

Under normal conditions we should have been disappointed with the examination results shown in Tables A and B, especially with the efficiency-marks in Table B. We know that the standard of efficiency has been fully maintained, and in some subjects even raised; but Table B shows a fall instead of the rise we anticipated before beginning the examinations. We attribute this apparent falling-off to prevailing sickness, both before and during the examination of a considerable number of schools. Throughout the whole examination period the schools were more or less affected by German measles. Under examination we had children who had recently recovered, children in various stages of convalescence, children showing the first symptoms of the sickness—all more or less physically unfit to do justice to themselves or their teachers. For hygienic reasons, as well as for the sake of the standard passes, especially in Standards IV. and VI., we arranged for the examination of children in whatever schools they presented themselves, and by this and other measures endeavoured, as far as possible, to minimise the bad results of the sickness; but notwithstanding all that was done, the children affected were examined at a disadvantage. The head-teachers' examination of Standards I. and II. gave the same result as in 1897—viz., 97·6 per cent. of passes; but the examination of Standard III. to Standard VI. gave only 82·7 per cent. of passes, a drop of 2 per cent.; and the efficiency-marks on which Table B is based show in pass-subjects a drop of 4·3 per cent., in class-subjects a drop of 3·3 per cent., and in additional subjects a drop of 1·2 per cent.

The once popular idea that a "good pass" is the end and aim of school life and work is dying, but dying hard; and once more we protest against a high percentage of passes being accepted as evidence of a high standard of efficiency. The pupil who gains from 50 to 60 per cent. in each of six of the pass-subjects, but does poorly in the remaining ten subjects of the school course, receives a standard pass; the pupil who does very good work—say, gains 76 per cent. in all the subjects of the school course—receives a standard pass: in calculating the percentage of passes no distinction is made; and so it is with schools. Under Table A two schools, each passing all the pupils, would be classed as excellent; while under Table B one might be classed as very weak and the other as very good. The majority of the pupils of the first school will close their school life with an already relaxing grasp of the mechanically acquired modicum of information that enabled them to touch the minimum standard of a pass, and with little taste and less capacity for self-improvement; the majority of the pupils of the second school will complete the school course with a fair stock of varied information well assimilated—a permanent possession—with a taste for one or more of their studies, and a consciousness of capacity for self-improvement. Advantage has been taken of our attitude towards the percentage craze to enter, on our authority, the plea that a poor pass should give parents and Committees little concern. We cannot for a moment allow this. Children of average capacity and in fairly good attendance have a right to expect passes, and should have no difficulty in securing them; and to those in Standard IV. and Standard VI. success in the pass-examination may be of life-long importance. We repeat what we have already said in this connection, and we consider it worthy of note by all concerned: "Every well-taught school gains a high standard pass; but not every school that gains a high standard pass is a well-taught school."

On the 31st July, 1894, amended regulations for the inspection and examination of schools came into force. Under section 6 of these regulations it became the duty of the head-teacher of each school to examine classes Standard I. and Standard II., and ascertain what pupils are fit to pass Standards I. and II. respectively. This has been done, and the pupils whom the head-teacher deemed fit to pass have, if present in class during the Inspector's examination in class-subjects, been passed in their respective standards. Under section 3 it became the duty of the Inspector to report on the degree of discretion displayed by the head-teacher in the determining of the passes in Standards I. and II. In discharge of this duty we have examined these standards, with greater or less minuteness according to circumstances, and we have almost invariably reported that the passes were "satisfactory," or "justified by the results of our examination." This experiment has been on its trial for four years. We cannot but commend the wisdom that designed it, and have no hesitation in saying that the power placed in the hands of the head-teachers has been used with great discretion and with good results.

For two years we have had under consideration and discussion the total abolition of the standard pass. We have endeavoured to exclude from our counsels all outside influences, and to confine ourselves to the operation of the standard pass on school life and work, to the professional character of our teaching staff, to the condition of our schools, and to our own relations with them. When we wrote our report for 1897 there was still a difference of opinion among us. We are now at one; and we think that, so far as the Otago District is concerned, the standard pass might, with great advantage to real education, be abolished.

The re-examination of Standard I. and Standard II. by Inspectors may seem to some a work of supererogation. We know that it is not. As frankly as we have asserted that head-teachers have used their power with great discretion, we assert that much of the smoothness and success with which the experiment has worked is due to this re-examination. Frequently the head-teacher suspends judgment till after the Inspector's examination; frequently a decision is altered during the examination, and a pupil receives the benefit of a better performance; differences of opinion between head-master and assistant disappear during examination; sometimes in small country schools the mistress needs the support of the Inspector's judgment on the failures. We make the examination as minute as time permits, but we do not feel bound to make it, in all cases, as complete as that of the higher standards. Sufficient ground, however, is covered to enable us to place on record in the examination reports our estimate of the work done by assistants in charge of these classes, and thus to place them on the same platform as the teachers of the higher classes.

The following is an illustration of the examination reports placed during the year before the Board and the respective School Committees:—