The Chairman then delivered the following address:—

GENTLEMEN,—

The circular sent to you by direction of the Minister of Education, inviting you to attend this Conference, suggests certain matters for your consideration. These are—(1) The syllabus, (2) scholarship regulations, (3) pupil-teacher regulations, (4) teachers' certificates, (5) higher instruction in primary schools and district high schools, (6) handwork in primary schools, (7) continuation schools, (8) school attendance, (9) examination of private schools, and other subjects, if any, that may be admitted.

There is, however, no wish on the part of the Minister to limit your proceedings to the consideration of the matters thus named, although their full discussion would take a far longer time than can probably be spared by any of us. The Minister and the department would be glad to have the expression of your opinions, as those of a body of experts, on any matters that call for attention or reform in the educational affairs of our colony. One subject that has occupied the attention of educational authorities during the past year—namely, the question of a colonial scale of staff and salaries—the Minister has not suggested for your consideration, as it will form the subject of discussion at a special conference to be held at a later date.

The subjects named in the circular involve principally questions that have arisen through correspondence with the various Boards, or with Inspectors of Schools, and otherwise in the ordinary course of administration. It may be as well that I should briefly refer to the chief topics that are to come before you for discussion.

First with regard to the syllabus: The present syllabus seems to call for amendment in regard to the amount of work required from children at various stages, to the arrangement of that work, to the method of treatment of the various subjects so far as it is indicated by the syllabus, and—most urgent of all, perhaps—in regard to the absence of any substantial differentiation between what is required in small schools and in large schools.

Under the new regulations, which came into force last year, no change was made in the requirements of the syllabus, except in respect of the permission given to substitute handwork for certain other subjects, and in respect of the transference of some of the subjects from the pass-group to the class-group. It was, however, generally understood at the Conference held in July, 1899, that time should be given to enable us to judge to some extent of the effect of the degree of freedom granted by the new regulations. Many, perhaps most, of the suggestions for the alteration of the syllabus relate to amendments in detail. Without intending to imply that careful amendments in detail are unimportant, I may yet venture to point out that the most serious amendment required is more radical, inasmuch as in smaller schools the number of compulsory subjects is so large as to affect prejudicially the quality of the instruction, and relief might be with advantage granted to both teachers and taught. Moreover, it is highly important that space should be found for manual instruction or handwork, or hand- and eye-training (by whichever name we prefer to call it), throughout the school course.

If we begin to consider the question practically, we see at once that any attempt to remodel the syllabus, especially in the direction of differentiating between the requirements of the syllabus for small and large schools, must be influenced by the view we take of the individual standard pass. Whatever value that may have in the eyes of the community, there would to some extent be an element of uncertainty about it if, in addition to the fact of varying standards of interpretation in the different districts, there were added the fact that a child in a country school could pass a given standard with one or two subjects less than a child in a town school. Other reasons, of course, are urged why the individual standard pass should be abolished. I wish to be impartial, and have mentioned the question only to point out how it is connected with the amendment of the syllabus.

The specimen schemes of instruction adapted to the requirements of the new code issued by the English Board of Education contain the germ of an idea of differentiation between large and small schools that would apply with possibly greater force in New Zealand than in England and Wales. I will not take up the time of the Conference by discussing the various subjects in detail. I should like, however, to say that I have no sympathy whatever with any desire that may exist to lessen the amount of reading required. If we have taught the child to read easily, and to like good books; to observe; to act in accordance with his own observation; to reason from his own observation—in other words, to use his hands and eyes intelligently—we have really given him the beginning of a good education. If we have not done that, a large part of the time at school has been wasted, however hard the teachers may have worked at formal instruction. I should invite you, therefore, to consider how far it is desirable to increase rather than diminish the amount of reading. This may partly be met by a suggestion made in another connection—viz., that the reading of historical and geographical readers should be substituted for a more formal treatment of history and geography. In thus treating geography we shall have, of course, to guard against the danger of making geography a mere book-subject, and to take care that the teaching of physical geography is more and more founded upon actual observation of nature. Arithmetic might be curtailed and modified without any great loss to the commonwealth; and when Anglo-Saxons so far wake up as to adopt a decimal money system and a metric system of weights and measures we shall absolutely gain three or four hours a week in every school, and probably twice as much in every countinghouse. In this and in other subjects alternative programmes might be allowed.

You will probably all agree with me that it is desirable that pupil-teacher regulations, so far as they lead up to teachers' certificates, should be as nearly as possible the same all over the colony. At present they differ somewhat widely. The greatest obstacle to uniformity is the difficulty of training pupil-teachers in small schools There would be very little difficulty in introducing a greater degree of uniformity if there were no pupil-teachers, say, in schools with less than seventy-five in average attendance—*i.e.*, if the first addition to the staff were an assistant, and not a pupil-teacher, as it is now in some districts.