

SOUTHLAND.

SIR,—

Education Office, Invercargill, 27th February, 1897.

As required by the provisions of section 102 of "The Education Act, 1877," the Board of the Education District of Southland has the honour to present the following summary of its proceedings for the year ending 31st December, 1896:—

THE BOARD.—Since the last report was submitted the constitution of the Board has undergone no change. At the annual election held in March there were four gentlemen nominated to fill the vacancies caused by the retirement of Messrs. J. Walker Bain, Alfred Baldey, and George McLeod. The voting resulted in the re-election of the three gentlemen named. It is worthy of note that, of the elected members, Mr. Baldey has been honoured by re-election for six consecutive periods of three years each, Mr. McLeod for five, and Mr. Bain for four such periods; their continuous services as members of the Board, computed to the end of the current year, will therefore total nineteen, sixteen, and ten years respectively. At the April meeting of the Board Mr. Thomas MacGibbon, of Mataura, was unanimously elected Chairman for the ensuing year. The Venerable Archdeacon Stocker and Mr. F. Woodward were duly elected as the Board's representatives on the Board of Governors of the Southland High Schools, while Mr. James Walker Bain continued to represent the Board's interests on the Trust of the School Commissioners of Otago. The Board continued to hold its meetings during the year on the first Friday of each month; while a committee consisting of all the members met on an average of about once a fortnight for the transaction of routine business, and for the consideration of such matters of special importance as were referred to it. To avoid unnecessary delay in filling vacancies, and in the carrying-out of works authorised by the Board, this committee is vested with power to make all ordinary appointments to the teaching staff, and also to accept tenders for works. During the course of the year twelve ordinary meetings of the Board and twenty-one meetings of the executive committee were held. The attendance at these meetings was very satisfactory indeed when the absence of two members during the entire parliamentary session is taken into account. The average attendance of members at meetings of the Board was 7·7; at those of the executive committee, 7·5.

PUBLIC SCHOOLS.—The Board has to report an unprecedentedly heavy loss of school buildings by fire. The principal disaster occurred in connection with the Gore school building, which was completely destroyed in July last. This building has been reinstated at an expenditure of over £1,000. A grant of £640 in aid of this work has been promised by the Government. It will thus be seen that, by this unfortunate occurrence, the Board will lose at least £350. Of course, the new building is in every way better fitted than the old structure to meet the requirements, present and prospective, of this important and rising district. The school at Scott's Gap and the teacher's residence at Pyramid Siding were also destroyed by fire, the former in the month of August last and the latter in December. Grants of £153 and £95 respectively in aid of their re-erection have also been promised, and a tender for the reinstatement of each building has been accepted by the Board. The erection of a new school in the Waikiwi (suburban) district, at a cost of £475, is another important work completed during the year. Negotiations for the purchase of a residence and glebe for the use of the teacher are at present pending. These works, in addition to the ordinary current expenditure, have proved a very heavy drain on the Board's resources.

At the close of the previous year there were 133 schools in operation, and, as was anticipated in last year's report, the demands for additional school-accommodation have been unusually pressing. During the year the Board sanctioned the establishment of new schools at Waikiwi, Maitland Village, Croydon Siding, Crown Terrace, Waianiwa Township, Papatotara, and Centre Island, the two latter being, in effect, household schools, the one granted in the interests of a settler beyond the Waiau far removed from the advantages of our education system, the other for the sole benefit of the family of the lighthouse-keeper. The Miller's Flat School, previously closed on account of sparseness of population, was reopened during the year; and, as predicted in last year's report, the school at Groper's Bush was, on account of the decreased attendance, permanently closed. There were thus 140 schools in actual operation at the close of the year to which this report has reference. Twenty-eight of this number are classed as aided schools, the average attendance in each case being less than twenty pupils.

SCHOOL ATTENDANCE.—The attendance of pupils at the schools in this district still continues to increase. The average weekly number on the rolls of the various schools for the year was 9,728, while the mean average (strict) attendance for the same period was 7,851, an increase over the previous year's record of forty-seven in roll-number and 207 in average attendance. The working average for the year, on which basis payments of grants to Boards by the Government are now made, was 7,964, an increase over the previous year of 165. The percentage proportion of strict average attendance to roll-number also shows a gratifying increase, being 80·7, as against 79 for last year. Whether this satisfactory feature is attributable to an absence of any serious epidemic of illness during the year, a more intelligent appreciation of the benefits of education by parents throughout the district, the beneficial influence of the efforts of the Board through the medium of its Truant Officer, or all of these factors combined, it would be extremely difficult to say; probably one would not be far wrong in adopting the last-mentioned as the real explanation.

In quite a number of our school districts increased interest is being manifested by School Committees in the matter of school attendance. The Committees in the districts referred to have made special requests that the Board's Truant Officer should institute proceedings against parents or guardians who fail to observe the provisions of the School Attendance Act. This power of setting the law in motion rests primarily with the local Committee, and it is satisfactory to note that some of these bodies now face the responsibility, and thus endeavour to remove a real hindrance to the general advancement of education throughout the district. Nothing so much militates against the success of a school as the want of interest displayed by those responsible for an irregular attendance of pupils. It is but the reiteration of a truism to assert that