

Although I have stated above that, on the whole, the results for this district are fairly satisfactory, it must be admitted that, taking the schools separately, there are some very notable differences to be explained. Leaving the 88th-clause schools out of the question for the present, it will be seen that the percentage of the scholars examined who passed varies from 4 per cent. at the Arahura Road to 94 at Kumara. Now, assuming that anything less than 70 per cent. must be regarded as unsatisfactory, we find that 9 out of 17 schools have fallen below this point. It is of course easy to throw the blame upon the stringency of the examination, but this excuse fails to have much weight, when it is observed that excellent results have been obtained in all the standards, from the lowest to the highest, in some of the schools both large and small. Taking the First and Second Standards, in which (as was stated above) the examination this year was more exacting than heretofore, we find Greymouth, Stafford, Cobden, Paroa, Woodstock, and Kynnersley and several 88th-clause schools, passing all presented in the First Standard; and Greymouth, Kumara, Paroa, Donoghue's, and one 88th-clause school passing all presented in the Second; whilst several pass from 85 per cent. and upwards in both standards. In the Third Standard, which gives a lower percentage than any other, the following percentages of passes were obtained: Kynnersley, 100; Paroa, 91; Kumara, 90; Cobden, 83; Grey, 75; Hokitika, 73. In the Fourth Standard, Grey passes 93; Kumara, 91; and Hokitika, 73 per cent.; and several small schools passed all they presented. In the Fifth Standard, Kumara, Stafford, Kanieri, Brunnerton, and Cobden pass all presented; and Hokitika, 87; Greymouth, 80; Paroa, 80; and Ross, 74 per cent. In the Sixth Standard all but two schools presenting scholars passed all presented. From these facts it is evident that the low results in certain schools and standards cannot be attributed to the severity of the examination, but that the explanation must be sought for elsewhere. I shall here give a general statement of some of the causes which, in my opinion, have assisted to produce the undesirable features which are discoverable upon a careful examination of the Tables A and B, reserving the application of them for the confidential report which will accompany this.

The Board will recollect that at the examinations held in 1880 and 1881 I excluded from the ordinary returns the names of all scholars who had attended less than 300 half-days, when they failed to pass. This year I discontinued the practice in consequence of the resolution fixing 250 as the minimum attendance to admit to the examination. I find, on looking through the examination schedules, and omitting a few schools that had been closed for a portion of the year, there are 275 scholars whose attendance was less than 300, although more than 250 half-days. Of this number 88 failed, and, if these are excluded from the calculation, the percentage of passes will be increased from 69 to 74. Now, adding these 275 to the 325 who are returned on Table A as having been excluded from the examination on account of deficient attendance (*i.e.*, less than 250 half-days), we have 600 children whose attendance has been very irregular; and this, it must be remembered, is exclusive of scholars below Standard I; or, in other words, of the 1,878 children preparing for standard examination, 600, or 32 per cent., were irregular in their attendance. I have no means of comparing our district with any other in this respect, but it is evident that the irregularity of one-third of all the children in the district must have a serious effect upon the progress of the whole. In my last report I spoke very strongly on this point, and this year there does not appear to be less ground for dissatisfaction with the attendance. I have reason to believe that the adoption of the minimum limit of attendance in connection with the annual examination will materially diminish this irregularity, but much more could be effected by the united efforts of teachers, Committees, and parents, than by any regulation that could possibly be framed. In a private report sent in some two years ago in reference to this subject, I pointed out that the best authorities on educational affairs are almost unanimous in attributing excessive irregularity to inefficiency in the management. One writer says, "Excessive irregularity is frequently assigned as the cause of the low state of a school, but it is much oftener the effect, for both parents and children naturally become indifferent when the discipline and instruction are of a worthless character."

Unpunctuality, another form of irregularity, is also, I am sorry to say, very noticeable at some schools; and the same writer, referring to the subject, says, "Among the many circumstances that may be considered indicative of a badly conducted school, this [unpunctuality], when allowed to run to an extreme, is perhaps the most infallible of any. The unpunctuality of the children is almost always the consequence of indifference, or want of firmness and vigilance, on the part of the teacher." With regard to punctuality, a striking contrast is presented to an observer outside certain schools when the school-bell rings. In one case, at the first sound of the bell every child in sight may be seen to start off in a brisk walk, or a run, to endeavour to reach the appointed spot before the bell shall have stopped. At another no such anxiety is to be noticed. The children, however far from or near to the building at the time, appear scarcely to hear the bell, and certainly to attach no importance to its warning, but continue to saunter along with listless indifference, that shows they are under no apprehension of unpleasant consequence from their unpunctuality; and from ten to fifteen minutes afterwards groups of children may be seen leisurely making their way towards the school, as though they had abundance of time to spare. There is no doubt that irregularity is to some extent unavoidable where the scholars live at an excessive distance from the school and when the weather is very wet; but these two conditions are not more general in this district than in some others, and certainly cannot be admitted as an excuse for unpunctuality. The distance to be travelled requires a certain well-known time for its accomplishment, and it is only necessary to start so much earlier to insure punctual arrival at the school.

It is a common and to a great extent a fair complaint that the requirements of the standards are too numerous and exacting; this being not unfrequently coupled with another—which at any rate cannot be urged this year—that the local interpretation of these requirements is too severe. We also hear about insufficient time between one examination and another, and of staffs inadequate to the work required of them; but, after all, the question may be asked, "Is the time made the most of, and are the staffs employed to the greatest advantage in every case?" I have reason to believe that in some schools the work of teaching is not carried on with uniform regularity throughout the whole of the school year. It begins languidly, and increases in vigour as the time for the examination approaches, and