

NELSON.

SIR,—

January 31st, 1879.

I have the honor to lay before you my report on the Nelson public schools for the half-year ending December, 1878. No tabulated statements are appended, because a mass of statistics (almost embarrassing from their fulness of detail), required by the Education Department, will form part of the Board's report for 1878, shortly to be published. As the new system of standards has not yet been brought into operation, this report will deal almost exclusively with the discipline, organization, and methods of teaching in our schools—that is to say, rather with processes than with results—and is especially intended for the guidance of teachers.

THE NEW STANDARDS.—The method of examination which has been followed for so many years in Nelson must, as a matter of course, cease after the end of the present year, when the new standards will be adopted throughout the colony. The change is a grave one. Under the former system, the success or failure of every pupil, in each subject, was recorded, and, while the teacher was allowed much more latitude, the mere number of passes made played a less important part than will probably be the case in future. The advantages of an uniform and highly elaborate scheme of examination are, so far as the central authorities are concerned, sufficiently obvious. By applying to the whole colony a rigid and precise series of tests, the task of comparison will, up to a certain point, be rendered easy. So far as mere *instruction* goes,—as distinguished from *education*,—a glance at a row of tabulated statements will suffice to show the relative percentage of those who have got the prescribed minimum of instruction in the several education districts. The shortcomings in this respect of any especially backward neighbourhood, or even school, will also be readily detected by the same compendious process. But the gain to the workers in each school district is by no means so evident. It is scarcely the highest aim of Inspectors and teachers to secure absolute uniformity in the style of teaching, or to endeavour to turn out all the children within their district as nearly as may be of the same pattern. And it should be, it seems to me, more than ever the especial duty of an Inspector to see that the new standards are not so worked as to crush all individuality out of both teachers and scholars—to encourage originality wherever found, and to counteract, as much as possible, the inevitable leaning of those who are constrained to work within a certain prescribed groove to rest content with the bare minimum laid down as necessary to secure a pass.

INSPECTION AND EXAMINATION.—Having lately completed a tour of inspection, I shall be at liberty, during the first half of this year, to co-operate with the teachers in reorganizing their schools in conformity with the requirements of the new standards. The most practical way of doing this will be to put the children in each school (who will have been re-classified at the beginning of the year) through a preliminary examination in the standards. Although the results of this examination will not be published, a service will have been rendered to head teachers, by showing them where their scholars are likely to fail, and where they have been badly classified. At the final examination, towards the close of the year, far greater stress will be laid upon general intelligence than upon verbal memory. The utmost care will also be taken, in the short estimate of the condition of each school, which has always formed, and will continue to form, a part of my reports, to check the tendency to routine teaching that so frequently follows the adoption of any set of standards, however skilfully devised. The teacher whose work is sound, even if his standard be pitched somewhat low—and who can show well-trained scholars and a good tone in his school—may rest assured that his merits shall not pass unrecognized. I make this explanation to guard against an error which some of our teachers may easily fall into,—that of taking for more than it is worth the passing of a large percentage of scholars in the higher standards. This, of itself, is by no means sufficient to constitute a good school, and must not be allowed to influence unduly a good teacher's plans. There will be a greater likelihood of the scholars in the Nelson District being well taught if their teachers will bear steadily in mind the fact that standards are a means, not an end—that they are, at best, nothing more than an imperfect machinery for measuring a portion only of the work of a school.

REARRANGEMENT OF SCHOOL WORK.—The addition of several subjects, notably science, drawing, and vocal music, to the course, will necessitate an entire change in the apportionment of the school hours. Music and drawing must, for obvious reasons, continue to be optional subjects, for some time to come at least, but no valid excuse can be urged for omitting science. To this subject, therefore, I shall at present confine myself. Knowing the difficulty of wedging even a single extra item into our already crowded time-tables, I have been at some pains to devise such a scheme as will burden teachers and scholars to the smallest extent compatible with efficiency. And in doing this I have followed as closely as possible the advice of one who is, perhaps, the first living authority on such a question, and who has, besides, done more than any other man to introduce the study of science to the schools of Great Britain—Professor Huxley. These are his words: "Every educational advantage which training in physical science can give is obtainable from the proper study of these two [botany and physics], and I should be contented for the present if they, added to physical geography, furnished the whole of the scientific curriculum of schools." I propose then, with the permission of the Board, that, during the current year, Huxley's Introductory Science Primer, after being mastered by the scholars preparing for Standards V. and VI., shall be put into the hands of those training for Standard IV. Geikie's Physical Geography (which has already been read by most of the older scholars) may be used as the text-book for Standard V., Balfour Stewart's Physics being given to the Sixth. Next year botany may be substituted for physics as a study for Sixth Standard scholars. I am aware that many of the experiments proposed in the primer on physics cannot be performed without a costly apparatus, and that this objection applies yet more strongly to the chemistry primer. Still, the greater part of the former book can be made intelligible to children, by the exercise of a little ingenuity on the part of the teacher, even without any outlay on apparatus. All of these primers may also be used with advantage as reading-books, by which plan we may at once meet half-way Professor Huxley's demand, "that science should have at least as much time given to it as to any other single subject, say four hours a week in each class of an ordinary school."