply of 30 cubic feet of air per minute per pupil. Twenty-four rooms in 10 buildings were examined, 6 of these, or $\frac{1}{4}$ of the whole, showed less than 8 cubic feet per minute per pupil; 8 rooms gave between 8 and 12 cubic feet, and only 3 rooms showed over 20 cubic feet.

And these conditions of poor ventilation exist in buildings, many of which are thirty to fifty years old; besides, the floors of 77 of them, or 41 per cent. of the whole number, had *never been washed* since laid, until the summer of 1895, and it appeared that many escaped the wave of cleaning even then.

The feather duster is ubiquitous, and it is the practice, sanctioned by the rules of the school-committee, to stir up by its use in the morning the dust which has settled upon the desks, just in time to greet the pupils as they enter, and to fill their throats with the germs which cannot fail to be present under such conditions. Moreover, from ignorance, indolence, and a mistaken idea of economy, the school-houses are not well aired during the evening and night, but close, stagnant air, laden with the dust of ages, greets teacher and pupil. What wonder that the windows are thrown open and cold air allowed to fall upon the tender bodies, heated with the hurry to school, causing colds, if not pneumonia!

Nor are the sins of dust and cold air the only ones to be reckoned.

A total of 126 old-style flush and privy vaults still remained, after having been *condemned year after year* by the board of health.

Is there not need of some shock which will shake the public out of its fatal apathy when the recommendations of its board of health fall unheeded upon the ears of city officials? Are there not some weak points in the organization which render possible such a state of things?

The mayor of Boston has said that there is no more urgent duty which the municipality owes to its citizens than that of providing healthful conditions for its schools. He also gave it as his belief that the division of responsibility between several branches of the city government allowed an escape from the penalties which otherwise might be exacted.

Local agitation may do some good, but it seems as if the time had come for some concerted action,—perhaps by the American Public Health Association, and some pressure brought to bear upon city authorities to compel them to keep their property in good condition. Perhaps the most efficient way would be to invoke the power of the law, and to insist that such buildings as are flagrant violations of the law shall be closed, as private buildings would be.

If such action could be taken by each State Board of Health, an impression might be made which would have a lasting effect.

It is probably within the limits of truth to state that if the laws now on the statute books were enforced as strictly in respect to school-houses as to private houses and places of business, there would be 20,000 children on the streets of Boston next September, on account of the closing of buildings which have been allowed to be used year after year in defiance of all legal and moral law.

That this charge of the city's neglect of its own buildings is well founded may be seen from two or three sentences in the report of the expert commission appointed in 1896 by the mayor of Boston, on the "Sanitation of School-houses":

"Inside the buildings are constantly met conditions showing lack of expert knowledge and judgment in permitting certain things to be done in the way they are, and in continuing old methods that would not be allowed an instant in progressive private work."

"If cases like these came within the observation of the Health Department in their inspection of private houses, alterations would be peremptorily ordered, with the alternative of closing the building against all occupation."

How lax a city government may become, is seen in the fact that only 27 out of the 186 school-houses of Boston were found to have anything like adequate fire escapes.

The employés would be justified in refusing to work in any factory under

such conditions ; why would not teachers be sustained in demanding protection while in the performance of their duty ?

It has been stated that defects in ventilation and in working space surpass in their disastrous effects on the health of the employed all other injurious conditions taken together, whether the disease-producing agent be dust, or noxious vapors, or gases, or heat, or a distinctly poisonous material.

It would seem, therefore, that among the occupations classed as dangerous in modern times, that of the public school teacher must be included, and that the usual safeguards must be so extended as to make it possible for such employés to obtain legal redress for injuries to health received in fulfilling the duties required of them, and, furthermore, public-spirited citizens should see to it that the city is as surely held responsible for deaths of school children occasioned by municipal neglect as for the deaths of those who are killed by a falling bridge.

