

EDUCATION AND HEALTH STANDING COMMITTEE

INQUIRY INTO CHANGES TO THE POST-COMPULSORY CURRICULUM IN WESTERN AUSTRALIA

**TRANSCRIPT OF EVIDENCE TAKEN
AT PERTH
WEDNESDAY, 17 AUGUST 2005**

SESSION 1

Members

Mr T.G. Stephens (Chairman)

Dr E. Constable

Mrs D.J. Guise

Dr K.D. Hames

Mr J.N. Hyde

Mr T.K. Waldron

Mr M.P. Whitely

Hearing commenced at 9.35 am

SYME, REVEREND ANDREW P.
Headmaster, Scotch College,
PO Box 223,
Claremont 6910, examined:

The CHAIRMAN: The committee hearing is a proceeding of Parliament and warrants the same respect that proceedings in the house itself demand. Even though you are not required to give evidence on oath, any deliberate misleading of the committee may be regarded as contempt of Parliament. Unless otherwise directed by the committee, witnesses' evidence is public and may be published, including on the Parliament web site, immediately after correction. Have you read the notes on the "Details of Witness" sheet?

Reverend Syme: Yes.

The CHAIRMAN: Would you please state your professional address and the capacity in which you appear before the committee?

Reverend Syme: My professional address is Scotch College, Shenton Road, Swanbourne. I appear before the committee as headmaster of Scotch College and secretary of the Association of Heads of Independent Schools of Australia.

The CHAIRMAN: It is the committee's intention, subject to your concurrence, to make your written submission to the committee available publicly after today's hearing. Do you have any objection to that?

Reverend Syme: No, I do not, and that applies also to my AHISA colleagues. I will explain the AHISA schools, because that may be of help. Clearly I would be very happy to have the submission from Scotch College made available. I have consulted with my AHISA colleagues, which is a group of about 30 independent schools. I do not officially represent them, but we have consulted widely on this matter, and I think I have a flavour of some of the issues; however, it will not be unanimous, because I am not empowered to say exactly what those schools' positions are. It is a group that is loosely connected because of its commitment to independent education.

The CHAIRMAN: So on the question of the submission from the AHISA schools -

Reverend Syme: I am sure they would be willing to have that made available.

The CHAIRMAN: That clarifies that matter. Would you like to speak to your submission, and at the end of that it would be open to the committee members to question you on both your written and oral submissions?

Reverend Syme: I am very comfortable that the submissions speak for themselves. I think we have said in our submissions what we want to say. I believe it would be more useful if I could respond to the questions of the committee.

The CHAIRMAN: I am happy to do that, but could you summarise your submission, without taking a lot of time?

Reverend Syme: The position of both Scotch College and AHISA is that we support the general direction of outcomes-based education, and we support the curriculum frameworks that came in in 1998. We have in both submissions, and also in the AISWA submission, because I am on the education committee for AISWA as well - am I allowed to refer to those other groups?

The CHAIRMAN: Yes.

Reverend Syme: We have some serious concerns about the implementation, rather than the philosophical direction. That would be the general thrust of those three submissions.

The CHAIRMAN: Would you like to outline your concerns about the implementation, or highlight that section of your written submission that details those concerns?

Reverend Syme: If I could pick up the major point - there are probably a number of subsections within each of those submissions - the most serious concern is the lack of material and time available across all three parts of the education sector for proper implementation. I draw attention to two things. In the original post-compulsory review, commitments were made by the Curriculum Council about the provision of materials, examination information and examples of assessment 18 months before the implementation. The research document that I referred to in the AHISA submission said that a minimum of 12 months was required for materials to be made available to schools, and for clarity about the final position and things to do with assessment and examples of work. However, we are now heading towards late August for implementation in February of media and English, etc, and those things are not available. Although I am a minister of the Uniting Church, I have worked in schools all my life. I have never before seen stress and uncertainty like this in the sector. The amount of stress being carried in the sector is of the highest order due to the uncertainty, the lack of material that we have available, and the short time frames. That impacts very significantly not just on student uncertainty - students tend to go on regardless - but on the staff and the lack of surety that people like me need to have to be able to talk to the parents. I have called meetings to make myself available to every parent in the school, for a range of reasons, such as the ones I have mentioned. That means I have committed myself to 20 night meetings in the past two terms just to try to be able to talk about a range of significant issues. Because we do not know what we are talking about - the final product - there is a lack of certainty for parent bodies. There are 1 100 parents in my school. My school is a middle-sized school. That is very, very significant. That uncertainty and lack of confidence in the education sector is, I believe, the most serious of the issues. There may be some other things that we can explore.

[9.40 am]

Dr E. CONSTABLE: Just taking up that point: if you were in charge and you could make the decision, how would you change the implementation timetable to make it work?

Reverend Syme: I want to be clear that this is not the unanimous position of the AHISA schools, but it is certainly mine and that of most of the AHISA schools. We wrote to the minister two weeks ago after a meeting asking for an audience with the minister. We believe that the commitment from the task group to implement and receive evaluations needs to be taken seriously, but we must have materials in schools for staff, parents and boys 18 months before a course is implemented. Therefore, we have written to the minister applauding her for the recent initiative to draw the three sectors together - the principals agree that that was a really significant meeting - but asking for a delay in the rest of the implementation until 2008-09.

Dr E. CONSTABLE: That would be all subjects?

Reverend Syme: Yes. The two-year implementation that is planned for 2006-07 -

Mr T.K. WALDRON: Should go back two years?

Reverend Syme: Yes, that is right; 2007-08 should go back to 2008-09. The reason for that is the amount of stress we are putting into schools and the lack of clarity. If I can take a specific example, we have had all our English staff out at every professional development opportunity we possibly can get them to. What that means is that in a faculty of about 10 or so, the teachers are taken away from their year 12 lessons now. As well as that, I have had to release staff to start preparing course material, not knowing what their actual course material is headed towards. They are withdrawn from class to do that. This English staff will go home to mark at night, and they will be marking in

the next holidays. I do not think the sector can financially afford the implementation of the bigger bulk of subjects in 2007-08.

Dr E. CONSTABLE: That was my next question.

Reverend Syme: You should understand that this is so serious that, although there is no resolution of this matter, the possibility of taking an extra week in mid-year just to cope is being discussed. There is discussion to allow course-writing time. It is an extremely pressured system now; it will be worse 12 months from now and worse again 12 months after that.

Mr T.K. WALDRON: Reverend, how do you see that pressure impacting on students?

Reverend Syme: This is probably not quantifiable; it is simply a reflection. One of the marks of really good schools is the ability to allow highly professional, knowledgeable staff to interact with students in a variety of ways, not just in the classroom. There is an issue of time and freedom to have corridor conversations, whether they be at a sporting event, a drama performance or in the corridor. The system at the moment is so focused on uncertainty about assessments that all my people do is talk about assessments, and there is nothing that will destroy a teacher's spirit more. Teachers are in there because of the teaching and learning aspect, for which they must do an assessment to gauge their students' progress, but all the conversation, everywhere you go, is about assessment. That is anathema to good schools, intriguingly, but that is all the discussion is about. Actually, the education system has to get absolute clarity about that - freedom by giving clarity - which releases staff to concentrate on teaching and learning and, more importantly, to concentrate on students, not just in the classroom but everywhere they meet them. Our people, both at Scotch and in the independent, government and Catholic schools, are under the hammer at the moment preparing and trying to get their heads around this. That means that, even with the best will in the world, when people like me stand in front of parents, it is presented as a very complicated system and a huge task for parents. It is difficult for staff. In many respects, we are supportive of this sort of transformation, but for parents who come to this occasionally and vicariously through their sons and daughters it is terribly hard - terribly, terribly hard.

Mr M.P. WHITELEY: I notice in your paper you have written that you favour the implementation in one block rather than having staggered implementation.

Reverend Syme: Yes.

Mr M.P. WHITELEY: Because if you were going to delay there would be a couple of options. You could look at delaying the whole thing or you could look at having staggered implementation over a number of years.

Reverend Syme: Yes.

Mr M.P. WHITELEY: Why do you favour having it all done in one block rather than simply putting effort into one subject, getting it right and then introducing the next?

[9.50 am]

Reverend Syme: Let me say that there are two parts to this. One of the pieces of confusion I think is that we are in a period when we have no option but to carry multiple systems. That means, if you can imagine a year 10 parent information evening at Scotch or any place in the state, that a teacher will stand and give an hour-and-a-half presentation on TEE-based subjects. Then we are going to make a mental gymnastic leap. We will talk about outcomes education and you have to hold both of them in your head simultaneously and actually they are quite different systems. My preference is to try to alleviate that confusion, because that will be a real issue. I will flip to the other side of it, because it is just as real. I do not know whether we can afford it. That - this is a Scotch position and only a Scotch position - would be a reflection of the amount of confusion in the system in trying to attempt one mechanism to see it forward. The flip side of the coin is that I do not know

how I would do it, because I do not think I could fund the sort of professional development that is needed for staff to achieve that.

Mr M.P. WHITELY: Therefore, some practical financial constraints might stop the big bang implementation and, in fact, a staggered implementation might be more suitable.

Reverend Syme: Remember these were written some time ago and things change. One of the difficulties is that it changes underneath you almost by the hour. What I am saying today could change; you might have someone before you and the game is changed. That is one of our difficulties; we are not dealing with a solid object. The decision I believe was as a result of some pressure out of the State School Teachers Union; that is, it was a real issue. In fact, we recognise their decision about funding was a real concern and it is absolutely valid.

The CHAIRMAN: I refer to the description of your efforts to try to explain the new system to a group of parents who confront the topic only occasionally. I guess these same parents have a difficulty with the current system. I am speaking from the experience of a parent. We sit in front of a headmaster or a staff member who is trying to explain the current TEE, the scaling and the way it works. If you have not applied yourself to this area, it can be problematic. I suppose you are saying that the problem is exacerbated by explaining the two systems at the same time.

Reverend Syme: I certainly understand that. Your comment on the issue of scaling is absolutely right - it is at best a mystery. Scaling is a piece of mathematics that I do not think anyone understands, but we hope someone does. It is very difficult to explain logically because it is so complex.

The CHAIRMAN: Yet, there is an assumption in the current debate that there is certainty and validity that somehow or other the scaling process has been stolen by the changes that are contemplated.

Reverend Syme: Everything in education ultimately rests on good teacher judgment. The issue of whether you make something 70 per cent or gauge at a level is still a comparative issue and again rests on good teacher judgment. I am not sure I would support the notion that somehow the previous system is inherently superior because of that. However, that requires fine-grained assessment. One of our issues is the research that the Curriculum Council did into international best practice in outcomes-based education. One of the conclusions of the research article that I do not think the Curriculum Council has heard is that no-one has done it to this sort of depth before. In the words of Sir Humphrey Appleby, "It is a very brave decision, minister." However, that is the path we are taking.

The Chairman's issue was whether it is absolutely secure, and I say no. Both systems rest on good teacher judgment supported by high-level moderation. One of the issues when bringing in a new system, whatever form it takes, is that every indication is that there are not the financial resources to get the moderation right. I do not think that, for whatever reason, the Curriculum Council has not been funded properly. There are a couple of ways to discuss this. The issue of funding for moderation is a very real concern for schools like mine and the AHISA schools.

Dr E. CONSTABLE: A couple of the issues you raised underline the stress that teachers are under. Correct me if I am wrong, but it seems to me that in every school each English teacher is required to prepare his own material. It looks to me as if everyone is inventing his own wheel. I do not believe that is necessary. There might be a better way of doing that.

On the matter of stress, one of the issues that has been raised with me formally and informally is that there is a fear a lot of teachers will leave teaching because it will be all too much for them and they have other things to do with their lives. Would you comment on those issues.

Reverend Syme: Sorry, what was the first point?

Dr E. CONSTABLE: It was about everyone inventing their own wheel.

Reverend Syme: I think that is occurring because, in August, what option do we have? My people are writing course material because they have not got things given to them. They are doing that without knowing what the exam will be based on. I am delighted to be a headmaster, because I would hate to be an exam writer. It would be an onerous job.

Dr E. CONSTABLE: Is it necessary in outcomes-based education for everyone to invent their own wheel in English, mathematics, physics and chemistry?

Reverend Syme: It should not be. You must have exemplars of what sort of work is required at level 6 English.

Dr E. CONSTABLE: It is a fundamental fault of what is proposed - that incredible effort and cost.

Reverend Syme: If a system is going to change itself, it must provide the resources to do it - the exemplars and the clarity of the assessment. That has not arrived. My people have been trying to work away at a system without knowing what the end point is.

Dr E. CONSTABLE: A funny-looking wheel.

Reverend Syme: Yes, a very dangerous wheel and it is completely unfair to staff. It is not a reasonable expectation of any system, but we have no choice. People are beaver away without knowing the outcomes. In my view, this is about the worst piece of backward planning I have ever seen.

Dr E. CONSTABLE: Would you comment on my other point of stress and teachers giving up? Do you see evidence of that?

Reverend Syme: Yes, particularly in older staff. There is much to commend an outcomes focus. I will take that further: good teachers in good schools have always had an outcomes focus. Good teachers are worried not about what they do, but what students do. That is what outcomes-based education is about - an absolute 100 per cent unhesitating focus on what students can do. Outcomes education tries to take that further by saying, "Let's see if we can be specific." That is probably a reasonable thing to do; for example, what is it specifically that you want to know? Once you get into the fine-grained assessment of aspects - a term used in this context - you find the further you go with it the more problematic it becomes.

To come back to the question of stress, members of my staff are saying, and teachers in every school would be the same, "I do not need this. I will check the web site on how my superannuation is going."

Mr T.K. WALDRON: I refer to the stress which you are talking about and which I have seen. You mentioned delaying to 2008-09. Would that ease the stress and would it enable teachers to have more contact with students? The students, as you alluded to, are the ones we are talking about. Would it relieve the stress and advantage the students now?

Is there a difference between teachers who have not encountered outcomes-based education in, say, years 11 and 12 and those who have? That question is put to me at times.

[10.00 am]

Reverend Syme: Could I perhaps restate the first question, Terry, by saying that I would encourage the committee to consider that timing is based on when you can supply adequate source material? Whenever that comes, say, 18 months from then is the date; because it is actually the source material, and the clarity of that assessment and exemplars of work, that is the critical unknown here and, and that is not, I believe, articulated enough or funded. I do not know, but it seems to me that rather than setting the date, the issues that face the schools are that we must have the material; we must be able to tell with clarity what our students are on about. The second questions was?

Mr T.K. WALDRON: With teachers who have not experienced outcomes-based education as opposed to those who have been in either primary or middle school, is there a difference or is it just a perception that some people are putting forward, in your opinion?

Reverend Syme: I will say this a little carefully. I know that right through both sectors - this is not a sectorial issue - there are outstanding staff who, for all their life, have chosen to focus on the work of students. It is probably an easier take-up with younger staff, because this has been talked about at universities and exiting into the market; it is a bit earlier in their career. However, one of the perplexing things for highly professional, outstanding teachers in their fifties, for example, is the question that arises from, "I have actually been doing this all my life. I am actually just being asked to write it up differently." That is really complex to get your head around. The stress is not just about whether they think it is reasonable. There are certainly people who do not think it is reasonable - there would be in every school - and that this is not a good approach to take, but behind that is the assumption that really good staff have been doing it all their life. My greatest fear is that we are driving into a system where all people will do is assess and mark in notebooks and not talk to students. That is my biggest fear.

Mr M.P. WHITELEY: In your submission you refer to the changes by the Curriculum Council and, I think, the employment of shortening time frames. Can you elaborate on that?

Reverend Syme: A specific example would be a commitment to get material to people 18 months out. Here we are in August still waiting for the English material.

Mr M.P. WHITELEY: That is rather their failure to provide the information rather than time lines being bought.

Reverend Syme: That is right.

Mr M.P. WHITELEY: You also raise concerns about the fact that an outcomes-based approach is compatible with tertiary entrance but not for ranking students for tertiary education. I am struggling to come to terms with how that can be.

Reverend Syme: I will have a go at this, but it is complex for the committee. The great value of outcomes-based education, particularly for years 1 to 12 schools, is that for the first time it is a way of trying to map progress across 12 years. Let me take an example. Previously you went from year 8 maths to year 9 maths with no understanding of what the student could do. There are 12 discrete unrelated years, which does not value where the students come from, because often there is no structure because of time pressures to actually sit down and say, "Harry does this. Fred does this. This is where they're up to. This is their weakness." One of the strengths of outcomes-based education is to try to map a student's progress just by charting the progress across what we call levels 1 to 8 - it could be any level. It is the first time in education. That is why the movement has come nationally and internationally to try to follow progress. However, let us say that someone gets to somewhere at level 5 or 6. What are you actually going to do with that level 5 or 6? That is a perfectly reasonable on-balance judgment in my view. Universities are requiring a number to rank students, but it is actually not a number to take a level and to make it into a piece of mathematics. For example, in the latest material I have seen you have to hit an outcome twice for it to be valid and then you average it. If it is in the first semester, it is ranked at 0.3 and in the second semester ranked at 0.7. Now that is applying a mathematical principle to something that is not a percentage. I think it is a piece of mathematical nonsense. To me it does not make logical sense. It does not make logical sense to my common room, but that is what we are doing. That is partly driven by the need - perhaps a reasonable need - for universities to have a ranking system in place. The schools are required to do the universities' work. I think that is an intriguing notion in itself.

The CHAIRMAN: What percentage of your year 11 and 12 students would be doing TEE at this stage?

Reverend Syme: It is a bit of a moveable feast, but somewhere between 70 and 80 per cent.

Dr E. CONSTABLE: May I just follow on from that for a moment? Do you see the other 20 or 30 per cent of students being advantaged or disadvantaged by this new system? How do you see the less able student fitting in?

Reverend Syme: Because of the percentages in my school, there would be better people to give advice on the difference between wholly school assessed and TEE. One of our hopes for the system was to provide a signed pathway for the reality of equivalent opportunity for TAFE or employment-bound students as much as for university-bound students. One of my concerns, if I may try to give some examples, is that the actual practices may in fact work very much against those students. For example, we might have 25 able students all at level 8. That provides more opportunities for my best able students. If we are going to do physical education studies, which traditionally perhaps in my environment was for wholly school assessed subjects for non-university-bound boys, and we now make it a level 8 subject and you examine it at something like the physiology that I did as part of my university degree, we are actually creating subjects that do not allow those less able students to participate, because we have to assess to be able to have levels 7 and 8, which is probably early university physiology or something like that. Again that is not clear. To take an English example, there is an English course of study. That means that a student doing 1A, 1B, 1C, 1D, 2A, 2B, 3A and 3B will sit one exam. It is likely that 1A, 1B, 1C, 1D students will not sit it because they are not university-bound boys, but if the potential is there in the system to have one exam, the range of students may go from a future Rhodes scholar to the boy who has high level dyslexia and specific learning difficulties and struggling away. He might be a fantastic human being who will be a great citizen but has a specific learning difficulty. They will all be sitting the same exam.

Dr E. CONSTABLE: What effect will it have on that?

Reverend Syme: I fear that exam will not be discerning. I have no idea what advice I would give on that, because I do not understand how it is possible. John, the boy with high-level learning difficulties, might want to sit the exam, but I could not think of a more destructive thing to put a boy through in his last weeks of school. We are going to send them out. We are going to lose all of term 4 to run these. That is another issue. We are going to lose more teaching and learning weeks. We will basically lose all of term 4.

[10.10 am]

Mr M.P. WHITELEY: Why is that?

Reverend Syme: Just sheer numbers. To run 50 exams and to keep the same time frame, students will probably have to do two or three exams on a day. No-one will want a boy or a girl to sit two or three, two to three-hour exams. Again, we do not know whether they will be two or three-hour exams - simple things like that. We are about 15 months away from actually sitting these exams and we do not even know how long they will be. We do not know the frame of them. With 50 exams, we will probably be losing teaching and learning time. For some of those students who are not university bound the potential is that it will be one of the most negative experiences of their education. They will probably choose not to sit it, to be fair, but it has that potential.

Dr E. CONSTABLE: It is still negative if they do not sit it.

Reverend Syme: Every school tries to provide experiences for their year 12 students so that when they leave they feel highly valued and part of it, rather than differentiating between people because they are more academically able or are better at sport or drama. They are highly valued. I think there are some concerns about that.

The CHAIRMAN: We have another couple of minutes scheduled for this session. Martin?

Mr M.P. WHITELEY: Just going back a little to the years prior to years 11 and 12, a concern that has been expressed is that you end up with a statement of competency, which may or may not be particularly meaningful. It is like a minimum standard. In practicality, it ends up being a minimum standard with a little tick list. There is not a reward for excellence or for kids going above and

beyond. In my own son's report, one of the criticisms was that he thought he was doing okay but he got exactly the same mark as everybody else in his school in terms of level 3. He is in year 9. Can I get your thoughts on that?

Reverend Syme: It is a very interesting point that you raise. I will provide a specific example from our school. We have a thing called a certificate of academic excellence, which is the very issue that you raised. We used to award it to the boys who got the best marks or the best grades. We have just run a logarithm through our reporting system on levels that pulls out the boys who have achieved the highest levels, and they are almost identical. The notion that this is a dumbing down is not correct. I can demonstrate that at Scotch College that is not so. What it is is that it is a different way of understanding. It is not as easily accessible because of the assumptions we had about what 70 per cent might mean. Seventy per cent rarely meant much at all, unless you provided a range of other material with it. In our case, once you have done the computation, the same certificates go to the same boys.

Mr M.P. WHITELEY: I understand that 70 per cent is abstract, but you know that 70 per cent is more than 50 per cent. I think the point my son was making to me was, "Dad, I think I'm getting 70 per cent, but I'm getting the same marks as other kids who are getting 50." I was looking to get a feel from his report on how he had gone. I think perhaps this was a kid's year 8 report and in year 9 he could not see any reward for effort and maybe he slacked off a bit. That is an intuitive feeling as a parent.

Reverend Syme: It is part of the issues that parents are having. I can only speak about what we do at Scotch in this particular case. It is a very fair concern for a parent to ask, "How is he going compared with that cohort?" In our situation, what we do on a report is to block the middle 80 per cent of levels, so we can demonstrate on a report where, by and large, that cohort on this writing aspect for English is falling and your son is within that cohort. You can get that answer for reading, writing and all the other parts of it.

Mr M.P. WHITELEY: Basically, your son is in the middle 80 per cent, not the top 10 per cent or the bottom 10 per cent.

Reverend Syme: Somewhere in that, or in fact outside it, because he could be in the top 10 per cent or the bottom 10 per cent.

Mr M.P. WHITELEY: Do you actually get a percentile - "Your son is at 50 per cent"?

Reverend Syme: No, a dot - "He is about there."

Mr M.P. WHITELEY: A halfway point or just -

Reverend Syme: I think your question is that it seems to you that it is very reasonable for parents to ask how their son is doing against others. The answering of that question must be done by schools. The notion that outcomes-based education is a purely individual thing is false.

Mr M.P. WHITELEY: So, you get a dot, like WALNA testing, in that range?

Reverend Syme: Yes, we used the WALNA model. For English, which might have five outcomes on our report, the big advantage that we never had before is that parents can see that their son is doing well in the writing and speaking aspects, but in reading he has fallen behind the rest of the cohort, so the parents and the school need to be focusing on that. We have not had that sort of accuracy before. I think every school needs to answer a very reasonable concern of, "Where is he in the cohort?"

Mr M.P. WHITELEY: Would it be possible to see a copy of a depersonalised report?

Reverend Syme: Of course. We would be very happy to share that.

Mr M.P. WHITELEY: That would be great.

The CHAIRMAN: I am going to cut it off there, Reverend Syme. Thank you very much for this session. We are going to do a quick changeover of the bench.

Reverend Syme: Thank you.

Hearing concluded at 10.15 am