

NORTH CANTERBURY.

SIR,—

Education Office, Christchurch, 24th January, 1901.

We have the honour to present the statistical return for the year 1900 of the schools in the North Canterbury District as required by section 16 of the regulations for inspection and examination.

The return shows the number of pupils presented in the several classes, and purports to give 'the number present in each class at the time of the annual visit.' Both items are copied from the separate school reports, for which the forms are furnished by the Education Department; but it is necessary to point out in regard to the second of the two columns that, according to our instructions, the number reported as present in Standards V. to I. is the number present at the head-teacher's examination of the pupils, and not the number present at the annual visit of the Inspector. The difference so far is not great, for children rarely absent themselves on the day of the Inspector's visit if they can possibly attend, but time may see the difference greater as the importance to the individual of the examination diminishes in the minds of parent and pupil.

Some aided schools opened before the end of the year have not yet been visited, so that the number of schools examined remains the same (200) as in the previous year. In these 200 schools there were presented 20,018 children, of which number 18,732 were reported as present. For the previous year the numbers corresponding were 20,428 and 19,036. In the Sixth Standard 1,194 certificates have been granted, showing an increase of forty-one. The following are the average ages of pupils in the several standard classes: Standard VI., 13 years 9 months; Standard V., 12 years 10 months; Standard IV., 11 years 11 months; Standard III., 10 years 10 months; Standard II., 9 years 8 months; Standard I., 8 years 6 months.

During the year the periods devoted to inspection and examination respectively have not differed materially from the routine of former years. In the larger schools the newer conditions have relieved us of a good deal of night-work hitherto necessary for the valuation of papers, and in about a dozen of the largest there has been a substantial saving of time, which, however, the season of the year in which the saving was made did not allow us to utilise elsewhere to advantage. In all schools of smaller size the examination has taken up as much time as ever. In the future we hope to be able to do something more to meet the present prevailing view of the relative importance of method and result by adding a number of casual visits of short duration, on each of which some one or more points of discipline or method would receive attention.

The most important point on which our evidence of the past year's experience will be looked for is clearly the use the teachers have made of the recent extension of their duties and privileges in the classification of the pupils. In the larger schools the change has been welcomed as a manifest improvement, and the feeling is fully reciprocated by the Inspectors, apart from any relief afforded them in the discharge of an arduous duty. In the smaller schools the change is less appreciated. In these we have very commonly found a considerable reluctance on the part of the teacher to put himself in the position of the final arbiter of the pupil's status. In the great majority of cases the Inspector has been requested to modify the result in accordance with his own judgment, and generally we may say—that is, with comparatively few exceptions—the schedule of the small school in its final form is the result of a consultation.

In determining the status of pupils one great source of embarrassment—perhaps the chief source outside the large schools, where the teachers have boldly fixed their own standard, definitely and consistently declining to accept the narrower basis permitted—has been the great want of definiteness in the standard specified in the regulations. Whether a Fifth Standard certificate, for instance, is to be granted on the basis of a Fifth Standard qualification in three subjects only—say, in reading, spelling, and writing (two of them of minimum value as indicators of mental progress)—or is to represent a much wider qualification, including a Fifth Standard proficiency in composition or arithmetic, or in both, is, we are instructed, within the option given alike to both teacher and Inspector. So wide a field for varying interpretations places the teacher in an invidious position, which it can scarcely serve any useful purpose to ask him to occupy; while the Inspector, on his part, may well hesitate to disturb an arrangement proposed by the teacher within the limits of his option, though in the interests of the school it may not meet with approval. Regulations, however, we have to recollect, do not make a district. The making or marring has more to do with the character and capacity of the staff of teachers the district has collected or bred; in this respect we may feel sufficiently complacent, expecting to find in a common understanding a fairly efficient substitute for a more precise definition of guiding principles.

As to the standard of proficiency adopted by the teachers in individual subjects, we have considerable confidence that, whatever else it may have been in a few instances, it has been essentially honest, and in the main examination has shown it to be sound.

Reading: In this subject we are justified in saying that our schools are making progress, the progress being chiefly in the direction of wider range and increased facility in the lower standards, and of more frequent evidences of intelligent appreciation in the upper. On reading as a vocal art much stress has not been laid, in the upper stages at least, nor do we consider this feature of nearly so much importance as range and intelligence. In such a view the class practice, however valuable in itself, must be regarded as subordinate to the cultivation of a reading habit, and wherever teachers, by the formation of school libraries, or by the use of supplementary class-books of standard fiction, have done something in this direction their efforts have been amply rewarded.

Writing: Complaints are sometimes heard from outside sources that the writing of boys leaving school for trade employments leaves much to be desired. No doubt it does; but even at the Sixth Standard stage, with boys of thirteen or fourteen years of age, much more than a crude school-boy hand, falling far short of a passable commercial standard, can scarcely be expected from the average pupil when we consider the time available for special practice amid the claims of a variety of subjects. We are satisfied if the principles on which the writing has been taught and the