

MARLBOROUGH.

SIR,—

Blenheim, 13th March, 1884.

I have the honour to submit to you my report upon the public schools in the District of Marlborough for the year 1883.

I have examined twenty-six schools, 1,276 children being present on examination-day 1,490 scholars were on the rolls of these schools, being an increase of 131 since my previous examination. With the view of meeting the largely-increasing demands on my time caused by the steady increase in the number of new schools, eleven of which—for the most part remote and difficult of access—have been opened since I undertook the inspection of this district, I have obtained the Board's permission to examine the bulk of the schools in February. So far as I can judge no harm has resulted from the change, which, on the other hand, has enabled me to devote much more time to the task of examining than was formerly possible. The unusual length of the interval between the two last examinations—which will not occur again—has, after all, done little more than compensate for the wide-spread and contracted sickness of last year. This is clearly shown by the records of attendance, which in many schools does not equal, and, taking the whole district, does not exceed, for the fifteen months the normal attendance for an ordinary school year. To prevent, however any possible injury to schools likely to be affected by harvest work, I have, in all such cases, offered the alternative of an examination in September in future.

It is gratifying to be able to state that several of the defects of which I complained in my last report have, to a great extent, been remedied. The increased pains evidently bestowed upon the handwriting have borne good fruit, the number of schools in which the children write really well being now twice as great as it was a year ago. Neat and well-arranged paper-work is also more common than it was. The improvement in the formerly very faulty arithmetic of many of the schools is also marked and general, the failures in this respect having been largely reduced. It is probable that the lightening of the requirements in history and political geography may have somewhat contributed to this result. The letter-writing is still, however, far from being as good as it ought to be. It is exasperating, after all that has been said and written on this head, to find letters on the simplest subjects in which a minimum of relevant matter is overloaded with meaningless preambles and pointless endings. It is impossible not to see that such questionable pieces of ornamentation are altogether foreign to boy-nature, and that the young writers must have been very carefully trained in the pernicious art of "padding."

I recommend the teachers to give more attention to spelling. The failures this year were twice as numerous as they were at the previous examination.

The result of my examinations, in which several schools have attained, and still more have closely approached, the maximum percentage of passes obtainable, has certainly not taken me by surprise. From a thoroughly competent staff of teachers, such as is now in the service of the Board, and from a fairly intelligent body of scholars, no less ought to be expected. When the percentage of passes falls considerably short of the Marlborough record, as I observe has been occasionally the case in other districts, where, nevertheless, such a fact is spoken of without marked disapproval, some factor must surely enter into the question of which I have no knowledge. For it seems clear that, given fairly capable teachers and scholars—with a saving clause for children who have attended irregularly—if any large proportion of the latter fail to reach, year by year the minimum required by the standard regulations, such failure can be reasonably accounted for only in one of two ways—either the papers set and the general style of examination must be too difficult for children of average ability, or the standards themselves must exact more than can be compassed by such children from year to year. If interpreted very strictly, there is no doubt that, without departing from the letter of the regulations, the standards can be so applied as to crush all but a small minority of exceptional scholars. But the latitude of construction allowed—and even expressly recommended—in the pamphlet issued by the Education Department, leaves little excuse for overtasking the bulk of the candidates for the several standards. After several years' experience of the working of the present system, and after ample time has been afforded to both teachers and Inspectors for ascertaining with some approach to precision how much ought to be expected from children of a given age and standing, I should feel it a great reflection, either on the teachers of any district that I was employed to inspect, or on myself as the examiner, if the proportion of those who failed to pass much exceeded, at the outside, a fourth of the total number of candidates. I do not see how it is possible to escape the conclusion that if the outcome of my interpretation of the requirements of the standards is to be the rejection of a large proportion of the scholars with whom I have to deal, I must have made some mistake, and that I ought to set about rectifying it with the least possible delay. If, on the other hand, I am quite sure that the fault rests with the teachers, I hold it to be my plain duty to state this in the clearest manner to the Board, at whatever cost. It is impossible to reconcile a general approval of a teaching staff with a long list of failures.

I confess that I am not altogether satisfied with the outcome of my appeal to teachers, in my last report, to try the experiment of largely reducing home-lessons. That the burdens against which I protested have been much lightened in many instances, with the happiest results, I have ample evidence. But it is not quite clear that the reform has been so general and so complete as might be desired. There is a suspicious ring about the stereotyped answer, "about an hour's steady work every evening," to my queries on this point. It is, indeed, questionable if the teacher exists who, with every desire to state the exact truth, can help unconsciously extenuating the tasks he exacts, and over-estimating the working powers of some, at least, of his scholars. The evidence of parents, who know exactly where the shoe pinches, would be more satisfactory. This is a matter in which substantial help might be given by School Committees, if only they have the will, as undoubtedly they have the power, summarily to put a stop to excessive impositions. An Inspector can do little more than remonstrate.