

MARLBOROUGH.

SIR,—

Blenheim, 5th March, 1888.

I have the honour to lay before you my annual report on the public schools in the district of Marlborough for the year 1887.

There were 1,666 scholars on the rolls of the twenty-nine schools examined, 1,511 children being present. It is satisfactory to find that no more than fifty-two standard candidates absented themselves from examination, sickness being almost invariably the cause of absence. The percentage of failures (17·8) compares favourably with last year's percentage (19·6). On the other hand, the percentage of passes, compared with the roll number, falls short of last year's record by about 4 per cent. This latter test, however, is almost valueless as a measure of the general efficiency of the schools. Although I have invariably protested against a percentage of passes and failures being accepted as the sole criterion of the success of any school, it must be conceded that it forms a factor in estimating the year's work that cannot safely be disregarded. I cannot but regret, therefore, that a fourth of the candidates for standards should have failed in eight schools; and that, in six of these, the failures should amount to more than a third of those presented, after deducting scholars whose failures were not recorded, on account of the irregularity of their attendance. Wherever it has been possible to do so, I have set forth extenuating circumstances. In several cases none appeared to exist. On this occasion I have thought it best to confine myself almost exclusively to pointing out wherein the teaching of two subjects of the first consequence seem to me defective, and I will merely state in general terms that both "pass" and "class" subjects (with these two exceptions) are on the whole well taught throughout the district.

At the risk of being charged with a wearisome iteration, I must for the third time express my dissatisfaction with the progress made in the art of reading. In few of the Marlborough schools can the reading, even of the most advanced scholars, be fairly termed good, a third of them do not rise above the barest mediocrity, while in several even mediocrity is far from being attained. It would seem as though the multiplicity of subjects introduced into the course of instruction for the higher classes has caused teachers to lose sight of the supreme importance of good reading. The root of the mischief is apparently to be found in the imperfect training of the younger scholars, who, until they have passed the First Standard, are often taught in a perfunctory and slipshod fashion. But by this time many of them have acquired such bad habits as may well have become inveterate and well-nigh incurable. And yet it is not unreasonable to conjecture that the framers of the syllabus, in exacting so slight a modicum of attainment in other subjects as is prescribed for the First Standard, intended to set free children until their ninth year, mainly in order that they might master the art of reading. In this matter, indeed, in spite of all the vaunts that have been uttered about the superiority of the modern methods of teaching, our schools have still something to learn from the dame schools of bygone days, where children were at least taught to read, if they were taught little else. And yet, unless I am greatly mistaken, the measure of efficiency that I should consider satisfactory is by no means unattainable. It has certainly been easily attained in some of our schools, and it would be difficult to show why it should be out of the reach of any one of them. When a class of scholars in their tenth year can read fluently at sight, and so as to be readily understood by an examiner who has no book before him, a simple narrative, all that is required will have been done. With less than this one ought not to be satisfied.

Although the handwriting on the whole is not nearly so good as it would be if anything like the skill and pains which the importance of the subject deserves were bestowed upon it, some improvement has undoubtedly been made during the past year, especially in those schools which were formerly the worst offenders. It is still, however, far from being generally understood that no subject demands more minute and undivided attention on the part of the teacher, especially at the outset, than writing. He who habitually attempts to deal with anything else while a writing lesson is going on has himself to thank if he fails to turn out a good penman. Yet it is not uncommon to meet with time-tables in which provision is made for giving a reading lesson simultaneously with a lesson in writing to another class. Instead of adopting this dangerous device for saving time, it would be almost better for a teacher who is really hard pressed by the demands of many classes to cut down the time set apart for writing by one-half, but to attend to nothing else during the shortened period. I believe that no real injustice would be done in the long run if an examiner were to take round with him a few specimens of the average handwriting turned out in well-taught schools, steadily rejecting all copies that compared very unfavourably with the standard thus set up. One such sharp lesson would, I believe, go far towards raising the quality of the penmanship throughout the district.

It is to be regretted that head teachers do not take more pains to master the regulations laid down by the Education Department for their guidance. An unfavourable impression is naturally created when an examiner discovers that a teacher has either misunderstood or, what is worse, has disregarded certain directions as to the school course which have been laid down expressly for him. It must be distinctly understood that these directions cannot be treated in an eclectic fashion, and that no teacher is at liberty to omit any portion either of the "class" or the "pass" subjects simply because he has come to the conclusion that what he leaves out is not essential. A single instance will show my meaning. Among the regulations for the work of the First Standard it is clearly laid down that candidates must know the relative values of current coinage and the aliquot parts of a pound sterling. But in a full third of the Marlborough schools my late examinations have disclosed the fact that this part of the work has practically not been taught. A similar laxity prevails as to the teaching of drawing, a pretty general impression seeming to prevail that, provided the subject is taught at all, it is a matter of comparative indifference how far the quality of the work or the grade of the drawing book used corresponds with what is prescribed in the syllabus. Neither in drawing nor in history will any excuse be admitted in future for deviations from the authorised programme. I have observed that in two of our schools—and those amongst the best conducted—