

PUBLIC-SCHOOL BUILDINGS.

During the year ending 31st March, 1920, applications were received by the Department from Education Boards for grants for new public-school buildings, additions, residences, sites, &c., to a total amount of £496,153, as compared with £238,817 in 1918–19. This is apart from schools established in buildings for which no grant is made except by way of rent. The departmental expenditure for the year was £109,981, and at the end of the financial year the commitments totalled £308,088. Thirty-five new schools of varying sizes were erected, forty-seven were enlarged, and two were rebuilt; six residences were also erected and two were enlarged.

During the war the Education Boards restricted the applications for grants to cases that were regarded as of pressing urgency. The result was that in growing centres the school accommodation became overtaxed to a degree that could be justified only by the necessity for exercising the strictest economy in the expenditure of public funds. Where, under normal conditions, additional rooms would have been provided, the best use was made of the existing accommodation, or temporary provision for the increase in the attendance was made by renting such halls as were available; and where new schools were required every possible expedient was adopted to avoid the erection of buildings. These temporary arrangements were more or less unsatisfactory in character. The rented buildings were sometimes unlined, poorly lit, and otherwise unsuitable for educational purposes and for occupation by children.

With the close of the war, however, it was generally recognized that adequate financial provision should be made, not only for the erection of buildings in connection with which action had necessarily been deferred as a war measure, but also for the adoption of a general scheme of reconstruction of such of the older schools as, gauged by modern standards, are defective in essential features. Such a comprehensive school-building programme was rendered possible by the passing of the Education Purposes Loans Act, 1919, which empowered the Minister of Finance to borrow during four years moneys to the amount of £3,500,000 for the purpose of the erection, structural alteration, and improvement of educational buildings and for the acquisition of the necessary sites. This with £450,000 additional available from unexpended appropriations on the Public Works Fund authorizes the provision of a total of approximately £4,000,000 for all classes of educational buildings and sites.

The large sum thus made available for the erection of educational buildings has resulted in a very great increase in the amounts applied for by the several Education Boards for buildings and sites, while the grants authorized have increased correspondingly. During the last six financial years the amounts authorized for public schools alone were—1914–15, £54,895; 1915–16, £34,412; 1916–17, £36,973; 1917–18, £66,750; 1918–19, £124,162; 1919–20, £319,225.

The increased cost in the erection of school buildings is a very serious problem with which the Department is faced, for schools are now costing at least twice as much as they did under pre-war conditions. Education Boards, particularly in the North Island, are moreover experiencing the greatest difficulty in carrying out authorized works. Sometimes no tenders at all are received in response to advertisements, sometimes only one or two are received. Almost invariably the Department is asked to approve additional grants—often for substantial sums, representing a very large percentage of increase on the estimated cost. Prices are still rising, and though little rebuilding or remodelling has so far been undertaken, except in connection with schools where increased accommodation is necessary, the large sums that are being even now spent on school buildings are undoubtedly tending to inflate building-prices, particularly in districts where the school population is rapidly increasing. It is indeed a matter of great concern whether the State is getting the best value for the expenditure at the present time, and it may be temporarily found necessary to impose restrictions with respect to the accommodation that is to be regarded as absolutely essential.

As indicated above, a comprehensive scheme of rebuilding and remodelling older schools has not yet been undertaken. Education Boards have been requested