

The condition most detrimental to the efficiency of the schools is irregular attendance, which must be due to the necessities or lack of interest of the parents. In an agricultural district children share to a large extent the occupations of their parents, and the value of their services affects the regularity of the attendance. The necessary sacrifice is, however, frequently made. In this district the most regular, as well as the most irregular, attendance is found in places where all the parents are engaged in farming pursuits. In a mining community there is not the same reason for the absence of pupils; yet the attendance in the Board's schools is frequently very irregular without any adequate cause.

The influence of regular attendance and parental interest is very noticeable when comparison is made between the household and the other aided schools. In Westland the maintenance of a large proportion of aided schools is rendered necessary by the exigencies of settlement. Suitable land for small farming and payable grounds for mining in portions of the district are wide apart, and families are frequently separated by distance or dangerous rivers, so that the appointment of itinerant teachers is impracticable. It follows that if these miniature schools are not maintained a large number of children will be deprived of education, or the parents must refrain from occupying these outposts of settlement. The teacher of a household school, often an elder sister of the pupils, has no special qualifications besides a pass in Standard VI., and shares the disadvantage of other sole teachers in having to devote separate attention to several standard classes. Yet such is the effect of regular attendance secured by the anxiety of the parents to obtain for their families the full benefit of the school that results are produced equal in many important respects to those of the best schools. But in the remaining aided schools, although the work is but little increased and the teachers are usually better qualified, the average results suffer greatly in comparison. It would seem that, when a separate building is used and the institution is shared by several families, the interest is weakened, and regular attendance is not maintained. While there are exceptions in both the attendance and success of these schools, the impediment to progress thus arising necessarily lowers the average result.

In the larger schools, where the teachers are more experienced and the staffs approach or reach the stage where each standard class is in charge of a separate teacher, difficulties are more easily overcome. The attendance of the scholars is, however, not satisfactory in several districts, and the Board has recently endeavoured, by the appointment of paid truant officers, to improve the conditions in this respect. During the year 1895, notwithstanding, no serious action has been taken by the local authorities to utilise the services of these officers and to enforce the clauses of the School Attendance Act. When it is distinctly understood that irregular attendance is the chief impediment in the progress of education in the district, it is reasonable to hope that greater efforts will be made to effect an improvement.

During the past year the Board has arranged for an increase in the supply of appliances of the schools. This includes a set of extra readers for each of the six standards, the "New Zealand Reader" being provided for Standard VI. The wider course of reading thus secured, if combined with continued attention to phrasing, expression, and comprehension of the reading matter, cannot fail to produce important results. Natural history and number charts and gymnastic apparatus have also been furnished to the principal schools, in order to afford opportunity for greater efficiency in the instruction in the corresponding subjects of the school course.

The passes secured during 1895 in the various pass-subjects may be represented by the following percentages of the number present at the examinations: Reading, 97; spelling, 80; writing, 95; arithmetic, 68; composition, 92; drawing, 93; geography, 82. This statement shows that arithmetic, spelling, and geography are the chief causes of failure. As the arithmetic tests are now set by the Education Department it will perhaps be of value to add in detail the percentage of passes in this subject compared with those of the previous year:—

	Standard VI. Per Cent.	Standard V. Per Cent.	Standard IV. Per Cent.	Standard III. Per Cent.
1894	68	71	82	70
1895	75	49	74	77

It will be seen that slightly more than half the pupils in the Fifth Standard failed in arithmetic during 1895. This fact should impress on the teachers the urgent necessity for the adoption of thorough methods in the preparation of this admittedly difficult year's course.

In the class and additional subjects general improvement must be recorded, except in grammar, which in many instances was insufficiently prepared. A decided improvement was apparent in the amount and character of the teaching of object-lessons.

With the exception of those in charge of schools with a roll-number of more than 120, the headmasters at the examinations of the year preferred to leave the promotion of pupils in the First and Second Standards to the Inspector, and the passes recorded in the larger schools coincided with sufficient exactness with the results of my examination. It would appear that the privilege of classification in the lower standards is regarded as of doubtful benefit by the teachers of the smaller schools, where parental influence is likely to be exerted with greater effect to secure premature promotion.

The number of pupils over eight years of age presented in the infant classes is 14·5 per cent. of the number forming these classes and 5·4 per cent. of the total roll-number. No returns are available for comparison of these percentages with those of other districts; but there is little doubt that room exists for a reduction of the number by improved methods of teaching as well as by the more regular attendance of the pupils.

The Chairman, Westland Education Board,

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