

The Education Act of 1870

The **Elementary Education Act 1870**, commonly known as *Forster's Education Act*, set the framework for schooling of all children between the ages of 5 and 13 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.

The **National Education League** was a political movement in England and Wales which promoted elementary education for all children, free from religious control. The League was opposed by the National Educational Union of Manchester, consisting of Conservatives and Anglicans. The Anglicans and Catholic Churches were in control of most of the existing voluntary schools, and controlled the religious education of those who attended. The Liberals and Dissenters wanted compulsory education without religious doctrine.

Object The establishment of a system which shall secure the education of every child in the country.

Means

1. **Local authorities** shall be **compelled by law** to see that sufficient **school accommodation** is provided for every child in their district.
2. **The cost** of founding, and maintaining such schools as may be required shall be **provided out of local rates, supplemented by government grants.**
3. **All schools** aided by local rates shall be **under the management of local authorities and subject to government inspection.**
4. All schools aided by local rates shall be **unsectarian.**
5. To all schools aided by local rates **admission** shall be **free.**
6. School accommodation being provided, the state or the local authorities shall have power to **compel the attendance of children** of suitable age not otherwise receiving education.

NEEDS: 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;
- others feared that handing children to a central authority could lead to indoctrination. Some poor people feared that mass education would equip people to scam 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.

Effects

Between 1870 and 1880, 3000–4000 schools were started or taken over by school boards. Board Members were elected by the ratepayers. (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.

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.

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 hundreds of thousands of children in Wales who very often knew no English were taught in English only. Tactics which would today be known as emotional and physical abuse were used in order to ensure that children did not use their first and very often only language.

THINK!

If you were the Minister of Education what reform would you propose to improve the Italian school system?