

month, while the executive committee generally meets twice at regular intervals between Board meetings. By the executive committee the major portion of the routine work of the Board receives first consideration, thus lessening considerably the time that would otherwise be absorbed by the regular monthly meetings, and facilitating in a marked degree the conduct of its general business. During the year the Board held one special meeting and twelve ordinary meetings; and the executive committee met twenty-three times, the general attendance thereat being satisfactory in view of the absence of three of its members—two being absent on a visit to Great Britain, the other attending to his parliamentary duties at Wellington. In addition to the foregoing, several meetings of special committees were held, and these, along with the attendance at the regular meetings, constituted for the members of the Board a very busy year.

SCHOOLS.—Under this heading there is little to report. The number of schools in active operation is 147, the same as for the preceding year—one school (Chatton Road) being closed for lack of attendance, another (in the newly settled district of Otapiri) being opened. It is a somewhat significant fact that, during the past two years, the progress in the matter of establishing new schools, which was for the preceding fourteen years so marked a feature in this Board's annual report, has been arrested. From this condition of affairs it may safely be inferred that the Southland Education District is now fairly well supplied with educational facilities for the instruction of its rising generation.

ATTENDANCE OF PUPILS.—In common with other parts of the colony, this district has to report a distinct decrease in the attendance at its public schools. It was reported last year that a slight decrease had taken place, but this year the falling-off is somewhat more marked, affecting as a necessary consequence the Board's financial position in a more serious degree than was noted last year. The average attendance for 1899 was 8,024, and for 1900, 7,924, a decrease of 100.

The ratio of strict average attendance to average weekly roll number now stands at 81·6, a fairly satisfactory record when one takes into account the difficulties with which many pupils have to contend in rural and isolated districts where good roads—or, indeed, roads of any kind—are an unknown quantity. The average attendance at many—if not all—of the larger schools, where the environment is more distinctly favourable, might be much improved were parents to realise the immense advantage to be gained from a regular and systematic attendance of their children, and the serious handicap children without education will in future experience in the battle of life. It is but a truism to repeat that the experience of those engaged in the actual work of teaching is that more solid progress can be attained in two years of regular and uninterrupted study than in three years of desultory and spasmodic effort; more than this, the status and efficiency of the school as a whole are more seriously impaired by the prevalence of this evil than by all other adverse conditions combined. The services of the Board's Truant Officer have been retained, and the increased percentage of average attendance to roll number may, in part at least, be fairly attributed to the efforts of that official. This officer, in the execution of his duty, endeavours by moral suasion to induce parents to take full advantage of the benefits of our education system; failing success by that method of procedure, he exercises his privilege to compel attendance by legal process, in which latter alternative he is supported by the gentlemen who now occupy the Magisterial bench in this district. Were the provisions of the School Attendance Act somewhat more stringent in the matter of the fines which may be imposed for aggravated cases of neglect or defiance of the law, the possible good to be accomplished would be much increased. As the Act stands, there are many who do prefer to run all risk, and, if need be, pay the maximum penalty for its infringement, and, for the sake of a paltry gain, mar the prospects of those whose welfare ought to be their chief concern. The distance limit provided for in the Act might also with advantage be modified. The limit of compulsory attendance might very well be increased to, say, three miles for children between the ages of nine and thirteen years, the present limit, two miles, being retained for pupils who have not yet attained the lower age, and this Board is of opinion that the School Attendance Act should be amended accordingly. As the Act now stands, it forms a strong argument for the undue multiplication of small schools in sparsely populated districts.

TEACHING STAFF.—There were in the service of the Board at the end of the year 237 teachers (including pupil-teachers), the sexes being about equally represented. The supply of fully qualified teachers still continues quite equal to the demand, as also is the supply of candidates (especially females) for entry into the lowest branch of the service, viz., the ranks of the pupil-teachers. For boys, the prospects of remunerative employment, as compared with other professions, do not seem sufficient to induce many to enter the service, and for this reason, if for no other, it is to be hoped that with the introduction of a colonial scale of salaries the position of teachers financially may be considerably improved. It is unquestionably true that, while the staffs of the more important schools may receive fair remuneration, the profession is, as a whole, decidedly underpaid. At present, for every boy desirous of entering the service there are at least six girls, though the percentage of boys to girls actually on the Board's staff is higher than has been the case for years past. At one time the numbers were as six girls to one boy; now the proportion is as eight to three, a very encouraging feature.

PUPIL-TEACHERS.—In the service of the Board at the close of the year there were forty-four pupil-teachers, twelve boys and thirty-two girls. Of this number, twenty-five presented themselves at the annual examination held in the month of June last, when twenty-two passed and three failed. The remaining nineteen had either completed their respective apprenticeships or passed some departmental examination equivalent to that of the first (highest) grade. The Inspectors report that, except in Class IV., the quality of the work done is not up to the average standard of past years, and this unsatisfactory circumstance is accounted for by the fact that the majority of the ablest pupil-teachers pass some other examination, thus securing exemption, and, as a consequence, lowering the average standard of excellence.