

These numbers show for the year a decrease of fifty-two in the number of pupils presented. There is a falling-off of thirty-five in the preparatory classes, of seventy-five in Standard I., of fifty-two in Standard III., and of five above Standard VI., with a rise of thirty in Standard II., of thirty-two in Standard IV., of twenty in Standard V., and of thirty-three in Standard VI. This is my twelfth report, and the first in which I have had to chronicle a decrease. For the eleven years previous to this there has been a yearly increase averaging 103, or 1,134 altogether. The number present and examined in Standards I. to VI. is 3,568, as against 3,570 last year; and the number of pupils that passed in one or other of the standards is 3,055, as against 3,043 last year. The percentage of those that passed is 85·6; it was 85·2 last year.

Head-teachers have the promotion of the children of Standards I. and II. in their own hands, and the percentage of passes in these classes was 98 and 97 respectively. As I have pointed out in former reports, I examine Standards I. and II. in all their subjects to form a judgment on the character of the work as a whole, and to ascertain if the promotions have been awarded with discretion. In the main I was satisfied with the awards; but in at least six schools the head-teachers seem to me to have sadly blundered in granting passes that were not deserved. Better that the children should have had one good cry over the disappointment of failing than that they should be harrassed and worried for a year or two to come, trying to do the work of a class for which they are not sufficiently prepared. In Standards III., IV., V., and VI. the percentages of passes were 83, 72, 79, and 84.

The number of children on the rolls in Standards I. to VI. was 3,655, and of these 3,568 were present at examination—that is to say, 98 children out of every 100 on the rolls were examined. The average attendance for the year was 86·4; the average for the colony as a whole in 1896 was 82·1. To encourage regularity in attendance the Board awards nicely illuminated certificates of two grades, the first for perfect regularity, and the second for attendance that is almost perfect; and this year there has been a great increase in the number of scholars that have earned them. Many of the Committees also award prizes for attendance. With these incentives for those who in any case would make a good attendance, and with the activity of the truant officers directed towards those who attend only under pressure, the schools as a whole show a degree of regularity of attendance that is very satisfactory.

Of the 1,475 children in preparatory classes 185 were over eight years of age when the schools in which they are taught were examined. The reasons given for not presenting them in Standard I. appeared to me to be, in most cases, sufficient.

The infant-rooms of several of our largest schools are very pleasant places to visit. The physical exercises and marching are gone through with great spirit and precision, the children timing their movements with some bright song, or with the lilting of a dance-tune. Two schools, Timaru Main and Waimataitai, have recently procured pianos for school use; and in Waimate the infant-mistress has for years past been good enough to use her own piano with excellent effect. Lessons on colour and form; on common things and on animals; paper-folding and block-building; lessons on number with the ball-frame, with coloured reels—singly and strung in tens—with bundles of sticks, &c.; drawing of symmetrical forms on slates ruled in small squares: these and other occupations are engaged in with advantage to the progress of the children in preparing the ordinary subjects of the standard course. We have twenty-six schools with two or more certificated teachers engaged in each, and I should wish to find the infant-mistress in every one of these ever on the watch for anything that will make the work of her department lightsome and effective. Much might be learned by visiting, as opportunity offered, some infant-room that has a good reputation. Again, books on school method should not be looked upon merely as aids to passing the examination in school management for the D or E certificate, and thereafter set apart as votive offerings, too suggestive of stress and strain to be again looked into. It is when there is no need to go to them as to a task that the study of them will be most profitable. And here I would recommend to teachers of infant classes a careful reading of chapter vii. of Garlick's book, "A New Manual of Method." They will find much that is helpful and suggestive stated in brief; and having read one chapter they may be lured on to others all brimming over with information that should prove most serviceable.

With regard to the various subjects of instruction in the standard classes there is little to be said that has not been brought into prominence in past reports.

The percentage of passes in reading ranges from 87 in Standard III. to 97 in Standard VI. This is not an indication of the quality of the reading, for to pass in reading does not always mean to read well. Still, I am pleased to say that the reading was deserving of commendation in more than half of the schools, and in these were included five of the largest schools; in twenty-three schools it was fair; and in nine it was decidedly poor. Each class was tested in the reading-book used during the year, but the scholars had also had some additional practice in reading from their history class-book. A good many teachers meet with little success in training their children to answer questions on the meaning of what has been read. This is not always from want of effort on the part of the teachers, but rather from misdirected effort. The practice of telling what they have been reading about must be begun by the children in the infant-room and continued in the standard classes till it becomes a habit. The child of ordinary intelligence really knows perfectly well the meaning of the great bulk of the matter he meets with in his reading-lessons; but he must be made to feel that, having this knowledge, he must make the effort to give it expression in words of his own.

Spelling has been carefully prepared in most of the schools; but, as the percentage of passes in this subject was only 81 over all, it will be seen that there is still room for much improvement.

Writing was good to very good in forty-five schools, in thirteen it was only fair, and in seven it was poor. Practice in writing without teaching is still too common; and many copybooks are filled in which one looks in vain for that careful imitation of the pattern which is necessary for good writing, and the absence of which points most unmistakably to neglect of duty on the part of the teacher.