

**YEAR 7 STUDENTS — SECONDARY SCHOOL**

*Motion*

**MR B.S. WYATT (Victoria Park)** [5.08 pm]: I move —

That this house condemns the Minister for Education for the uncertainty she is causing parents with her continued delay in making a decision on the entry of year 7 students to secondary schools and calls on the minister to immediately make and announce a decision on whether year 7 students in government schools will be required to attend secondary school.

The nature of these motions, including a condemnation of a minister, means that there is unlikely to be a bipartisan discussion, but despite the word “condemn” I am very keen for the minister to explain today where we are with this.

**Dr E. Constable:** Just ask me to explain!

**Mr B.S. WYATT:** The minister will now have an hour, as opposed to the hurly-burly of question time, in which to explain where we are at and why it has taken 658 days since she raised this issue back on 27 May 2009 to today, when we are apparently no closer to a decision. I put this question to the Minister for Education yesterday in question time and she made a number of statements, which I will not quote, of course, because I am unable to quote from the *Hansard* daily. However, the minister has raised a number of issues that I am keen to pursue with her. I want to spend some time going over a little of the background and why we find ourselves in this position today and why the minister has decided to raise the issue. I accept that it is a complicated issue and that it was never going to be an easy decision for the minister to make. I accept that there are pros and cons for the argument whether year 7s stay in primary school or we move them into secondary school. However, the time has come for a decision to be made. Most members will be aware that the former Minister for Education and Training made a decision on this back in February 2007—this is according to his media release—effectively keeping year 7s in primary school, while acknowledging the fact that there were a number of large government schools that already had year 7s in secondary school, and allowing consideration, on a case-by-case basis, of bringing year 7s into those secondary schools under construction. The point is that the minister has made a number of statements on this issue over a long period—nearly two years! On 13 October 2010, five months ago, the minister said she was two to three months away from making a decision. I acknowledge the minister’s comments in question time yesterday that she was waiting on the first draft report on the national curriculum, which she received on 8 December. Hopefully, now the minister has had a chance to be briefed on that, she has considered the matter and is today in a position to at the very least give a timetable for when this may go to cabinet and when there may be a decision. I put this to the minister yesterday so that, by the time the budget rolls around in May, teachers, parents, schools and children are in a position of some certainty about exactly what is the government’s policy on this issue.

The Department of Education and Training produced a report on this issue dated February 2007 titled “The Future Placement of Year 7 Students in Western Australian Public Schools: A Study”, which effectively outlined three options: to locate all students in secondary schooling; to retain all students in primary schooling; or to continue with a mixed model. I appreciate that things have changed since then and the independent schools have gone to a model of having year 7s in secondary schooling, and, going by the minister’s comments in the media and in the chamber, she is concerned about this dual system.

The minister has made many comments about public discussion and public consultation. This has not taken place. A discussion document has not been released by the government, unlike in Queensland, where the government released a discussion document that provided options and parameters, asked for input and provided a mechanism so that all concerned parties could be part of that process. The minister has made no call for public submissions, and as far as I am aware no public forums have ever been held by the minister or the government. The minister has not even issued any media releases or referred to this issue, which is one of the more significant policy issues for the government to consider in the education system. Not one media release has gone out on this issue! If the minister were keen on public consultation and hearing from those affected parties—primarily teachers, children, parents and schools—I would have thought that at the very least a process would have been put in place beyond the minister simply receiving letters from parents or schools and making the odd comment in the media. The minister has created huge uncertainty. I have raised this issue with the minister in this place previously in the context of the year 7 class size at Kensington Primary School, which had shrunk considerably. That was some time ago.

I accept that the decision is a difficult one that has pros and cons on both sides; however, a decision must be made. I am calling on the minister to do that today. I do not expect the minister to get up and make that decision,

Mr Ben Wyatt; Acting Speaker; Dr Elizabeth Constable; Mr Mark McGowan; Ms Andrea Mitchell; Mr Paul Papalia; Mr Andrew Waddell

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but I expect her to at least provide the chamber and therefore the people of Western Australia with a clear plan on what progress we can expect on a decision going forward.

The issue first arose on 27 May 2009 in budget estimates when the member for Kingsley asked the minister a dorothea dixer. It is amazing how a dorothea dixer can come back to haunt a minister! The minister said that it was time to revisit the decision made by the former Minister for Education and Training, the member for Rockingham. The current minister highlighted some of the troubles and concerns that were raised in the report of the Department of Education and Training. I want to highlight some of the key findings of that report, because it did make very clear some of the major obstacles in the way of moving year 7s into secondary school. Perhaps the key finding of that report, and the very first finding made by the department, reads —

There is no evidence at either the State or national levels that outcomes improve when Year 7 students are in secondary settings.

That seems to be the key issue. If we cannot at the very least prove that there is going to be a beneficial outcome to students from moving them into secondary school, what is the point? A number of other concerns were raised, primarily by the advocacy groups in Western Australia. The Western Australian Primary Principals' Association has been very vocal in its advocacy of the placement of year 7s, as have a number of other organisations. On page 4 of the report, one of the other findings reads —

The provision of specialist teachers and facilities in secondary schools for Year 7 students could be expected to improve student engagement and motivation. At present, there is insufficient evidence to suggest that it would also improve their levels of achievement.

One of the arguments that the minister has made and that is being made to move year 7s into secondary schools is that it gives them access to specialist teachers. I will go through some of the findings that WAPPA has highlighted on that. No doubt the report that the minister received on 8 December 2010 on the national curriculum will provide her with further enlightenment on that area. No doubt the former minister came across this issue, just as the minister and the National Party members of the government are also aware of this. One of the key findings in the department's report reads —

There are early indications of community anxiety about student wellbeing. In rural and remote areas, communities are very concerned about the emotional, social and economic impacts of a change in the setting for Year 7 schooling on the students, their families and the community.

There is no doubt, as Mr Acting Speaker (Mr P.B. Watson) would be aware in Albany, the idea of moving students out of year 7 in primary school to secondary school, particularly if there is going to be a placement of those kids into city-based boarding schools, has a double impact: kids leaving home at an earlier age, and the costs of attending boarding school imposing a financial burden on families.

The department's report outlined a number of different implementation costs and impacts. Perhaps the biggest one is —

The relocation of all year 7 students into secondary settings is estimated to cost \$835m net over the period 2009 to 2015; followed by annual recurrent costs of \$122m. A phased implementation approach would probably reduce these costs.

Not long ago, in an article by Bethanie Hiatt, the minister was reported to have said that she anticipated a reduction in the costs. I note that the Department of Education did its study at the higher end and assumed that most schools would need money spent on them. Perhaps an audit has been done on secondary schools that have the capacity to absorb year 7 students without significant capital expenditure, which may reduce that cost. Alternatively, the cost could be reduced by phasing in the movement of year 7s into secondary schools over a longer time or, indeed, the minister might have either made the decision, or is considering making the decision, to not involve all schools. I note, again in the same article by Ms Hiatt, that the minister suggests regional schools may be exempt from any change in policy, which no doubt accounts for the finding from the department that I just read out. Importantly for members, I want to read into *Hansard* the department's conclusion in 2007 and two of its recommendations. The conclusion on page 6 states —

It is clear that it is not feasible to move all public Year 7 students into secondary settings in the foreseeable future, due to the high costs, the capacity of the Department to provide teachers and the concerns of rural and remote communities.

It is important to note that one of the key issues the department had about moving year 7s from primary to secondary school was the acknowledgement that it would be almost impossible to find those several hundred additional secondary teachers. In 2007 there was general shortage of teachers. That problem does not exist at the moment, but within the next few years we will experience teacher shortages. The argument raised by the minister

Mr Ben Wyatt; Acting Speaker; Dr Elizabeth Constable; Mr Mark McGowan; Ms Andrea Mitchell; Mr Paul Papalia; Mr Andrew Waddell

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and others is that year 7s who go to secondary schools will get the benefit of specialist teachers. That argument ignores the fact that we have to find those teachers and train them in readiness for the expected quantity of students in secondary schools.

The department made six recommendations. The first recommendation no doubt resulted in the former Minister for Education, the member for Rockingham, making a particular decision. I do not intend to quote the whole report, but I will conclude with this. At page 7, the report states —

In public schools, the provision of schooling for Year 7 students should continue to be in primary settings. However, there is scope for variation from the basic model, as indicated in Recommendation 2.

Recommendation 2 states —

The relocation of Year 7 students into secondary settings should be considered on a case-by-case basis within local communities, as new schools are built or schools are being redeveloped, in the context of a statewide planning framework.

Recommendations 3 to 6 set out a number of considerations that the minister is hopefully considering in preparation of her long-awaited cabinet submission for a final decision to be made on this issue.

Before I move on and forget, I will mention a couple of concerns a teacher in the public system raised with me. He sent me an email about the loss of full-time equivalent positions at schools that move year 7 students from primary schools into secondary schools. The school size reduces and therefore there is a reduction in the allocation of other staff such as cleaners, gardeners and clerical positions. All those positions are based on a school's enrolment. That is the flow-on impact of reducing the size of the government primary school system when year 7s are moved to a high school. The email also alluded to the likely closure of small schools in remote and regional communities. The decision to move year 7 students into a high school would have an impact on primary schoolteachers who would no longer have any students and would have to be retrained in a secondary setting. The Western Australian Primary Principals' Association Inc has considered bringing specialist teachers into the primary school setting over time and keeping the year 7s where they are.

This issue has gone through a number of different contortions. The debate has moved on over the past two years, as I said, primarily at the advocacy level. WAPPA has been involved through Stephen Breen, and the Western Australian Secondary School Executives Association is obviously very keen to move year 7s into secondary schools. On 22 June 2009, shortly after the minister put the issue back on the agenda, the minister, again in an article in *The West Australian*, said that she was concerned WA was developing a dual system. From the various media reports on this issue, it appears that that has been her common concern. However, in response to the three questions without notice that the former shadow education minister, the member for Midland, put to the minister, the minister consistently said that the government is re-examining the issue and wants to have a public debate on it because it wants to hear what people have to say about it. To be perfectly frank, the public debate simply has not taken place. A mechanism has not been put in place to enable that to take place in any reasonably considered forum. On 9 March 2010, in another question on notice to the minister by the former shadow Minister for Education, the minister referred for the first time to the implications of the national curriculum. I hope that the minister is in a position, now that she has the report, to finally consider the extra implications that have arisen since the minister raised the issue in May 2009.

Interestingly, a couple of reports have been released over time. The University of Notre Dame reviewed the issue and, unsurprisingly, found that year 7s who were moved into a secondary school—I refer to another article from *The West Australian* on 6 April 2010—took the move in their stride, did not think it was an issue and thought that it was all very easy for them. It seems that it has been a battle of the primary principals versus the secondary principals and between public schools versus private schools. Comparative data from a couple of reports by Mr Breen from WAPPA show that under the old Western Australian literacy and numeracy assessment, students who completed year 7 in primary schools performed considerably better than students who completed year 7 in a secondary school. A report prepared by Julian Dooley from Edith Cowan University highlighted the bullying implications on year 7s in secondary schools and reported that year 7 students in a secondary school environment are much more susceptible to higher rates of bullying. As a parent of two young daughters, that concerns me and no doubt will concern all members.

I will refer to an article from *The West Australian* on this matter that has been kicking around for a long time. When we moved from Western Australian literacy and numeracy assessment program to the national assessment program, students who completed year 7 in a primary school setting performed better than year 7s who completed year 7 in a secondary setting. I accept that other external, physical and emotional impacts may affect those results. However, it is clear that if the minister plans to move away from the status quo, she needs to make the case for doing it.

Mr Ben Wyatt; Acting Speaker; Dr Elizabeth Constable; Mr Mark McGowan; Ms Andrea Mitchell; Mr Paul Papalia; Mr Andrew Waddell

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If we are to move year 7 students into the secondary setting, we need to make the case for why it is the best decision for those students. There will be other considerations; for example, cost. The Premier referred to the cost-benefit analysis that hopefully the department has done or is doing in some form. We found out yesterday that the Premier does not believe in cost-benefit analyses anymore. However, when thinking of spending close to \$1 billion—that was a 2007 estimate—a thorough understanding is needed about whether year 7 students will indeed benefit from the outcome. It is also apparent that the minister is perhaps changing her policy settings about any proposed move of year 7s into secondary schools and whether the move will apply to all schools or to only some schools. Certainly, on 9 November 2010, in response to a question on notice, the minister said that the ultimate decision on year 7s in high schools will apply to all schools. However, the minister's commentary in an article written by Bethany Hiatt on 16 February this year suggested that regional schools may be exempt. There may indeed be a very good case for exempting regional schools from whatever policy setting the minister chooses.

It is clear—something that I have quickly picked up in my very short time in this portfolio area—that teachers, schools and parents want a decision to be made. A decision must be made, minister. That is where we are at. The minister has had the better part of two years or as I have said 658 days since she raised the issue. The minister put this matter back on the agenda. The minister is reviewing a decision made by the former education minister and her decision will not be based on too many new things. The minister knew what the independent school system was going to do and has since done. The minister knows the impact of kids moving from the state school system into the private school system. Will the movement from state to private schools increase if we do not follow the private school lead and move year 7s into secondary school? I do not know. I am looking forward to hearing what the minister has to say on that. I would like the minister to at least attempt to answer a number of questions today. Firstly, when? The last time that the minister commented on this issue prior to yesterday's question time was 13 October 2010 when she indicated that she would "make a decision in the next two or three months". The opposition and the people of Western Australia expected a decision to be made before the end of 2010. But it is clear that there is still some time to go before this decision will be made. Secondly, will the minister's policy decision apply to all schools? Will every school in Western Australia have to consider or respond to the movement of year 7 students out of primary and into secondary schools, and, if so, what is the time frame for that? Over what time will that happen? I appreciate that the department's 2007 review anticipated in one scenario that the move would cost the better part of \$1 billion. Maybe the minister has come up with other scenarios. What are they? Once again, the minister commented to *The West Australian* that it will not cost as much as indicated by the department. What is the cost? Will that cost be provided to the Department of Education above and beyond the education allocation or will the department be forced to find that money internally in this budget or at least across the forward estimates? As I have already asked: has there been any analysis?

The fundamental problem is the lack of public debate. There has been no public debate simply because a process by which parents, teachers and students can engage the government has not been put in place. The government has not moved a motion in this place; the government has not brought on debate in this place. As I have said, not one media release—not one—has gone out from the minister on an issue that may be one of the most significant policy issues that the minister will deal with in this term of government—not one media release! How can a public debate take place in the absence of any form of guidance from the government? The Queensland government was very good at this; it provided a discussion paper setting out options, parameters and likely costs to allow the education community to make an informed contribution. This is a significant decision and at the very least the department and the minister should have provided that information to parents, teachers and students. A debate cannot be had in the absence of facts, and the most recent document that the opposition can find is the 2007 department report.

Fourthly, has the minister considered training primary teachers to provide specialist education in primary schools? One thing the minister worries about most in keeping year 7 students in a primary setting is the lack of access to specialist teachers, particularly in science and maths. That may very well be a good argument. It seems that the National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy results and some of the research done in the United States suggest that that is not the case. In fact, it certainly seems that the NAPLAN results for year 7s in a primary setting are better than for those who are not. Again, I appreciate that it is perhaps early days and that I am not privy to the reports the minister received on 8 December and referred to yesterday. In its 2007 report, the Department of Education stated that it may prove impossible to recruit several hundred secondary teachers. This is a problem that is hard for members to think of now because we effectively have a full complement of teachers. All those members in this place or involved in the education system in 2007 and the years leading up to 2007 will remember—certainly the member for Rockingham will remember this well—when we could not fill all those teaching places. We are about to go into a teacher shortage again in the next few years. At the very least,

Mr Ben Wyatt; Acting Speaker; Dr Elizabeth Constable; Mr Mark McGowan; Ms Andrea Mitchell; Mr Paul Papalia; Mr Andrew Waddell

---

the department must have considered that issue as well if it is going to put that extra burden on the secondary system.

Fifthly, although I have dealt with this already, why has a discussion paper not gone out to schools? Why has a discussion paper not gone out to families so that this debate could take place rather than in a vacuum? Sixthly, yesterday the minister said that she had been gathering data on this issue. What data has the minister been gathering? Where has the data come from? How has it been provided to the minister? This is a decision that needs to be made on more than simply letters to the minister—more than simply random conversations. This needs to be data that is provided in a logical and, I would have thought, scientific way.

Finally, yesterday the minister said that on 8 December last year she received the final draft of the first four areas of the national curriculum. What did that say? I for one will be very interested to know what that said because one of the schools is, I think, in my electorate and one is, I think, in the member for Armadale's electorate; that is, Armadale Primary School.

**Dr A.D. Buti:** It is in the member for Darling Range's electorate but most of the students come from my electorate.

**Mr B.S. WYATT:** Thank you. I assume that the minister has now been briefed on the issue. As I have said, this is perhaps one of the most important policy considerations that the government will have to deal with this term. We know that the minister has been very proud of her policy implementation in relation to independent public schools. However, this is one of the bigger challenges that face not only the minister and the government, but also the department. The reality is that any decision or the lack of a decision—that is the status quo—will have implications for the education of students. How will the minister respond. If the minister keeps year 7s in primary schools, she will have to address the issue that she has raised about specialist teachers and what that will likely cost over the forward estimates. If the minister wants to take the option of moving all year 7s into secondary schools, that will obviously have significant cost implications as well.

**Mr P. Abetz:** Huge implications.

**Mr B.S. WYATT:** Correct, member. You have been listening—or have you just walked in?

**Mr P. Abetz:** Intently.

**Mr B.S. WYATT:** Very good, member. As the department report of 2007 stated—how much has the member been listening?—it will cost \$835 million to move all year 7s into the secondary setting. As I have already noted, the minister has said that it may not be so costly depending on the decision that she makes. However, I have outlined the conundrum before the minister; I have outlined the various problems—the pros and cons—which she has to consider and for which she must ultimately make a decision. That is the reality.

This has been dragging on for two years. On 13 October last year the minister said she would make a decision within the next two to three months. The time is up. Schools want to know, schools want to prepare, families want to know, and families want to prepare. If the minister is no longer satisfied with the status quo, she needs to make her case. She has not taken the Western Australian public and the Western Australian education community into her confidence on this issue, and that is a major failing of this process. After two years of flagging this issue, I know I am not going to get a decision today, but the minister today needs to provide the house and Western Australia with, at the very least, some certainty about the timing of the process. I dare say it is going to be post budget, judging from the answer she gave yesterday. However, I may be pleasantly surprised. There needs at least to be an acknowledgment that a decision must be made, and made very soon.

As I said, there are not many things that the minister is going to have to deal with over the term of this government that will have such significant implications for the education of our primary school children, whether in the primary or secondary setting. I for one am interested, because ultimately it will affect my children, and I am sure many other members will be interested, including the member for Ocean Reef, who I know will be concerned about where his son will go to school in the future.

I ask the minister to please take this opportunity to inform the house. Despite the condemnation in the wording of the motion, I have tried to be as reasonable as I possibly can in this debate, because it is something that requires a resolution. It required a resolution last year, yet here we are in 2011, well beyond the minister's deadline. It is now time for the minister to set a clear and clean path for when she intends to make that decision and to indicate whether she intends to have any more consultation or, for that matter, any consultation.

**The ACTING SPEAKER (Mr P.B. Watson):** Member for Kalgoorlie, I have queried you for talking on that side of the chamber; now you are on this side of the chamber. How about you go sit in your seat and talk to yourself?

Mr Ben Wyatt; Acting Speaker; Dr Elizabeth Constable; Mr Mark McGowan; Ms Andrea Mitchell; Mr Paul Papalia; Mr Andrew Waddell

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**Mr B.S. WYATT:** Perhaps the member for Kalgoorlie missed year 7! He forgot how to follow instructions, Mr Acting Speaker!

I will conclude with those comments. There has been no consultation, minister, and perhaps we had missed our time frame. It is now time for a decision to be made. The minister needs to let us know right here and now when this decision will be made.

**DR E. CONSTABLE (Churchlands — Minister for Education)** [5.43 pm]: I know the motion contains the word “condemns”, but I do not feel condemned at all.

**Mr B.S. Wyatt:** Minister, I tried not to!

**Dr E. CONSTABLE:** I have been modelling listening skills and I have not interrupted the member for Victoria Park; he should do the same with me.

**Mr B.S. Wyatt:** I won't, minister, but I simply make the point that I deliberately didn't give you a condemnation speech.

**Dr E. CONSTABLE:** That is right, and that is why I am saying that I do not feel condemned.

**Mr B.S. Wyatt:** Good!

**Dr E. CONSTABLE:** As the member for Victoria Park said, and I agree with him wholeheartedly, the matter that he has brought forward this afternoon is very important, and I value the opportunity to correct some of the things he has said, to agree with some of the things he has said, to extend his and other members' knowledge of this issue, and to bring them up to where we are today. I caution, however, that in my answer to the member yesterday I said that this is in the cabinet process. The member asked some questions at the end of his speech, which I wrote down but which I will not be able to answer because a cabinet submission has been written and it is now with the Premier's office. Now that we have reached that part of the process, there are questions that I will not be able to answer at this point because they are at the point of cabinet deliberation. However, there are also a lot of issues, some raised by the member and others that I want to raise, that I will be more than happy to address as we progress over the next hour or so.

Rather than people feeling that they are—what was the word in the member's motion?—uncertain, I do not feel that people are uncertain. I think they have confidence that we are being thorough and that we are fully informed about the matter of year 7s and whether they should be placed in the last year of primary school or the first year of high school. This motion gives me an opportunity to comment on the complexities of the situation, some of which were recognised by the member for Victoria Park. I have no evidence at all that parents were concerned; they are interested, most certainly, but not concerned that a decision has not yet been made. There is certainly a great deal of evidence to show that people are interested, from the letters and comments I have received; from meetings I have had with Stephen Breen, who was mentioned by the member for Victoria Park and who is the president of the Western Australian Primary Principals' Association; from meetings I have had from time to time with Mr Rob Nairn, president of the Australian Secondary School Executives Association; and from meetings with others. There is a great deal of interest in this, for all good reasons. It was always going to take time, and I am sorry to tell the member for Victoria Park that there is going to be another short history lesson so that he can see how much time was taken by the previous government to get to the point it reached in 2007.

It is complex and there is much to learn. There have been worthwhile discussions with professional organisations and others, and there is an issue for small country schools that is very important. I think it is true to say that in so much of what we do in Western Australia, not only in education but also in other areas, one size does not fit all, and we have to keep that in mind. The most important question that I can underline here is: what is in the best interest of students? It has been very important to have had a very considered response and deliberation and to not rush this matter. When the Catholic schools were deciding to do this, they took three years to prepare. They took their time, and we have taken our time, just as the former government did. We will do this in the right way by taking our time.

I will start by giving members a short history lesson. I go back to May 2002, when Hon Alan Carpenter was Minister for Education. During budget estimates I asked him a question about the movement of the half-cohort for year 7 in 2009 and whether they would be in primary or secondary settings. He conceded that planning had to be done in 2002 to look at the matter. When the announcement of the increase in the school entry age was made by Hon Colin Barnett when he was Minister for Education, it was thought that when the half-cohort went into year 7, they would more than possibly be placed in secondary schools. It was recognised in 2002 by the then Labor Minister for Education that a lot of planning needed to be done to deal with this issue.

Mr Ben Wyatt; Acting Speaker; Dr Elizabeth Constable; Mr Mark McGowan; Ms Andrea Mitchell; Mr Paul Papalia; Mr Andrew Waddell

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Less than a month later, in the other place, Hon Ljiljana Ravlich as parliamentary secretary said that the whole idea of moving year 7s into secondary school was driven by economics. I think that that is a pretty sad view of the education of children. The view has to be about what is in the best educational, social and other interests of children for where they should be placed. That was being discussed in 2002 and it is an issue that has been raised year after year in estimates. It was somewhere on the agenda of the previous government, very early on.

As I said, there is a lot more to this issue than economics. It is not just about what it is going to cost; it is about the best interests of children. A lot of issues have arisen since 2007 when the then minister, the member for Rockingham, made the decision based on the information that he was provided with; a great deal has happened since then. Since I have been Minister for Education, I have visited something like 315 schools. Almost everywhere I have gone, I have engaged in a discussion about this issue, or people have raised it with me—often with parents present, often with school council members present, and certainly with staff—to gauge what their sense of this issue has been. As well as engaging in this issue in schools, we all know about the wonderful things happening in our public schools. A great deal of progress has been made in the past few years, particularly in those crucial areas of numeracy and literacy, and in the way that schools are approaching their work. I am always in awe of the highly capable, enthusiastic people teaching our children. I think we are in a very good place at the moment. I have sought the views of many hundreds of people as I have moved around schools. People have been very willing to share their points of view and very willing to listen.

Returning to history for a moment, during the estimates committee hearings in 2003, the then minister, Hon Alan Carpenter, stated —

... when it occurred to me that this would be an issue, I think last year or the year before, I made it clear that we must have some sort of strategy to deal with this issue and not just think that somehow it will sort itself out; ...

In 2002–03 the Labor minister was talking about strategy. My point here is that it took from 2002 to 2007 for the former government to come to its conclusion about what should happen with year 7s. It took five years to put strategies in place; it was thinking about it, gathering data and looking at the issue. The member for Victoria Park's criticism of me is that it has taken almost two years. The member himself said these are complex issues—even more complex now than it was in the years 2002 to 2007. It is not surprising that it has taken this length of time. A little later I will address the issue of that date in December last year, because I think the member needs to understand some of the issues around what happened there.

**Mr B.S. Wyatt:** You also said in October you were two or three months away from making a decision.

**Dr E. CONSTABLE:** I will come back to that. If I forget, the member can interject and remind me.

**Mr P.C. Tinley:** Lucky; you've got permission to interject!

**Dr E. CONSTABLE:** We are talking about listening skills, so we are on a roll here! This is a discussion as much as it is a debate and an exchange of ideas, which is really important. I value that.

I raised this year 7 in secondary school issue year after year because it was an issue I was really interested in, given the change in school entry age and children being so much older. I felt at that point, just like the member for Victoria Park does now, some urgency in thinking it through and dealing with it. The sorts of issues that I raised then included what curriculum changes would we make as a state if we made that change. That was really important. I raised a concern that we risked creating a hotchpotch situation of some children going to secondary school and some staying in primary school. I make the point it took a lot of time to get to that decision in 2007.

In 2006 the then Minister for Education and Training, Hon Ljiljana Ravlich, said that she was not rushing a decision, just as I said I was not going to rush this decision. This issue is far too important to rush and get it wrong, and not see it through. Hon Ljiljana Ravlich answered questions at that time in the Legislative Council posed to her by Hon Peter Collier. He asked very similar questions to the ones I had asked previously of Hon Alan Carpenter when he was education minister. It is interesting that during that time, 2005–06, the minister had already begun approving Catholic and independent schools to move to year 7 in secondary school. In that time two Catholic schools, and one independent school, were given approval by the minister. The door had been opened around 2005–06 for Catholic and independent schools to make that change. I believe it was really important to think through the implications that that change might have for government schools. There is no indication, in anything I have looked at or found, that that was taken into account. One of the most crucial things to occur is the impact on our primary schools, which is an issue the member for Victoria Park also raised.

It is interesting that no decision was made about the movement of public school students at all, but in December 2006, Hon Ljiljana Ravlich, as minister, granted blanket approval to Catholic schools to allow year 7s into high

Mr Ben Wyatt; Acting Speaker; Dr Elizabeth Constable; Mr Mark McGowan; Ms Andrea Mitchell; Mr Paul Papalia; Mr Andrew Waddell

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schools. That decision created a dual system. It is that dual system that we have been dealing with in our deliberations and our organisation of public schools ever since. In a sense, her swansong as minister was making that decision at the end of 2006. Of course, a large number of independent schools have since followed suit—so much so that a census last year showed that 38 Catholic schools and 14 independent secondary schools were enrolling year 7s in secondary settings, representing 78 per cent of private school students. Almost 80 per cent of private school students in year 7, as of last year—there would be more now—are in a secondary setting.

As an aside, what is interesting about that, member for Victoria Park, is that 63 public secondary schools already have the opportunity to have year 7s on their sites. There are 55 district high schools, K–10, which have year 7s on their sites. Theoretically, district high schools could have year 7s on their sites—some do not have any high school students. It is open to those schools to have them on site. That includes eight of our secondary schools. We are a part of that dual system. If we look at our 18 remote community schools and seven primary schools with secondary tops, there is another group of schools that have year 7s in a secondary setting. In addition, we have another 86 schools that enrol only secondary students. We have a mixed bag within the public system as well.

Getting back to the move by the Catholic schools, Catholic schools phased in year 7 in high schools mainly in 2008 and 2009. We know that has had an impact on primary schools in the public sector. In fact, as the member for Victoria Park said a moment ago, he raised that during the debate on the Premier’s Statement last year and expressed his concern that in his electorate there was one primary school at least at which there were very few year 7s, and that that was having an impact.

**Mr B.S. Wyatt:** Kensington Primary School.

**Dr E. CONSTABLE:** At the time he said he was not going to name it, but I think we discussed that afterwards. That has certainly been the picture across the metropolitan area. A lot of people shrugged it off to start with and said it is just in the leafy western suburbs that primary schools have been affected. That is not so—it has been right across the board. We have seen that impact on our primary schools throughout the metropolitan area. That is really important because some people have been saying to me, in the past few months, that it means that year 7 students are marking time because there are very few students. Many year 7 students are turning 13 years of age in primary school and are ready to move on to a different mode of learning and a different setting. When there are very few year 7s, we end up getting a mixed year 6–7 class. I guess half the year 7 students would be turning 13 years of age in a 6–7 class. Year 7 students should be extended and prepared for high school as year 7s if they remain in a public school. That is a major, major educational issue for us. The dual system that we now have has created a range of educational issues for year 7s.

It was a very fair issue that the member for Victoria Park raised. If I can quote *Hansard*, the member for Victoria Park made the statement —

However, the worry is that we will end up with a whole swag of public primary schools that have a very narrow band of kids there, —

This is a very, very important point the member made —

usually from the lower socio-economic groups, and they do not have the better performing kids. As we know, a school needs to have the better performing kids because —

I interrupted the member on that.

*Sitting suspended from 6.00 to 7.00 pm*

**Dr E. CONSTABLE:** Before the dinner break I was commenting on some of the member for Victoria Park’s words from *Hansard* of February last year, when he was talking about the impact of year 7 students in Catholic and independent schools moving into secondary schools, as well as the impact on our public primary schools. As we broke for dinner I was making the point about the fact that this has often meant “residualisation” of our schools and of our children in schools. The member had made the point that often it is the better performing children who leave for year 7 in a non-government school. I later made the comment that within the whole area of year 7 students are issues that we need to take seriously. I am delighted to report that the response from the member for Victoria Park was that these issues do need to be taken seriously. Therefore, we are at least in agreement on that point.

That brings me to the decision the previous government made in 2007 that year 7 students in public schools would remain in primary schools, notwithstanding the fact that eight secondary schools already had year 7 students, and, of course, district high schools have the capacity for year 7 students to be part of their secondary schooling configuration—indeed, they are in a number of district high schools.

Mr Ben Wyatt; Acting Speaker; Dr Elizabeth Constable; Mr Mark McGowan; Ms Andrea Mitchell; Mr Paul Papalia; Mr Andrew Waddell

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All sorts of comments have been made—I think it was in the paper provided to the previous minister—that there is no educational benefit from year 7 students being in secondary school. I do not think that research has actually really been done. I think often in educational research the statement has been made that there is no evidence to show whatever because we do not have the research to show it. I make the observation that in Victoria and New South Wales year 7 students have been in secondary schools for as long as I can remember. When I went to school in Sydney, primary school was K–6 and at the next level students went into what is now called year 7 at high school. Year 7 was called something else in my day, but I cannot remember what it was called. If we look at the National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy results for those students in Victoria and New South Wales, they are well ahead, they are way above average across the board. Therefore, I think there is evidence to show at least that their year 7 students are doing much better than ours and better than Queensland, South Australia and the Northern Territory, better than the Australian Capital Territory generally—not always, but almost always—and better than Tasmania. In looking at NAPLAN results a lot of other factors should be taken into account, but that is some evidence that shows consistently that those states’ year 7 and year 9 students perform much better than those of the other states. Therefore, we need to be very careful of statements in educational research that “there is no evidence to show it”; that is because no-one has gone out and sought that evidence in a systematic way.

**Mr B.S. Wyatt:** Is that being sought by the department at the moment?

**Dr E. CONSTABLE:** I think events have actually overtaken that, but I just wanted to make the point that members have to be very careful about hanging their hat on that sort of “there is no evidence” statement. Has anyone sought that evidence? I do not think so. I think there is evidence in that if we look at the national testing results of students in years 7 and 9 and compare them with our students, students in New South Wales and Victoria, where those year 7 students are in secondary school, do much better. There is probably mixed evidence, but I think there is some strong evidence, when we look at just that factor.

**Mr P. Papalia:** Are you talking about statewide?

**Mr B.S. Wyatt:** No, nationwide.

**Dr E. CONSTABLE:** No, I am looking nationwide.

**Mr P. Papalia:** Is your comparison between New South Wales and Western Australia statewide? Is that what you’re talking about?

**Dr E. CONSTABLE:** I am just saying that if we look across Australia, national testing is one measure, and there are others.

**Mr P. Papalia:** Of course, our NAPLAN results will be skewed by the disproportionate number of Indigenous students we have.

**Dr E. CONSTABLE:** I said that other factors come into play, but if the member were to look at it year after year consistently and if he were to take that factor out, I suspect he would still find the same result.

**Mr P. Papalia:** I don’t think you’ve got any evidence to support that.

**Dr E. CONSTABLE:** As an educational researcher I am saying that my thesis would be that if we take the Indigenous factor out of our results, we would probably still find the same thing. But I am not saying that is because those students are in secondary school; all I am saying is that we have to be careful of those sorts of statements in educational research.

**Mr B.S. Wyatt:** Okay, but is the department therefore preparing for you the evidence or research that you need to make that decision?

**Dr E. CONSTABLE:** We have gone through all these things and I am saying that I do not think we have that evidence. I think the jury is out on that research because I do not think that research is actually there. We have to be very careful of the bald statement “there is no evidence there so they should stay in primary school”. A lot of factors are involved —

**Mr B.S. Wyatt:** That was a statement of the department in its report.

**Dr E. CONSTABLE:** I know that it was a statement of the department. I am quite happy to be critical of statements of the department and people who write those reports. When I read those reports I usually go through them like a schoolmarm with a pencil and I do not always agree with them. It is not gospel just because the department has written it.

**Mr B.S. Wyatt:** Okay, but surely, though, there still has to be some body of work done to say that this will be the best decision because of outcomes.

Mr Ben Wyatt; Acting Speaker; Dr Elizabeth Constable; Mr Mark McGowan; Ms Andrea Mitchell; Mr Paul Papalia; Mr Andrew Waddell

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**Dr E. CONSTABLE:** It is often not direct evidence that those statements have been based on. However, let us move on from that. I just want to make the point that we have to be very cautious of that sort of statement.

I make no apology for taking time to consider this very complex issue. I pointed out earlier that in its seven and a half year term, the previous government took five of those years to consider this issue and deal with it.

**Mr B.S. Wyatt:** And you were critical from two years in, remember? You were critical—it's in *Hansard*—from two years in, funnily enough.

**Dr E. CONSTABLE:** I started asking questions about it in 2002.

**Mr B.S. Wyatt:** The member for Warnbro will go through some of the comments you made on that.

**Dr E. CONSTABLE:** I am sure that he will. I made lots of comments and asked lots of questions about it; I started showing my concern. The point I make is that a decision had to be made about this issue. The member talked about me taking a long time to make that decision; members opposite took a long time, too!

**Mr B.S. Wyatt:** The minister has to stop worrying about the previous government and start worrying about her own performance.

**Dr E. CONSTABLE:** I am very happy with that, so just listen to what we have been dealing with.

**Mr B.S. Wyatt:** You shouldn't be.

**Dr E. CONSTABLE:** Be a bit more generous than that!

**Mr B.S. Wyatt:** You sit there worrying about 2002! Are you going to go back to 1974 again?

**Dr E. CONSTABLE:** We have to take appropriate due diligence for any major and complex issues such as this, which is what the government has done. We have considered those issues and I will deal with each one briefly. There was a range of issues that were very important for us to look at. There has been wide comment on this matter over the past two years, which I have been very grateful for.

The first issue concerns the age of children. How many times do members go to a year 7 graduation in their electorate and see those kids? They are physically and emotionally mature. The issue is that we now have nine years of schooling in primary schools and five in secondary schools. We start with kindergarten up to year 7, so we have a very wide age range, and within that, certainly in the past two or three years, a major emphasis has been placed on early learning. It is part of a national partnership; it is part of funding and uniform legislation that will come to the Parliament about the care and the education of young children. A lot of effort is going into that, so in a sense the focus of primary schools has widened and changed. I ask the question: Is it really appropriate to ask primary schools to look after such a wide range of need and such a wide range in age? Can primary schools actually do that well? I think that is a really, really important question for us to address. I think in some cases schools can and in others perhaps not so well, because they are being asked to do so much and because of the importance of and emphasis on early learning. Age is a consideration, and the breadth of what primary schools are being asked to do is also a major consideration. We must be guided by what is in the best interests of students. I have said that before and I will keep repeating it. In everything we do, we have to start with an educational rationale; we have to start by saying, "What is in the best interests of students?"

The other thing that I think is important nationally is to consider the mobile workforce that we have, with people moving from state to state. We are heading towards the national curriculum, and we have agreed with that, because we know that many children move from state to state. This is an issue for those families who are mobile. They might have a child in year 6, and move from New South Wales with the expectation that their child is prepared for secondary school, but the child goes into a primary school, often with a very small cohort of students in that primary school. I believe that is a real issue for us also to look at. Of course, we want to continue to attract skilled labour, with the developments in this state. One of the first things that a family or someone wants to know if they have children of school age and are looking at changing their job and moving from one state to another is what the education system has to offer them. For some, it could be a deterrent when they find that year 7 students, many of whom are turning 13 years of age, are still in primary school. So that is another consideration for us to look at. We do not want those families to be disadvantaged through their relocation to Western Australia.

We have a range of contexts across the states. In Victoria and New South Wales, year 7 students are in the secondary context, as I said a moment ago. The Australian Capital Territory, Northern Territory and Tasmania have year 7 students in a middle schooling situation, not in a primary situation. Queensland has made its intent clear: it wants to move its year 7s into secondary schools by 2014. I had a discussion with Geoff Wilson, who was the minister when that decision was made. The government in Queensland had basically made its decision, and it put out a discussion paper afterwards. It did not put out a discussion paper looking for opinions so that it

Mr Ben Wyatt; Acting Speaker; Dr Elizabeth Constable; Mr Mark McGowan; Ms Andrea Mitchell; Mr Paul Papalia; Mr Andrew Waddell

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could make a decision; that decision has basically been made. Queensland is heading towards that change in 2014, although it is possible, with the floods and the other natural disasters in Queensland, that the people there might even think about changing that date, because so many of their schools have been severely damaged—I think 200 schools were severely damaged or wiped out during those floods. It is important for us to understand that, in that case, Western Australia and South Australia will be the only states that do not have year 7 students in secondary schools. We have to ask the question: will our students be disadvantaged when compared with their peers in the other states? I think it is likely that they will be disadvantaged. However, there are other factors to add to this story. What I am trying to demonstrate is the complexity of the issues that we have had to look at.

It is true that Stephen Breen, as president of the Western Australian Primary Principals' Association, has been strident in his comments about how year 7 students should stay in primary schools. One of the things that has been of concern to him, as it should be, is the classification of primary schools. They might be just that much smaller and be reclassified because year 7s have moved to secondary schools. I do not see that as a problem, because the classification system is man made, and it is quite possible to change that system to adapt if we were to make the change of year 7 students going into secondary schools.

On the other hand, Rob Nairn, the president of the Western Australian Secondary School Executives Association, tells me that unanimously across secondary schools the principals believe that the place for year 7s to be is in secondary schools. So there has been quite a divide. However, as I move around and visit primary schools, I ask the primary school principals that question, and I would say that about 80 per cent of them are telling me that, having had experience with the older year 7 students for the last two or three years, those year 7 students should really be in secondary schools. With that experience, knowledge and professional judgement, a large proportion of those principals are advising me in that way, and I find that extremely interesting.

I have already commented on the changing face of education in our primary schools and the emphasis on early childhood learning. It is very important that we get that right and that our primary schools are very involved in that also. I have also commented on the fact that we already have a dual system to some extent in our government schools, whereby district high schools—the eight government secondary schools—are able to have year 7 students in a secondary setting if they wish to do so, as do remote schools. They have the ability to organise their schools in such a way that year 7s have the experience, especially in the district high schools, of specialist teachers in a secondary school. Bullsbrook District High School is a very good example of that, and it has been doing it for a long time.

I will not go into the cost implications because that is part of the cabinet submission, but I make the general comment that the cost that was in that report is way out. At this point we have done an audit of every secondary school, and it is not the level that was suggested to the minister in 2007. However, cost implications go both ways, and I now want to come to the point of the national curriculum. This is a really, really important part of what we are discussing here. We were supposed to have the final drafts of the first four areas of the national curriculum in July last year. It took until 8 December for that to be considered at the ministerial council meeting. We are talking about science, mathematics, English and history as the first four areas. Those are being trialled this year in quite a number of Western Australian schools. It was not until we got those final drafts that I was able to get advice from the Curriculum Council, from the department and also from the non-government sector about whether students would be best placed in secondary schools in year 7. The best advice that I have received is that, certainly in science and maths, specialist teaching is going to be a very important part of that.

This gets back to the point I made about whether our students would be disadvantaged against their peers in other states. In New South Wales, Victoria, the ACT, the Northern Territory, Tasmania and, in 2014, Queensland, those students in year 7 will have specialist teachers in those four subjects. Our students will not. Personally, I think they will be disadvantaged, and that is the advice that I have been given. That was not a factor in 2007—it was not even on the horizon—but it is a very serious part of what we are looking at now. It was not until after 8 December that I was able to get that advice on the national curriculum. Quite frankly, if a child of mine or a grandchild was about to become part of the national curriculum scene, I would want them to have that specialist teaching, if that is the best professional advice that is around. Therefore, I think that is a very important part of what we are looking at here. We had to wait to get that advice before we could complete, if one likes, the jigsaw puzzle of the year 7 picture. That has to be a really important part of the member's thinking and his analysis of the situation —

**Mr B.S. Wyatt:** I accept that.

**Dr E. CONSTABLE:** — and of mine. We can talk about cost. If the decision is made—I do not know which way the decision will go because it is in the cabinet process and advice has gone forward on all these issues—for

Mr Ben Wyatt; Acting Speaker; Dr Elizabeth Constable; Mr Mark McGowan; Ms Andrea Mitchell; Mr Paul Papalia; Mr Andrew Waddell

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children to stay in primary school in year 7, they will still need some specialist teaching. So there is a cost either way.

**Mr B.S. Wyatt:** I said that; absolutely.

**Dr E. CONSTABLE:** Then we are agreeing with each other.

**Mr B.S. Wyatt:** Just out of interest, though—I do not know, and the chances are that you will say you can't tell me because of the cabinet process —

**Dr E. CONSTABLE:** And I will not.

**Mr B.S. Wyatt:** You're right. Any way you go, there is a cost.

**Dr E. CONSTABLE:** There is a cost if they stay in year 7 in primary schools, but that information was not available to the previous government because the national curriculum had not been developed then.

**Mr B.S. Wyatt:** A new element was added to it, yes.

**Dr E. CONSTABLE:** Yes. That cost will multiply because all areas of the curriculum will be adopted and incorporated over the next few years into the national curriculum, as has been agreed to by all states in Australia. That is a major complicating issue in all our thinking. It needed to be teased out and thought about very carefully. That was a slow process. I had expected to be able to consider that in the middle of last year. That is one thing that has certainly slowed the advice given to me and my deliberations on this issue, because we just did not get it in time. It was going to be July, then it was going to be August, and then it was going to be October. It was December when it was finally considered at the Ministerial Council for Education, Early Childhood Development and Youth Affairs.

I want to comment on a few more of the points that the member raised, and these are not in any particular order. Stephen Breen has raised the issue of bullying. Yes, there is bullying. Interestingly, member for Victoria Park, Friday is the National Day of Action Against Bullying and Violence, and I will make a statement about that tomorrow morning. What came out of the research that the Catholic Education Office of Western Australia commissioned at the University of Notre Dame Australia was that the most important thing about the move from year 7 to year 8 is managing the transition. If the transition for children is managed well, the negative effects of things such as bullying are minimised.

No, there has not been a discussion document. I do not think there was a need for that because it was quite plain wherever I went. In my speeches, I encouraged people to have a view and to discuss it. I believe that the matter of year 7s has been discussed thoroughly at all levels. I also believe that I have received the widest range of views on this issue from a large number of people. The way that Queensland did it, with a discussion paper afterwards, was a much better way to go. I think a discussion document would have delayed this issue even further. I do not believe there is huge uncertainty; I have no evidence of that. I do not accept that as a premise.

One of the points the member made when the member for Albany was in the chair was that moving year 7 students from primary schools to secondary schools would mean that parents would need to send their children away earlier. Parents who want their children to go to a boarding school in the city are faced with that now. I do not think that this change would make that much difference to the people who have to make that decision. Having said that, I am very mindful of the views of people in country areas. We have to continue to be mindful of them in any decision we make, and we have to ensure that any decision we make accommodates those people.

**Mr P. Papalia:** For National Party votes.

**Dr E. CONSTABLE:** No. It is the children and their families who are really important, especially if they are isolated in rural and remote areas. It is very important for us to be mindful of those people.

I believe that a public debate has taken place even though we disagree on that point. The content of the member's speech tells me that there has been a very lively discussion on this issue, and I have valued that lively discussion.

All in all, many issues have emerged since the decision of the previous government in 2007. Most of those issues, such as the "residualisation" of children in some schools that the member raised, were not there to be considered in 2007 and have arisen since. It is incredibly important for us to make sure that our kids are not more and more "residualised" by decisions. All of those things add up to a package of information that is to be considered by cabinet.

**Mr B.S. Wyatt:** So you are anticipating that, because it is in the cabinet process, we can expect this decision in the next two or three months?

Mr Ben Wyatt; Acting Speaker; Dr Elizabeth Constable; Mr Mark McGowan; Ms Andrea Mitchell; Mr Paul Papalia; Mr Andrew Waddell

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**Dr E. CONSTABLE:** I cannot give the member a time frame for that. Sometimes things happen quickly through the cabinet process; sometimes they happen slowly. I do not have any feeling for that. I am sorry; I cannot answer that question for the member at this point, because there is no answer to it.

**MR M. MCGOWAN (Rockingham)** [7.24 pm]: The motion seeks to condemn the Minister for Education for the uncertainty she is causing parents with her continued delay in making a decision. That is the key point that was raised by the member for Victoria Park. The minister has been critical on a number of occasions of the actions and behaviour of the former government, particularly me as the former minister. I heard her again during question time today attempt to blame me for the Premier's air conditioning policy. She indicated that she launched it and then she said that it was all my fault. I thought she managed to construct an interesting group of arguments on that occasion. She said that I was implementing the Premier's air conditioning policy and that somehow that was wrong and was my fault. In any event, the key point is the time taken to make a decision. If there is anything in education that is corrosive to the staff, to the system and to parents, it is indecision, and I will tell the minister why. What the minister failed to mention —

**Dr E. Constable:** You took five years.

**Mr M. McGOWAN:** I was minister for 18 months. The Minister for Education has been minister for more than two and a half years. I made a decision within three months of becoming the minister. That is something this minister failed to recognise. The member for Warnbro will point out how she has been misleading in her arguments about what happened in 2002 and 2003. The debates at that time were about the half-cohort, and the minister has deliberately obfuscated and misled on that issue. I became the minister in December 2006. By February 2007, I had made a decision on the issue. I recall Peter Collier, the erstwhile shadow Minister for Education, being quite concerned that I had not made a decision on this issue by the end of December. I made the decision in February. It took me three months to consider the report, discuss it with the department and my colleagues and come up with an answer to end the corrosiveness within the department.

**Dr E. Constable:** What about all the years before you became minister?

**Mr M. McGOWAN:** The minister has to listen. The member for Warnbro will point out to the schoolmarm that she has to listen.

A government member interjected.

**Mr M. McGOWAN:** She called herself a schoolmarm five minutes ago. Members have to listen.

**Dr E. Constable:** I did too! I go through reports like a schoolmarm with a lead pencil.

**Mr M. McGOWAN:** I am only repeating what the minister has been saying all day.

**Dr E. Constable:** I didn't say that I didn't say schoolmarm.

**Mr M. McGOWAN:** Yes, you did.

**Dr E. Constable:** I just said that I did call myself a schoolmarm, and I go through school reports with a pencil and correct them.

**Mr M. McGOWAN:** Yes, a schoolmarm. It took two and a half years to go through the report and correct it. It must be a big report. It has taken two and a half years to make a decision on this issue.

In May 2009, the minister announced that she was going to review the matter. That was six months after she became minister. It is now nearly two years since that time and we still do not have a decision. I know Stephen Breen, I know the Western Australian Primary Principals' Association, and I know parents and children in the school system. I am one of those parents in the public school system. I have two children in a public primary school in this state, and will have three children there within a couple of years. I know the system pretty well. What I can say to the minister is that uncertainty kills and decisions are what she was elected and appointed to make. All she has done in the debate is indicate where she thinks she is going. I can tell where she thinks she is going with this issue from what she has said. But she is still not prepared to say what she is going to do. She has given all the arguments for what she is going to do. I can imagine what her cabinet submission will say. It will say that in the city year 7s should go into high school, but that a bit more flexibility might be given for those in the country. From the arguments that the minister has put forward, that is what she is going to do. It has been two and a half years since she became minister and nearly two years since she announced an examination of this issue and we still do not have a final answer to all of this. As I said, that is corrosive for the public school system, and it is corrosive for primary schools around this state. I understand why Stephen Breen and primary school principals and staff and parents are concerned about this matter.

Mr Ben Wyatt; Acting Speaker; Dr Elizabeth Constable; Mr Mark McGowan; Ms Andrea Mitchell; Mr Paul Papalia; Mr Andrew Waddell

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The strongest element—I have no hesitation in saying this—of our public school system in Western Australia is our primary schools, country primary schools in particular.

**Dr E. Constable:** What are you saying about our secondary schools?

**Mr M. McGOWAN:** Does the minister disagree with me? The strongest element of our public school system in this state is our primary schools.

**Dr E. Constable:** So what, by implication, are you by implication about our secondary schools?

**Mr M. McGOWAN:** The minister can draw whatever implication she likes. I am making the speech. Does the minister disagree with that? The minister can go anywhere and ask anyone. That is what they will say. The great drop-off in the number of kids attending public education is when they finish primary school. That is a fact. If the minister does not know that, perhaps she needs another couple of years in the portfolio. The great strength in public education across Australia is the primary school system, and it has been thus for a number of years now—decades, in fact.

Secondary schools, certainly Churchlands Senior High School—the minister was on the school board there—and Shenton College and so forth, are very strong. But in other parts of the state, our high schools are not doing as well in retaining students as they should, or as they could, be doing. There is a range of reasons for that, but that is the fact. If the minister wants to deny the facts, she is in the wrong job. The greatest strength of our public school system is our primary schools. We need to make sure that they are listened to and that their strengths are maintained.

The minister indicated that in this state there are eight schools, apart from district high schools, in which year 7 students are not in primary school. I cannot name all those schools, but I think that figure is roughly correct. We need to exclude district high schools, because district high schools are predominantly, perhaps with the exception of Bullsbrook, in country areas and are K–10 or K–12 schools. Of course the students are going to be mixed in. Students at district high schools can start high school at whatever point they like within that configuration. That is a fact, of course. Apart from the district high schools around Western Australia, there are over 700 public schools in this state. In that whole mix, according to the figures the minister has just given us, there are only eight schools at which year 7 students are not in primary school.

I will give members an example. We built Gilmore Senior College, which was formerly Kwinana Senior High School. The year 7 students went into high school at that new school. That was a mistake. Members should go to the school and ask the teachers and the parents. They will say that that was a mistake. We need to be very careful about any changes that we make. I did not stop it in time. I should have. It was all configured and it had all started before I became the minister. I should have kept the kids in Kwinana in primary school for a year longer rather than put them into the high school. So there are eight schools, including Gilmore Senior College.

I had to repair the middle school situation that had been created by Hon Colin Barnett, the now Premier, when he was Minister for Education. He created a bunch of middle schools around Western Australia that were dying. Mandurah, Bunbury, Coodanup and Eaton spring to mind; there were a number of them around the state. I had to convert them to full year 8–12 high schools, because they were dying. They were wonderful facilities, all new, and a testament to the former minister, but they were not working. We had to fix them. The way we configure these schools is very important. We do not want to make mistakes. But, at the same time, we need to make decisions. The failure of this minister to make decisions is eating away at the fabric of schools around Western Australia. I made the decision to keep the kids in year 7 in primary school. I am a primary school parent. I still think that was the correct decision. I think the minister will find that a lot of people have the same view. Primary schools are a far more nurturing environment for young children.

A lot of private schools have gone the opposite way and are using year 7—let us be frank—as a marketing tool to pull in kids. We knew that. Has the minister spoken to her department about that? Of course, in the briefings they will say that to the minister. They will produce for her the advertisements. They started to do it at the end of my tenure as minister. They were advertising this as a marketing tool. They were telling parents that they should get their child into the school now so that they will get a place; and parents pulled their kids out of public education a year earlier. Would those same kids have been pulled out a year later? Yes, they would. Those same kids would have gone to those schools a year later. The minister has failed to recognise some of the realities. I am just telling the minister a few home truths. That is the truth. If the minister were to ask her department—I do not know whether she listens in briefings—they will tell her exactly that. They will be able to produce for the minister all sorts of advertisements from the newspaper demonstrating that that is the case.

Mr Ben Wyatt; Acting Speaker; Dr Elizabeth Constable; Mr Mark McGowan; Ms Andrea Mitchell; Mr Paul Papalia; Mr Andrew Waddell

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The minister talked about results. The minister also talked about New South Wales. I went to school in New South Wales, too. I was in year 7 at Coffs Harbour Senior High School. Do I think, based on my memory—which is more recent than the minister's—of 31 years ago, that that was the right decision? Well, it was the natural course of events in New South Wales. Do I think the New South Wales education system is better than the Western Australian education system? No, I do not. Do I think anything in New South Wales is better than in Western Australia? No, I do not—except for the Premier!

Several members interjected.

**Mr M. McGOWAN:** All members agree with me, and so does the minister; and, funnily enough, I think the member for Cottesloe agrees with me as well!

**Dr E. Constable:** Now we know that you are not serious about anything!

**Mr M. McGOWAN:** I can have a bit of levity, can I not?

The Western Australian education system is better than the New South Wales system. That system produced the member for Jandakot, for God's sake! Any system that produced the member for Jandakot we would have to wonder at!

**Mr T.G. Stephens:** Did it not produce you, too?

**Mr M. McGOWAN:** I did all right in education, member for Pilbara. I am an exception to the rule, as is the minister.

Do I think that simply because other states are doing it, we should slavishly follow? No. Does anyone think that just because New South Wales is doing it, Western Australia should do it? Does anyone agree with that argument? Look at the member for Jandakot! Need I say more!

Several members interjected.

**Mr M. McGOWAN:** Not the member for Warnbro; he is a product of Burekup Primary School and Bunbury Senior High School.

Decision making is important. The air conditioning issue that we faced a couple of weeks ago shows a lack of decision making. I read a column in the paper on the weekend by Zoltan Kovacs. He said in that column that the minister had been snowed by the department; the bureaucrats had blocked her from making the decision, and if only she had cut through the bureaucrats and made the decision, everything would have been all right. I think Mr Kovacs has been misled. My understanding of what happened is that the bureaucrats have been telling the minister for a long time that she could have resolved that issue, but she would not make a decision. That is the information that I have been given. Bear in mind I was a minister of that department for a period. That is the information I have been given. The minister was advised for months and months that this was going to be an issue and that she could resolve it if she wanted to in the way that she eventually did, but she did not do that at that time. There was briefing after briefing. I know when the briefings happen. It is after cabinet, on a Monday afternoon, when the bureaucrats march up, sit in the meeting room with the minister, and go through the issues of the week.

**Dr E. Constable:** It is on a Tuesday, actually.

**Mr M. McGOWAN:** The minister does it on a Tuesday. Okay. We were ahead of her. We did it on a Monday.

All I will say is this. The minister needs to make decisions. When the bureaucrats in the department came to the minister and said that air conditioning is an issue, and the minister needs to resolve it, perhaps she should have listened to them. I hope Mr Kovacs reads this. I think the journalists should ask a few questions around this.

**Dr E. Constable:** You live in a fantasy world. That's not true.

**Mr M. McGOWAN:** The minister would not make a decision. A decision needed to be made.

**Dr E. Constable:** That's not true, and you know it. You're making it up as you go along, and you know it.

**Mr M. McGOWAN:** The education system, in particular the public education system, suffered for weeks and weeks recently because of the minister's failure to make a decision. Is the minister saying it is wrong? Is the minister saying the department did not give her advice so that she could resolve this issue earlier than she did?

**Dr E. Constable:** Your speech is pure fantasy and you know it!

**Mr M. McGOWAN:** Is the minister denying it? She should bear in mind she is saying it in Parliament.

Mr Ben Wyatt; Acting Speaker; Dr Elizabeth Constable; Mr Mark McGowan; Ms Andrea Mitchell; Mr Paul Papalia; Mr Andrew Waddell

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**Dr E. Constable:** Your speech is pure fantasy!

**Mr M. McGOWAN:** She will not deny it! There is an issue there. I would encourage anyone in the department who knows about these things, or anyone up there who knows about these things, to realise that this minister failed to make a decision and that the crisis that engulfed public education for a couple of weeks recently was totally avoidable. Is the minister denying it?

**Dr E. Constable:** You did not air-condition one extra school! You did not move the zone one inch.

**Mr M. McGOWAN:** Does the minister mean the Premier's zone, the one that Colin Barnett created?

**Dr E. Constable:** Yes. You did not move it one inch.

**Mr M. McGOWAN:** Is the minister criticising the zone that Colin Barnett created? I thought whatever he said was gospel to the minister! God knows he tells the minister the answer to every question asked of her in question time! The minister is saying that the department did not give her advice on that.

**Dr E. Constable:** I'm saying you didn't move the zone one inch!

**Mr M. McGOWAN:** She will not answer the question. It is an easy one to resolve; a couple of FOIs might be in order here to find out exactly what took place with that issue. The minister was elected, she is paid a lot of money, she has been here 20 years and she is here to make a decision but she has not made one.

**MS A.R. MITCHELL (Kingsley)** [7.41 pm]: I rise to speak on this motion because I think it is such an important topic of conversation and not one that we can speak about lightly. I believe that this topic is of such significance that it needs a very thorough and detailed investigation. Whether year 7 students in government schools will be required to attend secondary school needs to be investigated because it is such a complex matter; this is not a simple matter. We are not talking about one year of schooling; we are talking about education. Education is the most critical aspect in everyone's lives. Education is even more important for the age group of year 7 students. There is no doubt that the decision will have a significant impact in many, many ways. We are talking about children and the future of Western Australia. Education is the core. It is not only about one year; this decision is absolutely critical to whether that year of schooling becomes something very positive or something very negative. We have heard a couple of stories about things not always working out the way we want. The decision should not be made—we have already heard that other states are doing it—simply because other states have made it or because of economic factors, because it is more than that. This is about a critical issue: students and their education.

I think a number of areas need to be considered, which many of us have touched on already. I do not see that any of us are saying that this decision is not important, but it needs to be made correctly and positively. I want to talk about education, economics and social impact, because I think those three areas sum it up fairly well. Age is critical in achieving the best outcome in education. Age has always been a difficult factor, because not everyone's skeletal age is the same as their emotional age or matches their level of maturity. Age is always an issue; every time we go into a school, we see the range, as we have already mentioned, particularly at year 7 graduations. We see variations in the physical, emotional and mental ages of children. Age is very, very significant and not something that is simple. However, age is a critical factor in achieving a successful education. I want people to investigate this properly. I want these things to be given very, very serious consideration.

**Mr D.A. Templeman:** What is your personal view on it?

**Ms A.R. MITCHELL:** I will get to that. The member will work out my personal view as we go through. I have only really started following up again on the national curriculum in the last couple of years. I was one of those students who transferred from Queensland to Western Australia when I was in high school. I must admit that I was very fortunate that I came from Queensland to Western Australia in that day and age, because those states had similar high school-age groups. It could have been difficult, but it worked. I think the concept of the national curriculum and how it could impact on this decision is something that definitely deserves to have time devoted to it, because those things are critical. I think somebody has already asked how many people have made that transition, either by themselves or with children. It can be quite a daunting process. I think the fact that we have waited for the resolution of the national curriculum and that Western Australia will adopt the national curriculum will make a big difference in how decisions are made.

Let us go back to 2008, when it was agreed that students had to stay at school until 17 years of age. That was a fairly significant decision. I know that physically the students are at school, but have the schools been able to adapt to that change in the last couple of years? I think that some schools probably have not. The students are there, but the education process may not be as good as it could be. I think a number of other things are going on. I was not here, so I do not recall the times in 2006 and 2007 when those other decisions were made. I remember

Mr Ben Wyatt; Acting Speaker; Dr Elizabeth Constable; Mr Mark McGowan; Ms Andrea Mitchell; Mr Paul Papalia; Mr Andrew Waddell

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when the decision was made for students to start school six months later, because I had a niece whom it impacted on as she was born in September, whereas the rest of the family had always started school early. Significant changes have been made in education in the last few years. I do not think that a lot of those changes have really settled yet. We are still dealing with those things now. I think another decision to change things is something we need to be very, very conscious of. Let us think it through, work it through and get it right.

I certainly understand that economics was a factor considered by Hon Ljiljana Ravlich. Economics is a huge factor, but once again I would rather have this decision made in a way that gives us the best possible outcome. Let us not do this one on the cheap. Let us make sure that we think it through and work it through. We must not look at only infrastructure. I think that is what people think of first: where will we put the year 7 students? I know some people would say straightaway that there is no room and that we will have to build new classrooms. Yes, infrastructure is a major part of that, but there is also the factor of human resources. Human resources is something that needs to be worked on. The member for Victoria Park has made some very, very good points about all those things that need to be taken into consideration. We all agree that this needs to be done correctly. We need to look at the assessment of the use of our current resources and our future resources, both physical and human. We must plan for the implementation of the changes and work out how they will occur.

I will quickly refer to social impact. I think the readiness factor does not always come up for consideration. Yes, readiness is often linked with age and it is often not linked with age. There is always that range in the readiness factor. With students in, say, year 7 at a government school now becoming teenagers, we have a whole different group of things to deal with in a primary school. If children start primary school later, does that mean they are ready to go into high school later? I am not a psychologist, but I know that a whole list of things must be considered. Teachers are dealing with those things constantly, but let us not make it more difficult for them. The decision we are waiting for the Minister for Education to make and put forward to us is about getting this situation right. It is a critical issue on which we want to get a result.

We have heard about the teachers. I do not know the heads of the Western Australian Primary Principals' Association Inc and the West Australian Secondary School Executives Association personally, but I recall and I understand that many, many teachers were saying they have had enough and they are sick of the changes. They want stability and things to settle for a while. We had major changes in high schools in 2008. We also had major changes in primary schools. I think it is important that we show that we are not rushing into making this decision because someone else has done it. We are saying that it needs to be considered and that we are looking at it, but we want to get it right.

Teachers are also very conscious of the introduction of the national curriculum. We hear them talk about it constantly. What will it mean? What will happen? Let us think about our teachers; they are a major resource. We need to ensure that they are comfortable and that they know that we have put the effort into thinking this issue through and that we will get a good result.

Many teachers say that they do not think it is worth year 7s going up. The parents of my niece who started school six months later have taken the option of moving her to year 7 in an independent school this year. That was a decision that her family had to make. Her parents did not do that with her older brothers but it came down to that readiness factor and the things that went with it.

The other thing that I am very conscious of is that parents want to know that we will make the best decision possible and we will make it on good grounds, having thought through the implications and the ramifications for students. They want to know that the decisions we make will have a positive impact on the education of their children. There is no question about that. I am very confident that this matter is under very serious consideration and that an announcement will be made when all these aspects have been resolved and worked through.

**MR P. PAPALIA (Warnbro)** [7.51 pm]: It is my pleasure to join in condemning the Minister for Education for the uncertainty she is causing parents with her continued delay in making a decision about the entry of year 7 students to secondary schools. I call on the minister to immediately make and announce a decision on whether year 7 students in government schools will be required to attend secondary school. This minister is incapable of making any type of decision, whether it be a bad one or a good one. It would not matter what type of decision she made if we saw some evidence that she was capable of deciding anything. That would be a wonderful outcome because it would confirm to us that she is doing more than just sitting on the government benches occupying a seat, receiving the money and paying for the flowers in her ministerial office to be changed every week.

During the two and a half long years of the Barnett government we have witnessed this minister demonstrate time after time that she has a standard response to criticism. Apart from asking the Premier what responses she should make to questions she is asked in question time, she has a standard response, which is inevitably to blame the previous government. That is an interesting response. When I was a backbencher in government for 18

Mr Ben Wyatt; Acting Speaker; Dr Elizabeth Constable; Mr Mark McGowan; Ms Andrea Mitchell; Mr Paul Papalia; Mr Andrew Waddell

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months, I witnessed just how sanctimonious, condescending and self-righteous the current Minister for Education was when she was sitting up the back as a notionally Independent member of this place. This was a person who was above any sort of criticism about anything. She was the litmus paper for independent thought in the Parliament of Western Australia, particularly in the field of education. Such was her credibility within the public arena of Western Australia on education that the moment any debate on education came up, 720 ABC would be on the phone saying, "Please, Liz, get down here; we need an expert to give us an independent authoritative response" to some issue of the day, whatever it was. Geoff Hutchison would pander to her and be gentle with her and thank her cordially for her input because she was Independent and she was going to fix the world by giving her independent advice.

Now what do we see? After being in government for two and a half years, we have seen the least amount of activity in the education portfolio in recent memory. I saw the minister's behaviour for only 18 months. I can only sympathise with my colleagues who had to sit through seven and a half years of it, because I was sick of it after about three weeks. I was sick of the amount of criticism that was directed at professional, dedicated ministers who were capable of making decisions. She might not have agreed with them but they made decisions. These were ministers who knew that when a department came to give them a briefing, they wanted a decision at the end of the process. They did not want to wait two and a half years for someone to decide to announce an outcome. I apologise to the member for Jandakot. His hearing is better than mine. My voice does elevate when I get a little excited, and my hearing is a bit less capable than the member's. I will try to keep it down.

I am afraid that I do have to take the minister to task because, as I said, her standard response whenever she is under the pump is to blame the previous government. In this case this evening she tried to suggest that former education minister and former Premier Alan Carpenter began this process of deliberation of year 7s in high school in 2002. She helpfully told us that that process occurred when she asked him a question during estimates in 2002. I searched *Hansard* to discover the nature of that discussion. It is interesting to note that the discussion to which she referred had nothing to do with year 7s going to high school, as is the subject of this debate. The discussion to which the minister referred was entirely to do with the half-cohort and whether the then Minister for Education had put planning in place for when that half-cohort, which had only just entered the system, eventually swept through the system and came out the other end and we had a situation in which an additional class was going into high school and a smaller class was left behind going into primary school. That is the question she asked during the estimates committee hearings in 2002. It had nothing to do with the subject we are debating tonight. The debate on year 7s going into high school did not commence in 2002. It was not a failure on behalf of then minister Carpenter to make a decision in 2002. In fact, it is informative to look at the nature of the discussion at that time and the questions that the current minister posed. They were hardly questions; it was more like a speech because it was estimates and she took the opportunity to pontificate a little. She is far less inclined to do that now that she is a minister and can do things. At that time the minister said —

That half-cohort of students will enter year 7 in 2009.

This is seven years in advance. Poor old Alan was under the pump. Seven years from then this half-cohort would be going into year 7. "What's your decision, Mr Carpenter, you ditherer? You've been here for five minutes; give us a decision about seven years' time." That is the pontificating, self-righteous former Independent, now absolute stalwart of the Liberal Party, education minister.

**Mr R.F. Johnson:** Don't you like her?

**Mr P. PAPALIA:** I do like Liz actually but I do not think she should be a minister. She said —

Does the minister envisage that those students will be part of the high school structure, or will they remain in the primary school structure?

The response was —

It was too early to make a firm decision ...

He was talking about something seven years hence. The minister said —

With due respect to the answer, I do not think this is long-term planning; it is short to medium-term planning. It is becoming an urgent issue.

Seven years from now, it is an urgent issue. She continued —

What will be the implications for current capital works? The budget papers contain forward estimates ...

Here is a question for the minister: is what we are asking her about short-term planning, medium-term planning or long-term planning? All we want from her is a decision. I know that the department is urging her to make a

Mr Ben Wyatt; Acting Speaker; Dr Elizabeth Constable; Mr Mark McGowan; Ms Andrea Mitchell; Mr Paul Papalia; Mr Andrew Waddell

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decision. I know that her colleagues are urging her to make a decision. There is only one certain thing about this decision process; that is, the minister is almost entirely incapable of making a decision because she was asked about this very subject a year and a half ago when the former education shadow minister asked her what she was going to do and when she was going to make a decision. The minister dithered on for about 10 minutes and at the end of that response, she said —

We have to look at this across the board; it is open for public discussion and I want to hear what people have to say about it.

How long is she going to listen and how long is she going to call for people to say something? When will she finally sit down and make a decision?

**MR A.J. WADDELL (Forrestfield)** [7.59 pm]: This is a fairly cut and dried issue in a lot of ways because all we are asking for is a decision. Two years ago I sat at a P&C meeting and watched a series of parents tear strips off the principal of a primary school because their year 6 children were being denied graduations. They intended to go to a private school the following year and they were being denied all of the usual ceremony that goes with leaving primary school. They were denied the school camp, the school jumper, the social and all those things. They made the point that they were very much part of the fabric of that school, they had been part of that from day one right through to that point in time, and they deserved the same recognition as everyone. The principal was flummoxed; he did not know how to deal with the issue because he had no guidance whatsoever from this government about what will happen in the future about the entry of year 7 students into high school. It might happen or it might not happen, but there are certain realities. The certain reality right now is that it happens in the private sector and in the Catholic sector. That is having a massive impact on our government schools. A lot of parents start planning their children's secondary education very early. My daughter was about one year old when we started thinking about where she might end up in high school. Unfortunately, in this day and age, to get into certain schools, even one year old is too late an age to start planning to get into those schools.

Debate adjourned, pursuant to standing orders.