

Register August 31st 1886

STATE EDUCATION.

Rather more than a month ago we offered some comments upon the motion moved by Mr. Bagster for a return concerning the success of State-school pupils at University examinations. What the ulterior object of this motion is we know not, but, with the returns before us, we are able to emphasize certain remarks which at the time we felt called on to make. Yesterday we published three letters from correspondents on the all-important subject of education, two of which have special reference to the State-school system, whilst the third, bearing the initials "W. H. A.," mainly touches upon matters in which all systems are concerned. The most lengthy of these letters, which is at the same time the most interesting, takes the ground that the results of the educational system have fallen off seriously, both with regard to boys and with regard to girls. The first charge will not bear examination. The writer founds his statements upon the results of the University examinations, and says that the system must be bad under which only twenty-seven pupils from State schools could be found to pass the primary and junior examinations in the years 1878-1885 inclusive. Here is left altogether out of account the fact that the flower of the State schools passes into secondary schools. Six exhibitions are annually offered to the pupils at the former. The winners are sent, free of expense to themselves or their parents, to some secondary school; and when they go up for examination the credit of their success or the disgrace of their failure is fairly enough taken by that school. The State offers higher education to the best pupils in its schools, but it does not say that its reputation should stand or fall with those pupils who are second best. It gets no credit for the pupils it has sent up to the secondary schools well-grounded in the compulsory subjects, and common fairness should

forbid us to attach any blame to its system for the failure of those who, not being adjudged the most promising pupils of their year, venture to compete for University honours. If Mr. Bagster wanted really to find out the facts as to the efficacy of our State-school system, he should have asked for a return showing the history of the pupils who had gained these exhibitions. If he had done so we believe the public would be surprised to learn how many of the honours of the University have been won by State-school pupils. They enter the secondary schools well grounded in the elements of education; here they acquire certain branches of learning which the higher schools alone can give; they are then sent up to the University, and the honour of their passing with credit is taken by the schools which sent them up. We cannot believe that the quality of the teaching has been lowered in the State schools. True, the boys are taught many things, not much; but then this is not the fault of the teachers, nor is it fair to charge them with incompetency because impossible results do not follow on their efforts. The "earnest teachers" of whom our correspondent writes have a work to do which is in no way less important than the preparation of pupils for University certificates, though these "have a positive money value in the world's market." They have a higher

duty to perform—an only duty—and that is so to administer the regulations and laws of their department as to ensure an ordinary knowledge of ordinary things by ordinary children. We hear far too much about signal successes, whereas the real duty of any State-directed system of education lies in the training of the masses, if for once we may use the expression. That teacher does more good from a State point of view in his day and generation who has taught twenty children to write and read than the man who has coached the successful candidate for the blue ribbon of South Australian scholarship. And this reminds us that the very last winner of this high distinction had been a pupil in a State school. He gained an exhibition from his school to one of our Colleges; there he gained a University Scholarship, and now he is the South Australian Scholar. It is absurd in the face of all the facts to say that "the much-talked-of ladder out of the State-school gutter is becoming a remoter possibility than ever."

Our correspondent is on much surer ground when the subject matter is the Advanced School for Girls. There are three points to which special attention is directed—(1) There is no proof that girls needed an advanced school more than boys; (2) private schools had sent up successful pupils for University examinations before the Advanced School was founded; and (3) the country has gained little or nothing in teaching power since the inauguration of the Advanced School. These points vary in value, but it may safely be said that the first two are unanswerable. We have all along held to the opinion that the establishment of the Advanced School for Girls was an unwarrantable interference with private enterprise. It seemed to supply no want. There were in 1879—as there are now—excellent schools for girls. Here they were taught the higher branches of knowledge, such as were necessary for liberal culture. They were not conspicuously deficient in any way, and certainly in some directions they were better than the secondary schools for boys. It is not to be supposed that the proprietors

of girls' schools would omit to secure the best available teachers for different subjects. They were concerned in this not only because the educational interests of their school would be furthered by the academic success of their pupils, but because their livelihood depended on this success. We cannot but think that it would be politic if the Advanced School for Girls were even now discontinued. It is certainly not indispensable. Until lately it has not taught Latin; even now it does not teach Greek. This would not matter if it were not that it was especially formed to fulfil for girls the duties performed by St. Peter's and Prince Alfred College, or other high-class boys' schools, as a guide to University honours. It is no answer to this to say that until lately Greek was not generally taught in Prince Alfred College, or that pupils might even now be sent up from St. Peter's College who would not take up Greek. The position is that this particular Advanced School was established for the purpose of supplying the means for a University education. This embodies Latin and Greek; in that it fails to teach these the school is defective. Pupils pass the junior and matriculation examinations from it—