

NORTH CANTERBURY.

SIR,—

Education Office, Christchurch, 31st January, 1907.

We have the honour to submit our general report on the working of the schools of the district during the year 1906.

At the close of this period the number of schools under the Board's control and dealt with by us as separate units was 208, the total varying slightly from quarter to quarter through the temporary closing or temporary reopening of a few conducted in private houses. Within the year practically all the schools of the district have been visited twice, an exception being made only with regard to some two or three where the small number of children, and the very rudimentary stage of attainment to be dealt with, rendered the inspection-visit a matter of minor importance. Fourteen denominational schools, located in various parts of the district from Kaikoura to Ashburton, again claimed our services as examiners; a fifteenth, opened at Woolston and not brought under our notice prior to the compilation of our time-table, had to await its opportunity in the year now begun. With a feeling of self-satisfaction, not, we hope, wholly unpardonable, we refer to the fulness with which our ordinary routine has been overtaken during the year just ended.

In the routine of inspection-visits during the year it has been found practicable (as teachers became more familiar with the new departures permissible under altered regulations) to bestow more attention upon schemes of work, to the opportunities (whether utilised or neglected) for grouping classes, and to the keeping of prescribed records. In these matters it is satisfactory to note that in the great majority of the schools a distinct advance has been made, while in a goodly number the thought, the care, and the skill devoted to such details are worthy of all praise. There were, however, instances in which neglect of specific instructions and ignorance of plain regulations were entirely inexcusable, and for which no toleration is to be expected in the current year. In a number of schools, varying in size and in conditions generally, it was found that teachers had compiled programmes of work far in excess of all reasonable requirements. There were, for instance, cases in which a scrappy and perfunctory treatment of Course A geography became the inevitable consequence of too extravagant provision for Course B. In some the scheme submitted in nature study was unduly comprehensive, and in others civic instruction had been sacrificed to make room for features of less importance.

In the "annual" or "examination" visits we have, so far as it seemed consistent with safety, brought our practice into closer conformity with the spirit of the regulations, directing our inquiry more to the treatment of subjects and to the methods adopted than to the attainments of individual pupils. Our district is fortunate in possessing a number of schools where the management is so effective and the teaching so thorough that in their case we would gladly go even further in this direction, and occasionally exempt all classes below Standard VI from formal examination for a whole year, accepting with entire confidence the headmaster's judgment in awarding or withholding promotions in the lower standards. It is also a source of satisfaction to feel that in a large section of schools all necessary ends of examination can be fully served by merely sampling the work, without calling upon each pupil to undergo a formal test in every subject. The gratification arising from these considerations is, however, still tempered by the conviction that in a number of our smaller schools the best safeguard of reasonable efficiency lies for the present in the maintenance of formal and searching examinations. In committing ourselves to this statement we wish to emphasize the point that no shadow of reproach, no sweeping imputation of incompetency, is levelled against the general body of teachers employed in these schools. We find in their ranks, even in the remotest corners of the district, workers whose unflagging industry, originality, fertility of resource, and strong personal influence command the warmest admiration. But there are others; and it is sometimes a matter for wonder that the others are not far more numerous. Lower salaries, less attractive surroundings, dearth of congenial companionship, lack of opportunities for the improvement of status, and above all the uncertainty inseparable under present conditions from all prospects of promotion sufficiently explain the absence of any keen rivalry for appointments to these positions. When, therefore, vacancies occur in such schools the only expedient is to make the most careful selection possible from the material available, and to utilise to the utmost subsequent opportunities for the guidance and training of the chosen candidates. If these candidates enter upon their duties reasonably qualified in a few leading essentials, such as interest in their work, earnestness of purpose, and a fairly liberal education, satisfactory developments may be awaited with confidence; and in that development a thorough and sympathetic examination of their schools may be made a factor of no small importance. The training of teachers must, however, be a minor portion of our duties, and we disclaim all desire to encroach upon the sphere of influence in which normal colleges under their improved conditions are accredited centres of "light and leading."

The dearth of qualified teachers willing to accept appointment in the lowest grade of schools, and the inevitable lowering of the standard of efficiency attendant upon this dearth, lead to a matter which becomes increasingly urgent from year to year. We refer to the establishment of central schools. The general decrease of school-going population in so many of the earlier settled portions of the district, and the multiplication of household, aided, and other modest establishments have had effects that were not anticipated and that are but seldom fully realised. Larger and long-established schools have been depleted, masterships which at one time were important enough to be regarded as prizes by able and ambitious young teachers now go a-begging for candidates, opportunities for gaining promotion are fewer, and, worst of all, the educational interests of many children have been to a large extent sacrificed. We cannot shut our eyes to the fact that in a number of small schools the training received by the children leaves much to be desired, while the shortcomings noted are frequently felt to be more the outcome of general surroundings than the result of neglect or of incapacity on the part of the teacher. In some Australian States, notably in New South Wales, the centralisation of schools in sparsely settled districts has now been carried beyond the stage of experiment, and the consensus of intelligent opinion is entirely in its favour. The Under-Secretary and Director of Education in that State in his report