

The number in Standard VII. shows a further decrease of twenty-nine, probably an indication of the continued popularity of the free-place system at the Nelson College. The unusually large number—eighty-three—who presented themselves for the Junior Civil Service Examination in December also points in the same direction, as many of these were college pupils desirous of retaining their free places for a longer term.

The total number on the roll is as we have pointed out somewhat less than it was last year, Standard III. lower by eighty-five and Standard I. higher by eighty-seven, showing respectively the largest decrease and increase per standard. The number present at examination is higher than last year, though not so high as in 1902, and we were pleased at the large number of schools, fifty-three, at which every child was present. The average age, except in Standard VII., is generally a little lower. A comparison with last year's figures, shows a loss of 113 and 114 respectively upon the possible number of presentations in Standards VI. and V., thus showing that a great number are leaving school without gaining or attempting to gain proficiency certificates. Now that a certificate of competency is issued only on direct application to the Inspector, who must satisfy himself of the applicant's ability, its value will probably be enhanced in the eyes of parents. If so, a direct incentive will be given to stimulate them to keep their children regularly at school till, at least, the Fifth Standard limit is reached.

The number of Standard VI. certificates obtained by pupils of the public schools was, of proficiency 258, of competency forty-nine. Very few that were not on the school roll made application to sit, the applicants being usually pupils from schools previously examined who had been unable to attend at the annual visit or who wished to attempt a second test.

In accordance with Regulation 24, a special examination was held in Nelson in November, and brought out eleven candidates for proficiency certificates, of whom four passed.

The percentage of candidates that obtained the proficiency certificate was very nearly the same as in 1903, though, in our opinion, the award was more easy of attainment than in former years. In some cases, too, an anomaly was created in that the proficiency certificate was gained by candidates whose marks would not entitle them to the lower or competency certificate. For the latter a pass in each of four out of five subjects is required, though a bad failure in two of the English subjects may not disqualify for the proficiency certificate. The anomaly may readily occur if 50 per cent. is the pass limit, and to lower the minimum much below that appears to us to render the certificate of little value as an indication of the holder's attainments.

The examination-papers this year have been set upon the course of work prescribed in the new syllabus. This is, we understand, the only district of the colony in which teachers have made an attempt to follow the lines laid down. Considering the short time since the change was definitely decided upon, complete development of the new system could not reasonably be expected unless, Minerva-like, it could in a moment spring into perfect being. From the date of the appearance of the revised syllabus—the result of the Conference of Inspectors and of the joint Conference of Inspectors and Teachers—the schools last examined had only the possibility of six months under the new conditions, and those taken first of only two. Consequently, in the matter of new departures, the work has been mainly tentative, but we are only too pleased that the ice has been broken, for the opportunity has been given to clear away many misunderstandings, and we are satisfied that the next year's programmes will be more fully and heartily undertaken, as teachers will have before them a more definite conception of the lines they are expected to follow, as well as of the amount of work they can reasonably expect to cover. The want of suitable text-books in arithmetic, drawing, writing, and especially in geography and history, has been a serious handicap, and we still await the appearance of these from the publishers, as well as from the Department, of the approved list, from which selection must be made. In several subjects teachers have been compelled to give oral lessons only, a serious tax upon sole teachers, whose attentions have to be divided between many different classes.

A brief criticism upon the different subjects taught will best show how far, in our opinion, aims have been realised.

We have grouped the schools according to efficiency as follows: Good, 13; satisfactory to good, 1; satisfactory, 88; fair to satisfactory, 3; fair, 8; moderate, 1; inferior, 1. In estimating the efficiency of a school, we have attached an equal value to each subject required to be taught, and the efficiency value of the school is given in accordance with the value of the majority of the subjects. It will thus be seen that in our opinion the schools generally have been satisfactorily conducted. The few exceptions are mostly the result of a broken school-year, irregular attendance, ignorance of requirements, or the inexperience of newly appointed teachers. A less number than usual maintained a very high standard, none being deemed excellent, though several were classed as good.

READING.—Very satisfactory work continues to be done under this head, two readers being prepared as hitherto in every class of school. The use of the aspirate still presents difficulty in a few localities, the home influence being hard to overcome, but we cannot name any marked fault that can fairly be described as general. The neglecting of the preparation of one book for spelling and the permission given in the new syllabus to substitute a geographical or historical reader for the second, have, we regret to say, suggested to many that only one literary reader should in future be prepared. This would we think, be a decidedly retrograde step.

The use of a geographical or historical reader as a second one might be advantageous in schools under sole teachers, but we hope that, in the interests of their pupils, head teachers will continue to prepare two literary readers, using, if desired, the suggested historical or geographical reader as an additional one. The advantages of a wide course of reading must appeal to every educationalist, as it has a direct bearing upon the child's general intelligence, and particularly affects his composition. The necessity, too, for enlarging the vocabulary was made very patent by the ignorance displayed by the children in using selected words in the composition tests. We admit that many of these given to Standards VI. and VII. were unusual, but we were often astonished at the weak attempts made to employ in sentences words which are in common every-day use.