

THE BOARD.—The retiring members for the year were Messrs. W. Ambury, H. Faull, and J. Mackay. Messrs. Faull and Mackay were re-elected, and Mr. W. Cutfield was elected to fill the vacancy caused by the retirement of Mr. Ambury, who did not seek re-election. Mr. R. G. Bauchope was re-elected Chairman. The Board for the year, therefore, consisted of the following: Mr. Bauchope (Chairman), Miss Heywood, Messrs. Adlam, Allsworth, Cutfield, Faull, Hill, Mackay, and Wade. Mr. Hill resigned in November, and Mr. D. McAllum was elected to fill the vacancy in January of the current year. The Board held twenty-four ordinary and two special meetings during the year, the attendance at which has been as follows: Miss Heywood, 26; Mr. Bauchope, 26; Mr. Adlam, 25; Mr. Allsworth, 26; Mr. Cutfield (who was elected in March, and who had the misfortune to meet with a serious accident shortly after his election), 11; Mr. Faull, 26; Mr. Hill, 22; Mr. Mackay, 25; and Mr. Wade, 26. In addition to these meetings the members have all been called upon to serve on various committees, established from time to time to cope with the work of the Board.

SCHOOLS.—The Huiroa, Tongaporutu, and Kaiiauai Schools, contracts for which were let at the end of 1896, were opened early in the year, bringing the number of schools in operation up to sixty. The Whangamomona School will be opened almost immediately, and the Board has in contemplation the erection of a school at Uruti, to supply the pressing needs of outlying settlers in that neighbourhood. Before considering applications for the establishment of new schools, the Board now sets up a committee to visit the locality, to interview the applicants with a view to ascertain if the settlement is likely to be of a permanent nature, to ascertain the distance from the nearest school, the formation of the country, and the state of the roads. With this information before it, the Board is in a position to deal with the application. Even with the greatest care it is impossible to avoid adding to the number of small schools, as the Board feels it would be neglecting its duty if it did not provide the means of education for the children of pioneer settlers.

TEACHERS.—The number of teachers in the Board's service at the end of the year was 133, as against 126 at the end of 1896. Changes have been frequent during the year, and in order to reduce the number, and the consequent temporary disorganization of schools, the Board brought a regulation into force in April, to the effect that no application for transfer would be considered unless the applicant had been in the Board's service twelve months. The Board has also revised its pupil-teachers' regulations, and made provision for the employment of a small number of ex-pupil teachers and cadets. The result of last year's examination of pupil-teachers was very unsatisfactory, seeing that out of twenty-two who were examined ten failed to pass into the next higher grade. The Board intimated to the teachers interested, and to the pupil-teachers who failed, that it expects a better result this year.

ATTENDANCE.—The total number on the roll at the end of last year was 3,845, as against 3,827 at the end of 1896. The increase would have been greater but for the enlargement and reorganization of the Roman Catholic School at Stratford. It was opened with a new staff of teachers in January, 1897, and has, for the present, affected the attendance at the schools in that neighbourhood. The average attendance still continues to improve, and has now reached 78 per cent., the highest percentage yet reached in this district. The Board has decided to appoint three Truant Inspectors, with the hope of improving the attendance in those parts of the district where there is still great room for improvement.

BUILDINGS.—New schools have been erected at Whangamomona and Kaiiauai, and additions made to the Frankley Road School. New residences have been built at Inglewood and Oaonui, and additions made at Rahotu. The question of residences has become one of great urgency, no fewer than twenty-five of our schools being without them. The teachers are granted a rent-allowance in lieu of a residence, but it is difficult for them to get accommodation near to the schools in bush districts, the majority of the settlers, when first going on the land, only building houses with sufficient accommodation for their own families. The Board finds that each year the buildings now in use, some of which have been built for many years, absorb a larger amount of the building fund more than one-third of the total grant was spent in painting and improving old buildings last year.

STRATFORD DISTRICT HIGH SCHOOL.—Seeing that the population of the district has largely increased, more especially in the south-eastern part, and that the advantages of the New Plymouth High School have not been utilised in a corresponding degree, as is apparent from the fact that the attendance has only increased by five since it was opened in January, 1882, the Board gladly acceded to the request of the Stratford Committee, and applied to the Hon. the Minister of Education for his sanction to convert the Stratford School into a District High School. His consent having been obtained, the school was opened as a District High School after the Christmas holidays, with Mr. John Boyle, M.A., as first assistant-master. The result so far has justified the Board's action, as there are now twenty-one pupils taking advantage of the opportunity thus given them.

SCHOLARSHIPS.—As a result of the December examination, scholarships have been awarded to four boys and five girls. The Board was able to increase the number of awards this year, owing to five of the candidates being able to attend the Stratford District High School, thus dispensing with the travelling-allowances hitherto granted to scholarship holders who live in that neighbourhood.

COMMITTEES.—There are now forty-eight school districts and School Committees, an increase of six as compared with the previous year. The Committees continue to show an increasing interest in performing the duties devolving upon them, and the Board is pleased to be again able to state that it continues to work harmoniously with them.

FINANCE.—The income of the Board from all sources, including £1,042 7s. 1d., balance on 31st December, 1896, was £15,770 16s. 7d., and the expenditure £14,537 2s., leaving a credit balance of £1,233 14s. 7d. Against this balance are liabilities which fully cover the same.

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The Hon. the Minister of Education.

ROBERT G. BAUCHOPE, Chairman.