

MARLBOROUGH.

SIR,—

Blenheim, 20th January, 1903.

I have the honour to present my twelfth annual report upon the primary schools under the control of your Board.

Sixty-three schools were open during the last quarter of the year 1901. Five of these—namely, Flaxbourne, Four-fathom Bay, Ocean Bay, Onahau Bay, and Waterfalls—were closed at the end of the year, the first three permanently, and the others temporarily. Two new schools—Sea View and Hopewell—were opened, and Onahau Bay was reopened during the year; so that sixty-one schools have been in operation during some part or the whole of the year. The roll numbers at the ends of the four quarters were: March, 2,073; June, 2,066; September, 2,023; December, 2,007. The mean average weekly roll number for the year was 2,054. The average daily attendances of the same quarters were: 1,769, 1,744, 1,746, and 1,723. The mean average attendance for the year 1902 is therefore 1,745. This number is important, since it determines the Board's income for 1903, from which must be met the whole expenditure of the Board other than for buildings and the teachers' salaries. The mean average attendance for the year is 85 per cent. of the mean average roll number, and shows an improvement of 3·4 per cent. upon last year's average. This improvement may perhaps be attributed in some degree to the direct and indirect influence of the Truant Officers. Only four districts in New Zealand exceeded this average in 1901. The steady decline in the roll numbers referred to in my last report, and again exemplified in this, is not difficult to account for, and will probably continue for some years longer, until a younger generation enters into possession of holdings at present occupied by the old folks, whose families have nearly all passed through the schools, and have in many instances been obliged to settle in other parts of the colony, owing to the fact that there is little or no land in this district suitable for settlement that is not already occupied. The almost entire absence of local industries other than agriculture, together with the occupation of the greater part of the district as sheep-runs, carrying a very small population, are also contributing causes of the small school attendance. The steady decrease in the school attendance has not so far been accompanied by any corresponding diminution in the number of schools, nor, consequently, by any material lessening of the working-expenses.

The scholars on the rolls of the schools at the date of the "annual visit" numbered 1,984, or ninety-three less than the corresponding number last year, and nearly double the deficiency of that year compared with 1900. The proportion of scholars in Standards VI., III., II., and Class P is slightly lower, and that of Standards VII., V., IV., and I. rather higher, than in 1901, the greatest increase, however, being only 1·4 per cent. in Standard IV. About 60 per cent. of all the scholars on the roll, or 89 per cent. of the number examined, obtained promotion. This is 3 per cent. less than in 1901, but about the same above the mean average of the whole colony in the same year. The percentages of passes in the several standards were as follows: In Standard VII., 91·8 per cent.; Standard VI., 70·7; Standard V., 83·8; Standard IV., 92·6; Standard III., 91·8; Standard II., 93·6; and Standard I., 93 per cent. of the numbers examined. These figures show a falling-off in the results of the examination of Standards V. and VI. when compared with those of last year. The Sixth Standard has 8 per cent. and the Fifth 10 per cent. more failures. The Fourth Standard has 2 per cent. fewer and the Third Standard the same proportion of failures as were recorded last year.

Neither the very small nor the larger schools are, as a rule, concerned in this depression, but chiefly small schools having all the standards represented, with, of course, a sole unassisted teacher. In my opinion, the teachers of such schools would be doing far more real good for the community and for the cause of education if they omitted some one (or more) of these class subjects, notwithstanding the statement in the standard regulations (clause 9) that "the neglect of any one of these subjects will be regarded as highly censurable," and by abandoning the hopeless attempt to accomplish the impossible they would have more heart for, and more success with, the remainder of the work. There would also be less excuse for the absurdity of allowing scholars to "pass" a standard though failing in two out of the five pass subjects.

Taking the Fifth and Sixth Standards alone, the following are some cases where the scholars gave a poor account of themselves: Blind River, Standard V.—examined, 3; passed, 1; Standard VI.—examined, 2; passed, 0. Ferndale: Standard V.—examined, 2; passed, 0; Standard VI.—examined, 4; passed, 0. Omaka: Standard V.—examined, 2; passed, 0; Standard VI.—examined, 2; passed, 1. Seddon: Standard V.—examined, 5; passed, 2; Standard VI.—examined, 4; passed, 0. Waitaria Bay: Standard V.—examined, 5; passed, 1. These all belong to the type of school that I have referred to in the previous paragraph.

In pleasing contrast with these cases are the schools where, although working under the same disadvantages, all the scholars examined in these two classes secured promotion—viz., Okaramio, Marlboroughtown, Havelock Suburban, and Kaituna. Several other schools, including small aided schools, passed all the scholars presented in one or both of these classes. The number of cases in the Third, Fourth, and Fifth Standards in which passes had been recorded which I could not indorse amounted to thirty-two out of 398, or about 8 per cent. The Department now requires that the ages given shall be the average of all the scholars on the roll, instead, as heretofore, of those only who pass. No comparison is therefore possible with the statistics of former years in this respect. The most extraordinary variations in these ages are to be found, reaching as high as four years above the average age of the same class in this district. The majority of cases of excessive age occur naturally in the small aided schools, and arise from the circumstances referred to in my last report. Fortunately these extreme ages are few in number, so that the average for the whole district is not seriously affected. In schools above grade O, however, there are numerous examples of averages not only above, but considerably below, the "district" average, and amongst the latter may be found some excuse for the shortcomings previously referred to.