

WESTLAND.

Sir,—

Hokitika, 1st March, 1889.

I have the honour to submit the report of the Education Board of the District of Westland for the year ended the 31st December, 1888.

At the beginning of the year the Board was composed of the following persons: Messrs. McLean Watt Jack, Charles Rose, and Richard John Seddon, elected members; and Messrs. Joseph Grimmond, John McWhirter, Gerhard Mueller, and Henry Richardson Rae nominated by Government.

Under the impression that clause 4 of "The Westland and Grey Education Boards Act Continuance Act, 1887," required that the Board should be reconstructed at the end of March, the steps, believed to be necessary, were taken for the election of new members, as provided for in "The Education Act, 1877." The election resulted in the return of Messrs. Jack, Seddon, and J. P. Will; and the Government then again nominated Messrs. Grimmond, McWhirter, Mueller, and Rae.

During the absence of Messrs. Grimmond and Seddon at Wellington—the necessity of granting leave of absence to those gentlemen having been overlooked—their seats became vacant under clause 21 of the Act, and Mr. Rae having resigned his seat it became necessary to fill the vacancies thus caused, which was done by the re-election of Mr. Seddon unopposed, and the nomination by Government of Messrs. Joseph Grimmond and John Bevan. Upon Mr. Seddon's seat becoming vacant, as before stated, Mr. Gerhard Mueller was appointed Chairman of the Board.

During the year 1888 twenty meetings of the Board were called, of which three lapsed for the want of a quorum; five were special meetings, and twelve ordinary meetings. The average attendance of members at the meetings actually held was 4.3. The following is the attendance of the several members: Mr. Mueller, 17; Mr. Jack, 14; Mr. Will, 12; Mr. Grimmond, 10; Mr. McWhirter, 7; Mr. Seddon, 7; Mr. Bevan (since September), 4. Mr. McWhirter's small attendance was due to serious illness.

The number of school districts in the Westland Education District at the beginning of the year was thirteen; but in the month of April a petition was received from the inhabitants of Humphrey's, which was then included in the Blue Spur District, praying the Board to erect that locality into a separate school district under the Act. The Board acceded to the request, but by clause 36 of the Act the formation of a new district could not take effect until the beginning of the present year.

The number of schools that have been in operation during the past year is the same as at the date of the last annual report—viz., twenty-four. Of these, eight have an average attendance below fifteen. Fifteen schools in the district are carried on at a loss to the Board, the remaining nine having to furnish the surplus necessary to support these, and to meet all other expenses of the Board.

An application for assistance to establish another small school has been received from a family living at Lake Mapourika, at a distance of twelve miles from the nearest school (Okarito), and it is not unlikely that other applications of a similar character will be received during the current year. The support of these little schools in remote places confers a valuable and highly-appreciated boon upon the persons interested, and has hitherto been cheerfully conceded by the Board, notwithstanding the serious drain they entail upon its very limited resources. It is to be feared, however, that the time is rapidly approaching when it will be beyond the power of the Board to afford any further assistance to such schools, even if it should not be compelled to reduce the number already established. The alterations recently brought into force by the Act of Legislature have already reduced the Board's income to an extent which renders it barely possible to carry on the educational business of the district with any approach to efficiency; but there is another, and, it is to be feared, a more serious, because quite uncontrollable, influence at work which must have a most disastrous effect upon the income of the Board if nothing should intervene to check it, and that is the steady decline of the population, as indicated by the falling off in the number of school children on the roll.

The roll number at the date of the last examination shows a falling-off of 146 during the year under review, the number being for 1887, 1,936, and for 1888, 1,790, or a decrease of $7\frac{1}{2}$ per cent. The strict average attendance, upon which the income of the Board now depends, was 1,453 for 1887, and 1,452 for the last year, so that the average attendance has, so far, been maintained at about the same point, notwithstanding the decrease on the roll number. This may be accounted for partly by the employment of truant officers in three of the more populous school districts, and partly by increased efforts on the part of Committees and teachers to insure regularity of attendance, the necessity for which has been forced upon their notice by the abolition of the working average.

That a considerable improvement in the attendance has been effected by some means will be more readily seen when the average attendance is expressed as a percentage of the roll number. In 1887 this was 74, whilst for 1888 it reached 78.3. The mean average for the whole of New Zealand for the years 1879 to 1887, both inclusive, calculated from the figures given in the Minister's last report, was 77.7, so that compared with other districts there is nothing to complain of in this respect. The fact, however, remains that the roll number is steadily decreasing. This decline in population is undoubtedly to a great extent due to the reservation of all available land in connection with the Midland Railway.

During the last five years scores of hardy, industrious, and enterprising men, anxious to become settlers, have made applications in vain to be permitted to purchase land in the district. The whole country has been, and still is, locked up for the benefit of the Midland Railway Company, and a most valuable class of settlers are driven to seek elsewhere for homesteads which, though