

Mr Andrew Waddell; Dr Tony Buti; Mr John Kobelke; Mr Tom Stephens; Mr Albert Jacob; Acting Speaker; Mr Martin Whitely; Mr Chris Tallentire; Mrs Liza Harvey; Dr Mike Nahan; Mr John McGrath; Dr Graham Jacobs; Mr Ben Wyatt

YEAR 7 STUDENTS — SECONDARY SCHOOL

Motion

Resumed from 16 March on the following motion moved by Mr B.S. Wyatt —

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.

MR A.J. WADDELL (Forrestfield) [4.10 pm]: I remind the house that this is an adjourned debate; we were debating this motion back in March. It was some time ago and I felt the need to refresh my memory on the remarks I made last time I was on my feet and those of others who had contributed to the debate up to that time. In my research, I came across a number of newspaper articles that have popped up since the debate occurred back in March. One article that struck me quoted the Minister for Education saying that she had a paper that was just about to go to cabinet. That was in April; we are now in June and we are yet to hear an announcement. This minister's name is becoming synonymous with considering, looking at, having a committee research it, a paper being developed, working on it, working towards it, waiting for something and waiting for the national curriculum—"we need to do this because of the national curriculum, but we cannot do it until the national curriculum"—and it is delay, delay.

Observers of Parliament might note that there is a certain spring in the air of this place lately, and I think it is because the Electoral Commission announced new boundaries last week and a number of people are now turning their minds to the next election. This will be my first attempt at a re-election, and I was surprised that it had come around so quickly—that, here we are, nearly three years into the term of this government. I have to ask the questions: In those three years what has this minister done other than consider, propose, consult, liaise or discuss? Has she actually made a decision that she has not been forced to make? The answer is absolutely, completely and utterly, no. Inactivity is the order of the day.

This is a very important issue that affects many people across the state. Anyone who has children, and many in this place do, knows how seriously parents take their children's educations. They know how much many of us struggle with the questions that face us when trying to determine the best educational outcomes for our children.

I have never been one to shy away from talking about my own personal experiences. Yesterday I was at Perth College, a private school, at an interview I had been asked to attend. When my daughter was born in 2001, we very much thought about what her educational needs would be in the future. This was long before I had any prospects of coming to this place. It was really when I was just an ordinary Western Australian trying to make ends meet and trying to do the best for my family. We put my daughter's name down at a number of schools, hoping to keep the doors open for the best educational outcomes. Here we are in 2011 and those things we did nine years ago are starting to come back to us, and we were invited by Perth College to an interview. My daughter is in year 5 in a public school and we have a lot of hopes and aspirations for her. We want to ensure that her high school education meets all her needs. We were faced with the prospect of having to make some very significant decisions for this nine-year-old, and we tried to involve her in those decisions. She was in fact offered a place at Perth College. Perth College requires that we pay a deposit of some \$4 000 to secure that place. I would be prepared to pay that amount for my daughter, but I suspect that it would be quite a struggle for many families. I could not honestly say that that is the optimum educational outcome I had envisaged for my daughter. I have other aspirations for her; we just want to keep our options open.

We are now faced with a situation in which, because private sector secondary schools have year 7 entry, they have brought forward their interviews and acceptance of places to year 5. Therefore, year 5 students have to go through this process. I would very much like my daughter to go to one of the really good select schools run by the state. My daughter has her heart set on getting into Perth Modern School or Shenton College, both of which are very good state schools. They would be her preferred option and I would be very pleased for her to get a place in one of those schools simply because I would not be faced with school fees of \$20 000 a year—not that that is the major consideration. The major consideration is her belief, which I share with her, that those schools would provide her with the best educational outcomes. The trouble is that in order for her to get into one of those schools, she has to sit the selective test—the gifted and talented test or the academic selective entrance test; one of the two—and that will be set for her in May 2012, with the results due in July 2012, for a possible entry in 2013. We face a situation in which the high school education of my daughter is being decided either this year or next year—that is, one year being for the private system and one year being for the public system—for entry in 2012 into the private system, if we choose it, or 2013 in the public system. Regardless of the outcome, if we

Extract from Hansard

[ASSEMBLY — Wednesday, 15 June 2011]

p4295a-4317a

Mr Andrew Waddell; Dr Tony Buti; Mr John Kobelke; Mr Tom Stephens; Mr Albert Jacob; Acting Speaker; Mr Martin Whitely; Mr Chris Tallentire; Mrs Liza Harvey; Dr Mike Nahan; Mr John McGrath; Dr Graham Jacobs; Mr Ben Wyatt

want to keep our options open, we need to pay the \$4 500 deposit in order to secure that place in the private system. I do not think that I am unusual in that circumstance; I think an awful lot of people will face it. That is just one of the consequences of a system that is out of whack, in which the state school system is not in sync with the private school system. We could ask whether the tail is wagging the dog or whether the dog is wagging the tail. Which one should be the pre-eminent system? As somebody on the Labor side of politics, I will always be a very strong supporter of the state school system, and I think that it should be the dog wagging the tail in that sense.

This matter needs to be looked at in relation to events at the national level. We are about to move to a national curriculum, and although there may be some minor alterations here or there to accommodate particular Western Australian needs, the reality is that the majority of our curriculum will be in sync with the rest of the country. As we know, in any national commonwealth negotiations, smaller states like Western Australia and South Australia are often overshadowed by the big states of Victoria and New South Wales. Victoria and New South Wales, of course, have long had year 7 entry into high school. Queensland has now announced that it has started the transition to a year 7 entry. Therefore, that will leave South Australia and us on the outer. If we think that the national curriculum will not be built around the concept that children start high school in year 7, we are kidding ourselves. If we do not start dealing with that issue today, if we do not start making announcements about it, and if we do not allow schools to transition and prepare for that by putting allocations in the budget and forward estimates, what are we doing other than setting up Western Australian children to fail? Ten years from now employers will be asking kids where they went to school. When they say they went to school in WA, those employers will say, “Oh, that’s a shame; we’ll take somebody from one of the states that had an education system that functioned and actually delivered the outcomes.”

We know that we are already not performing as well as we could in the national testing. We know we are not at the top. There are many arguments for why that is. We have a large dispersed population. We have a large Indigenous population. We have many things that create challenges for our educational system. That is a fact. I am sure that everybody in this place would be as dedicated as possible to correcting those problems. We should not be putting new barriers in front of us. We should not be creating more barriers for our children to perform in the most optimal way. A lot of parents would share the concern that we are not creating a school system in which our kids can perform as well as we would like them to. That is a tragedy.

When I was on my feet last time, I reflected on a P&C meeting that I attended when I was first elected. I am sure many other members have shared similar experiences. When we are first elected, we are very enthusiastic and we start attending many kinds of events that we probably had not attended in our previous lives.

Mr A.P. Jacob: Speak for yourself!

Mr A.J. WADDELL: Not all of us were local councillors. I certainly had not attended a large number of P&C meetings up to that point. I was taken by the fact that I was caught up in a ferocious argument between a principal and a parent on the P&C over what I thought at the time was a fairly insignificant issue—that is, the attendance of her child at the school graduation. She indicated that her daughter was going to be leaving the school at the end of that year because she was attending a private school the following year. That private school had given her entry to year 7. Her classmates who were not moving into a private school were remaining at this primary school and would go on to year 7 and graduate the following year. At the time the parent was quite upset about this because she felt that her daughter had been part of the school community since kindergarten, had done that rite of passage through the school and should also be able to achieve that thing that we encourage many children to achieve, which is a good graduation. She was in some way being robbed, in a way being told that she was deserting the school or not doing the right thing by leaving in year 6 instead of year 7, and denied a graduation. Since that very first meeting I have seen this argument come up probably half a dozen times at different P&C meetings. I can honestly say that parents get very hot-headed about it. As a parent, I kind of understand how families can be part of a community and how parents want their child to enjoy everything that the other children enjoy. It is not a major issue, but it again highlights the problems that this system creates by having year 7 entry to high school in the private sector and year 8 entry in the public sector.

The plea that we are making in this condemnation is for certainty. I suppose we are asking that the minister make a decision. We are asking the minister to tell the people of Western Australia what they can expect. She should allow them to plan and consider the futures of their children and make some decisions. We cannot pretend it is not happening. It is happening, it is going to happen and it will continue to happen. The national curriculum is going to make it worse. Every private school will have year 7 entry.

Mr A.P. Jacob: What do you think the decision should be?

Mr Andrew Waddell; Dr Tony Buti; Mr John Kobelke; Mr Tom Stephens; Mr Albert Jacob; Acting Speaker; Mr Martin Whitely; Mr Chris Tallentire; Mrs Liza Harvey; Dr Mike Nahan; Mr John McGrath; Dr Graham Jacobs; Mr Ben Wyatt

Dr K.D. Hames: Are you asking for us to go along with them?

Mr A.J. WADDELL: To be honest, that is inevitable. I believe it is inevitable that we will have year 7 entry like the other states. There is no reason, particularly when Western Australia is screaming for workers to prop up our economy, for us to ask families to move to Perth or other parts of Western Australia. I cannot possibly imagine how I could take a child who was in high school and say, "We're uprooting the family; we're moving you away from all your friends and, by the way, we're sending you back to primary school." I cannot imagine what that would be like. I cannot imagine that I could put that argument to my family.

Dr M.D. Nahan: I did.

Mr A.J. WADDELL: We are not all unique like the member for Riverton, and some of us have compassion and heart. I cannot imagine that we would do it. I cannot imagine that that would be acceptable.

We are going to have to get with the program, get with the national position and at least announce how we are going to transition. Let us start the planning. It is inevitable. We do not need another six months of consultation. We want to see the proposal that is going to cabinet. We want to see the department's plans. We want to know what it is going to cost. We want to know how we get from where we are today to where we need to be.

DR A.D. BUTI (Armadale) [4.25 pm]: Many members who have spoken before me have talked about the pros and cons of year 7 students moving into high school. My friend and neighbour in this place, the member for Forrestfield, has elaborated on those pros and cons very well. We are not denying that this is a difficult decision; we are concerned about the fact that the decision has not been made. One way or the other, the decision has to be made. It is not an easy decision. Like the member for Forrestfield, I think it will happen. I would prefer that it did not happen. I will tell members why I think it will happen and then I will tell them why I would prefer that it did not happen. One of the biggest reasons that I think it will happen, as the member for Forrestfield said, is the national curriculum, particularly the science curriculum. From my understanding of the national curriculum, it will be very hard for year 7 primary school science education to keep up with the standards that are required. If the standards are to be maintained and the current status quo is to be enforced whereby our year 7s remain in primary school, major science infrastructure will have to be undertaken in primary schools.

Mr A.P. Jacob: A lot of that has been done recently in primary schools.

Dr A.D. BUTI: The member may be right in a certain way, but there are not sufficient science laboratories, and it also comes down to day-to-day timetabling. The amount of science that is timetabled in primary schools is not sufficient to cope with what is required under the national curriculum. The national science curriculum pushes us to transfer our year 7s to high school.

The other main reason is the fact that the Catholic and private schools have done it. They have not only made that decision; it is operational. As the member for Forrestfield said, it does not mean that we have to follow them. However, in many schools there is a major depletion of students between year 6 and year 7. Parents are content to have their children in state primary schools but they want their children to attend a private secondary school. We are getting depleted year 7 classes in primary schools in the state system.

The other thing that the member for Forrestfield said is something that I am experiencing with my son, who is in year 6 in a state school this year and will be attending a private school next year. He laments, and he often says to me, "Dad, I can't graduate with my cohort. I will not be graduating with the kids I have been in school with since grade 1." I imagine that for most of us, including the minister, there was no such thing as year 7 graduation ceremonies when we were young. It was not a big thing. It is now a massive thing, as we know when we go to graduation ceremonies at the end of the year. The year 7 graduation is an incredibly important event in the education of a child. It seems to be a rite of passage that they think they are entitled to. Under the current system, if as parents we are making a decision to move a child from state primary education to private secondary education, we are depriving that child of the year 7 graduation. With that goes the chance also to be a prefect or a member of a student council. Children incur many negatives under the current system in which our children in private schools commence high school in year 7 while children in our state schools remain in primary school in year 7.

They are the reasons I think we have to move towards transferring our year 7s to high school. As I stated, I do not personally like that option. Hopefully, a decision will be made one way or the other. I believe that high school is intimidating enough. I am not really sure whether we want our 11-year-olds, in some cases, to have to endure the transition to high school. It is a much larger system; children move from teacher to teacher three, four or five times a day.

Mr Andrew Waddell; Dr Tony Buti; Mr John Kobelke; Mr Tom Stephens; Mr Albert Jacob; Acting Speaker; Mr Martin Whitely; Mr Chris Tallentire; Mrs Liza Harvey; Dr Mike Nahan; Mr John McGrath; Dr Graham Jacobs; Mr Ben Wyatt

Another important issue to be considered is bullying. From my understanding and from speaking to people in the education system, for some reason year 6 is a year in which lots of bullying occurs. I have not been able to verify this myself, but from hearsay and communication with teachers and people in education administration, year 6 seems to be a high point for bullying. The next high point for bullying is the transition from primary to high school. If year 7s moved into high school, there would be two years of major bullying—one in year 6 and the other in the first year of high school. Of course, that could have major negative consequences for the victims of bullying. If the government decides to allow year 7s to go into high school, which I think it will probably have to do, it will have to consider funding major statewide programs to ensure that we reduce the incidence of bullying and deal with the effects of bullying. I hope the minister has considered that in her deliberations and that, if a decision is made to follow the private system, major funding is provided to deal with the issue of bullying.

The other ramification that the minister and the government must consider in allowing year 7s to start high school is the amount of funding that is required. I think one of the reasons the government has hesitated on this issue is the enormous funding implications of moving students straight from year 6 to high school. I hope the minister is able to enlighten us on whether that is the case. I cannot see how it cannot be. There will be a significant increase in the number of students entering high school, and they will have to be housed. There must be an increase in the number of secondary teachers. What will the teachers who predominantly teach year 7s in primary school do? Will they remain in the primary school system with a reduced student load or will they have to also engage in a transition to high school? If they have to do that, surely they will have to engage in further education, and that will have cost implications. That is why the minister's hesitation and delay in making a decision on this issue is very worrying. The minister cannot make a decision and have it happen tomorrow. There has to be a lead-in time. We are now nearly halfway through this year. Even if a decision is made today that year 7 children will receive high school education, I cannot see how it can be implemented next year. Probably the earliest is 2013.

As I stated, I am not saying that the minister does not have a hard decision to make. It is a very hard decision. There are pros and cons either way. Although I said I think forces are pulling for us to move to the high school decision, personally, I see a lot of negatives to that. But, minister, we just want a decision. George Bush once said, "People say I'm indecisive, but I don't know about that."

Mr M. McGowan: Which one?

Dr A.D. BUTI: I am not sure which George Bush it was. Henry Ford also said, "Indecision is often worse than wrong action." Minister, I think that might be true. We hope the minister does not take the wrong action, but the fact that she is not making a decision is almost as bad. She must make a decision one way or the other.

I was reading an article the other day about the disease, or the art, of avoiding making decisions. It was summed up as the four-D mantra: dump, delay, delegate and, the last resort, do. I do not know about dumping. She is certainly delaying. She always talks about delegating, or it is always the department's fault. I wish she would take the last resort and do. Doing means making a decision. The minister is a highly intelligent person who has professional educational qualifications. It is not that she does not know the area. It is a difficult decision but she needs to make that decision. She cannot just keep telling us that a decision will be made at some stage. The indecision affects parents, teachers, curriculum developments, the education department as a whole, Western Australia's position in the national curriculum and, most importantly, our children. Each extra day of indecision means that all the various groups we in this Parliament represent are being affected. It is not easy for the minister. But she cannot deny that she has a responsibility to make a decision. The fact is that she has built up our expectation that a decision would be made. It should have been made months ago and we are still waiting. Minister, whatever happens, make the decision and make it now.

MR J.C. KOBELKE (Balcatta) [4.36 pm]: I rise in support of the motion, which condemns the Minister for Education for the uncertainty she has caused parents by continuing to delay a decision on whether year 7 students should remain in primary school or move to secondary school. As other members have indicated, as parents we are aware that education is incredibly important to our children. Often parents these days plan from the birth of their child what schools they hope to send their children to. Clearly, for some of the more elite private schools, that planning is essential or the children cannot get in. Even when it comes to public schools, people plan where to build or buy a house on the expectation that the particular government school will be a good school for their children. As the member for Armadale just said, they might hope to enrol their children in one of the schools that provide some sort of scholarship or selection process. Parents make these plans years in advance. For the minister to delay, delay, delay impacts very directly on parents, families and children in making those very important decisions about what schools they hope to send their child to. As I will discuss in a moment, putting the year 7 cohort into secondary school has a lot of implications that open up some

Mr Andrew Waddell; Dr Tony Buti; Mr John Kobelke; Mr Tom Stephens; Mr Albert Jacob; Acting Speaker; Mr Martin Whitely; Mr Chris Tallentire; Mrs Liza Harvey; Dr Mike Nahan; Mr John McGrath; Dr Graham Jacobs;
Mr Ben Wyatt

opportunities and close other opportunities for parents to get their children into particular schools. It impacts very directly on decisions parents might make about their children's education, even years into the future—never mind what they might want to do next year or the year after.

This minister has an education background; she was an academic in this area. Clearly, this is a classic example of someone not having the ability to be a minister because she cannot make a decision. It is not about just this issue. Through her performance in this place this minister has shown herself to be quite incompetent. I took a particular issue related to Balcatta Senior High School to the minister. I spoke to her personally on two occasions and on two occasions to her staff. It was a simple administrative issue about laptop computers for students going into year 8 and how to share the cost and get the best deal. It ran into issues about government policy on fees, which I understand. It is generally a good policy. The staff said, "Oh, I think we can do something about it." But could this minister make a decision? It was too hard for this minister to make a simple administrative decision to allow year 8 students at Balcatta Senior High School to have laptop computers. That just shows her incompetence in taking on this job as minister. At the moment, the minister is not sitting in her seat in the chamber because she knows that if she does and someone asks her a question, she is not able to interject. She is too frightened to answer a question in the debate. She is hiding on the back bench. Where is the competence of this minister? She is totally incompetent. She cannot even sit in her seat so that I might ask a question and she would have the opportunity to respond. She has been teed-up by the Premier because the Premier does this regularly. He is a wily old fella. He knows that if he does not sit in his seat, he cannot be asked to interject.

Mrs L.M. Harvey: We are actually sharing our knowledge of the private school participation with members opposite.

Mr J.C. KOBELKE: I thank the member for the interjection. At least that member can interject and has proven the point that the minister cannot do so because she would be disorderly if she interjected from where she is currently sitting. She is hiding on the back bench because she cannot handle the issue.

It is an absolute disgrace that someone of her educational background and competence has been such a poor minister. Norman Moore was poor enough and had real troubles. Unfortunately, the current minister is even worse. Norman Moore commented that he thought he needed to move to another portfolio because education did not give him the opportunity to have a high profile. With 800 schools, all those school openings and functions and all the policy decisions, he wanted to get out of the portfolio because he thought another portfolio would give him a high profile. This Minister for Education wants a low profile because she cannot do anything; she cannot make a decision.

Mrs L.M. Harvey: The minister made a significant contribution to this debate on Wednesday, 16 March. Perhaps she is just not full of herself —

Mr J.C. KOBELKE: Can the member give me one element of that contribution?

Mrs L.M. Harvey: Check the *Hansard*, member?

Mr J.C. KOBELKE: So the member has forgotten it! It was of major significance, but the member for Scarborough cannot remember one issue. She cannot remember one issue; that is how significant it was.

Let us come to the issue, which, as the member said, is difficult, and one that, clearly, an incompetent minister cannot handle. The genesis of the problem arose when Colin Barnett was the Minister for Education in the Richard Court government, and he changed the school starting age by six months so that students would be at least six months older than previously was the case before they could start school. Of course, that pushed back the entire age group going through schools. I happened to be the shadow Minister for Education at the time; therefore, I was very much involved in that debate. I was able to catch out the then responsible minister, Colin Barnett, not because I had any great knowledge of the matter; it just so happened that the Productivity Commission brought down a report a month before that decision was made that dealt with the schooling system right across Australia. I did not have all that knowledge, but a report of some significance gave me all the information. Therefore, I could stand and debate the matter knowing more than Minister Colin Barnett. Although he had made the decision, he had not done a lot of the research work. I pointed out back then in 1995–96, or about that time, that by moving to put back the school starting age by six months, it was inevitable that year 7 students would have to go to high school. I will give some of the reasons that I gave back then, some 15 or 16 years ago, which are even more true today.

Mr A.P. Jacob: Why didn't your side do it in 2002, then?

Mr J.C. KOBELKE: I will come to that.

Extract from Hansard

[ASSEMBLY — Wednesday, 15 June 2011]

p4295a-4317a

Mr Andrew Waddell; Dr Tony Buti; Mr John Kobelke; Mr Tom Stephens; Mr Albert Jacob; Acting Speaker; Mr Martin Whitely; Mr Chris Tallentire; Mrs Liza Harvey; Dr Mike Nahan; Mr John McGrath; Dr Graham Jacobs; Mr Ben Wyatt

In making that change to the age group, Western Australia was going to have, in terms of its primary and secondary education, an eight–five split; that is, eight years of primary education and five years of secondary education. Most of the rest of Australia had a seven–six split; that is, seven years for primary, counting the early years, and six years at secondary. There was a move by other states to go down that road some 15 years ago, if they had not already done so.

In terms of educational achievement, educational philosophy and pedagogy, it was going to be very difficult to have eight years of full and meaningful primary education in this state. That was because students in year 7 start to get bored and want the challenges of high school subjects, particularly as they were to be six months older. For pedagogical reasons, the push was on to move those students into high school or, at great expense, to put in science blocks and a whole lot of secondary education facilities at primary schools. The government could have gone that way, but I do not think that approach represents an efficient use of resources or that it would have necessarily been pedagogically better than the alternative. In terms of educational curriculum, there is a real problem if that eight–five system is maintained.

The other driver was that if the state were out of step with most of the rest of Australia, a problem would be created. In terms of educational resources available, materials being developed for students of the same age group in other parts of Australia would not be appropriate for our students because the materials would not match our students in many ways. Alignment is achieved in many general ways, but more and more cases would arise of non-alignment between what was happening in Western Australia and what was happening in other states that had already put year 7 students into high school. That lack of alignment has been driven further now because this minister has signed up to the national curriculum. With a national curriculum, year 7 students will require comparability with what students are doing in other places. To do that in primary schools requires the skilling-up of teachers and extra resources is a huge commitment, and, I suggest, this would be far less efficient than moving these year 7 students into high school.

All these pressures build. I indicated some 15 years ago to the now Premier, the then Minister for Education, that when he made such a decision, he would in the future need to move year 7 students from primary school to high school. But, of course, the biggest issue is cost. It was suggested back then that it would cost about \$100 million, and I suspect that it will cost a lot more than that now. However, that was the figure loosely bandied around back then.

Now is the prime time to make that move, because the half-cohort that was introduced when the starting age was moved back six months is now in high school. That created a problem a year ago with many high school teachers losing their jobs; that is, a smaller group of students moved into high school and many high school teachers were not needed and a lot of temporary teachers were not given jobs and were pushed out of the system. Last year and this year, the government had the chance to use those available high school teachers with the necessary expertise. Those teachers would not have filled all the spots required, but they would have helped in the transition. This change also meant that many high schools had the extra classrooms needed, and the government would not have to immediately build all the extra facilities needed. It would have to build some, but there would not be the same urgency to build all the extra facilities because the arrival of the half-cohort in high school creates space. That is another reason why it is urgent that this minister, or whomever the Premier might replace her with, grasps the nettle and does it now. If she waits a couple of years when that half-cohort is in year 12 or beyond, the transition cost will hit up-front and will be much more difficult. It will not be such an easy cost transition. The decision has to be made now, unless of course the minister will simply leave things as they are and thumb her nose at all the evidence suggesting that she cannot avoid the change; that is, do nothing and let the ship sink.

I also put to the house that the government school system in this country is incredibly important for our democratic system and for the cohesiveness of our community. It is the place where new arrivals generally go, be they economic immigrants or refugees. Overwhelmingly, those people go to public schools—to government schools. They are acculturated. They adapt. They become dinky-di Aussies within a generation. If this government will not offer the same standard of education in government schools, new arrivals to Australia will not get a decent education. The many Australians who decide to send their children to the local government school will want to move their children out of that school. Therefore, the percentage of the student population going to government schools will slip so low that they will be seen as providing a second-rate education. If we get to that situation—I fear with this incompetent minister we are being pushed in that direction—government schools will be seen as second rate. That will have huge implications for the whole way in which our community works, social cohesion and life opportunities for our young people. I believe that it is critically important to maintain well over 50 per cent of our students going into government schools. I have taught in government and non-government schools. My sons have gone to government and non-government schools. We have a great strength in having a dual system, but I am very concerned that if we see the percentage of the age group going to

Mr Andrew Waddell; Dr Tony Buti; Mr John Kobelke; Mr Tom Stephens; Mr Albert Jacob; Acting Speaker; Mr Martin Whitely; Mr Chris Tallentire; Mrs Liza Harvey; Dr Mike Nahan; Mr John McGrath; Dr Graham Jacobs; Mr Ben Wyatt

government schools slipping too low, slipping below 50 per cent, the general perception will be that government schools are not as good as private schools. I think that they are as good. As someone who taught in government and private schools for many years, I think we have a very high standard of education in our government schools. However, the public perception will change if people do not see students being enrolled in government schools in large numbers. I suggest that it is critical for more than 50 per cent of students to be enrolled in government schools.

This indecision by the minister is driving parents to put their kids into private schools. All the major private schools have moved year 7 into high school. The Catholic school system has put year 7s into high school. That created an opportunity because of the half-cohort. The year that half-cohort came through, Mirrabooka Senior High School—which was in my electorate—had only one class of year 8s. Part of it was the half-cohort; part of it was the attraction of low-fee private schools that took a whole lot of students who would have gone into the public system, because they made the change. These pressures are undermining the standing of government schools and the number of students going to them, because the private system has moved and is putting more pressure back on the government: “Fall into line or you will continue to slip. You will continue to get a lower percentage of those students staying in government schools.”

We can have a lot of different pedagogical arguments about students going into high school at the age of 12—some might still be 11. There are issues about that, but schools generally have gone to using the middle school system, which recognises the issue and creates a more nurturing and protective climate for those students. Middle schools are not new. As a teacher, I was transferred to Scarborough Senior High School in 1977 because it wanted to group into a middle school concept. I do not know whether I had anything to do with it, but after one year the school abandoned it. Those ideas have been around. There is now a much greater concentration on providing a special environment for those students in years 7, 8 and 9 in those early secondary years. We already have some government schools that have year 7s in high school, which causes confusion about which schools students can go to. Ballajura takes students in year 7. If members go to another school nearby, they will find that that school does not take year 7s. It is a dog’s breakfast. This minister cannot grasp the nettle and make a decision. It is having all these flow-on implications on the standard of education and the expectations of parents.

The economic problems with the transfer and finding the money are substantial, but the decision has to be made now so that we have one or two years left for that transition of the half-cohort through secondary schools and so that we will not have to suddenly build all the extra classrooms. We might be able to get some of those teachers back who were pushed out of the system when the half-cohort came in. We can start planning the transition for primary school teachers; clearly, there will be a reduced number of primary school teachers as the students they teach would generally move into high school. There are big issues in planning this. To do the transition well is complex and needs to be thought through properly and properly planned, but the drivers are there and the government cannot avoid them. The change must happen sooner or later. If it does not, it will be to the detriment of the standards in our government schools. If we drop the standards in our government schools, our social cohesion and the advancement of whole subsections within the community will be delayed or not given the opportunities that they should be given.

The minister cannot continue to sit on her hands and say, “I hope that it will go away.” It is a problem that was created by the Premier when he was Minister for Education. There are other drivers. The government might have decided that we will get pushed that way because of what has happened in other states. However, the key thing that has driven the move to private schools is the change to the school starting age made 15 or more years ago by the now Premier, who was then the Minister for Education. Despite having all that time, this government cannot make a decision. I was interjected on earlier and asked why the last government did not move year 7 to high school. The previous government obviously saw the cost implications. That cohort had not yet reached high school. In many areas the previous government was very forward thinking and planned things well in advance, such as with the Mandurah railway. Members on the Liberal side would have a go at it time after time, but it is now a brilliant success. The Minister for Transport got up today and heralded how we are nationally seen as a leader because of the decisions made by the former Labor government. We could have had more foresight in this particular area. We might have planned further into the future. However, the time came when that half-cohort moved into high school. That was last year. We are now in a position in which we must make a decision. It is with great regret that I have to say that we have such an incompetent minister that she cannot even sit in her seat when the debate is on. She is obviously not up to making important decisions such as this. Our students will suffer because of the incompetence of the minister.

MR T.G. STEPHENS (Pilbara) [4.56 pm]: The education portfolio is one of the most fundamentally important portfolios within any government with the enormous opportunities that it gives the person who has the responsibility of serving the community of Western Australia in that portfolio. The education portfolio becomes

Extract from Hansard

[ASSEMBLY — Wednesday, 15 June 2011]

p4295a-4317a

Mr Andrew Waddell; Dr Tony Buti; Mr John Kobelke; Mr Tom Stephens; Mr Albert Jacob; Acting Speaker; Mr Martin Whitely; Mr Chris Tallentire; Mrs Liza Harvey; Dr Mike Nahan; Mr John McGrath; Dr Graham Jacobs; Mr Ben Wyatt

the building block for educational opportunity for all Western Australians and especially people with disadvantages for whom education becomes the foundation and opportunity for access, equity and fairness in the life prospects that they might otherwise have had. Education is a portfolio in government that typically can be quite controversial. It is a portfolio that needs to have the support of the leadership of government and the competence of the minister holding the portfolio. The motion that is before the house today reads —

That this house condemns the Minister for Education ...

This motion is not in any way pulling punches; it is a serious motion —

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.

This motion again presents this house with an opportunity to bring this minister to book. I have been watching this minister while she has been in office and I very quickly arrived at the conclusion that she would be a failure—almost from day one. That was a source of considerable disappointment to me, because when we were in government and when she stood on this side of the house as an Independent, she showed all the hallmarks of someone who paraded compassion and interest and her credentials. She certainly strutted around venting enormous venom and spleen about my colleagues when they were in government. She chastised and criticised them and was held out in the media as a paragon of virtue for the clarity with which she saw—at least from the perspective of this side of the house—the policy issues with which she was confronted. For me, some of the chinks in my perception of her started to emerge when I served on a parliamentary committee with her. When the committee became involved in discussing issues associated with education, I started to see a lack of sincerity on the minister's part in handling the issues at hand. The minister had a propensity for playing politics and for not resolving the issue, but wanting to seem to be some sort of guru in the field of education; it was clearly becoming evident that she was not. The minister was not preoccupied by the outcomes or in delivering for the community of Western Australia the benefits that could flow from a fair and objective analysis of the issues. There are members on this side and the other side of the house who saw the way in which this minister, when in committee deliberations, showed herself to be a bit of a fraud and charlatan when it came to the handling of education issues. She was not prepared to take a stand with the parliamentary committee work that would have created the opportunity for tackling some very difficult issues in education in a bipartisan manner; she simply wanted to play politics with it. When issues were being solved by that parliamentary committee, the minister wanted to play politics instead.

I have watched the minister's mishandling of the education portfolio in the field of Indigenous education. This is an area in which she has always indicated to the community and to the Parliament that she has some passionate commitments, yet in the handling of that portfolio things have never been worse for the delivery of quality education to respond to the challenging needs of the Indigenous community of this state. In this particular case, the minister is not blessed with the opportunity of not knowing about the recommendations and support of parliamentary committees to tell her how she might proceed. The minister has reports available to her that are a roadmap for advancing the educational interests of the people of this state, and she has failed to deliver. This motion that is before the chamber is a timely reminder of this litany of failures. It reminds us yet again that here is another issue in which the minister is delivering uncertainty to the state of Western Australia. The minister is causing enormous disquiet for the students and for the parents of pupils from one end of this state to the other as she fails to resolve an issue that she and she alone can resolve. She is failing to tackle a policy issue that was put up for her by her colleagues—that is, the question of whether there will be year 7 students in secondary schools. Quite clearly, although the minister has failed in every other area of her portfolio, surely she could at least tackle this issue decisively. Have the minister's patterns of indecision and her failures now crippled her capacities so that even this critical issue will be one that she dodges and does not deliver upon?

This reminds me of another area in which the minister has paraded her interest—that is, the field of support services around education. The minister has argued that she holds dear the needs of these support services and of the people who work in these fields inside the education system with supports around school psychology services, and that these would be areas that would always be supported while she was the Minister for Education, yet the contrary has been the case. The minister has shunted these support services personnel away from their capacity to deliver their skills to meet the needs of the classes and the school students operating in the government school system of Western Australia to the disadvantage of those students, their families and the state of Western Australia. That is because of a failure in the capacity of this minister to be a good minister. She has a misplaced self-confidence in herself. In that self-confidence, instead of taking decisive steps, the minister has

Mr Andrew Waddell; Dr Tony Buti; Mr John Kobelke; Mr Tom Stephens; Mr Albert Jacob; Acting Speaker; Mr Martin Whitely; Mr Chris Tallentire; Mrs Liza Harvey; Dr Mike Nahan; Mr John McGrath; Dr Graham Jacobs; Mr Ben Wyatt

allowed opportunities to bypass her, the portfolio and the state. For the participants in education in Western Australia, particularly the students, as well as their parents and families, and those who are involved in the delivery of education and educational support services, this is a tragic time indeed.

Another area in which the minister has shown her failure to grab the nettle has been the bipartisan-supported recommendation that referred to mandating the teaching of literacy with techniques that would be guaranteed to work and are fundamental to a successful education system in this state. The minister had bipartisan support for that and had a roadmap in front of her. The minister simply squibs it, ignores the report, prevaricates and does not deliver the certainty in that field that is fundamental to quality education and turning around the educational opportunities of the students of Western Australia. The minister fails yet again. A roadmap was delivered to the minister with all the advantages available to this minister that were not available to any of her predecessors—bipartisan support for a road-tested, road-mapped policy and ironclad guarantees about a way forward. Instead of grabbing the opportunity, we have an educational system that is delivering, through the minister's failure to adopt a pedagogical approach that could enhance literacy achievement amongst our youngsters, very high levels of failure in Western Australia.

Last night in the corridors I had a conversation with a government colleague about the despair we feel in the regional areas of Western Australia when we can see government structures not delivering with certainty opportunities for advancing the interests of the most marginalised, the most impoverished, and the most needy sections of regional, remote and very remote populations of this state. Why does it happen? It happens as a result of the failure of individual parts of every portfolio to focus and tackle the issues at hand. In the education portfolio this minister has not been able to tackle the small issues, the big issues or the issue that is the subject of this motion before the house today.

In condemning the minister, the house would be doing the state and the government a great service. It would be creating the opportunity for the sorry chapter in Western Australia's educational history to be turned around and, instead, the portfolio could be allocated to someone without vanity and without the track record of failure. The portfolio could be handed to anyone who can be decisive and who can read basic opportunities to advance the educational interests of the people of Western Australia. It is not as though on the other side of the house there are not people with skills and talent, who have ears, minds and brains and who can listen and discuss the issues.

Mr P. Papalia: You are stretching it!

Mr T.G. STEPHENS: I can tell the member that there are, but mostly on the back bench. We have parliamentary colleagues on that side of the house who —

Dr A.D. Buti: They are on either side of the minister now.

Mr T.G. STEPHENS: Exactly; either side of the minister. In particular I want to pinpoint Mr Simpson, the member for Darling Range. If members sit and talk with him about an educational issue, they will hear someone who is decisive in his approach to education, who is interested in the viewpoint of others and who has the opportunity to grab an issue and advance it. Yet he is left languishing on the back bench while there is a minister up the front who is an embarrassment to the state, an embarrassment to the Parliament and, hopefully, an embarrassment for this government that it will do something about.

This house has the opportunity to highlight yet again the indecision, the prevarication and the failure of a minister whose responsibility was to do better, whose educational background should have equipped her to do better and whose prancing, parading and poncing around on this side of the house left us all with a sense of promise that she was going to do better. Instead of that, she has been an absolute arrogant, abject failure. She sits in this house and is supported by a Premier who seems to bestow unlimited bounty upon her portfolio. She has access to budget overruns and budgeting indiscretion; there does not seem to be any budgetary discipline. Her portfolio seems to have ways of acquiring funds in addition to those which are appropriated or allocated to it, but she does not utilise the generosity of the Premier, the Treasurer and the government of which she is a part to do something decisive that is of value to all the people of Western Australia who need to benefit from the education portfolio, especially those for whom education is a fundamental building block for access to equity, fairness and opportunity that they so desperately need.

When I sit and talk with colleagues in the corridors of this place, we look at the areas of failure and we look around for the magic solution to the issues with which we are confronted. I am thinking of the increasingly problematic area of Indigenous communities of Western Australia, where failure has been heaped upon more failure. It is not because there is the opportunity for any magic wand. What is required in every area of government, including in the area of education, is for ministers to be decisive and to take decisions that are fundamental to advancing the educational interests of people who are most in need.

Mr Andrew Waddell; Dr Tony Buti; Mr John Kobelke; Mr Tom Stephens; Mr Albert Jacob; Acting Speaker; Mr Martin Whitely; Mr Chris Tallentire; Mrs Liza Harvey; Dr Mike Nahan; Mr John McGrath; Dr Graham Jacobs; Mr Ben Wyatt

On this issue of the entry of year 7 students to secondary schools, the minister has displayed that she is not capable of taking decisions on the big issues. She has also not been capable of taking decisions on the smaller issues. She has certainly not been capable of delivering benefit to those who need to benefit most from the educational portfolio.

Having been in the Parliament of Western Australia now for much longer than I ever dreamt possible, I have been able to watch people come and go. Specifically, I was able to watch the previous member for Armadale, and I recognise that it is rare indeed to have someone come into this place who is focused and determined and who uses their skills, intellect, effort and energy to make a decisive impact on the state of Western Australia, as the former member for Armadale did, particularly in the planning and infrastructure portfolio. How did she do that? She did that by applying all her skills, her compassion, her intellect and her energy to the portfolio that she was lucky enough to hold for eight years. By the standards I have available to me as a member of Parliament for nearly 30 years, she stands out for her singular skill and talent. Every now and again one hears the other side try to demolish her track record and her achievements.

I compare the former minister with the current minister. What will the current minister be able to identify as her achievements in the education portfolio? What will she have done? When she finishes as Minister for Education, what will she be able to say that she has done? She will be able to say that in the period in which she held the portfolio she prevaricated, she postponed, she considered, she thought about and imagined what might be possible, she pranced and she poned, but she did absolutely nothing to advantage the interests of the schoolchildren or the people of Western Australia.

This house should not even blink as it passes this motion condemning this minister. More importantly, the moment the motion is carried by the house, the government should remove her from the custodianship of this portfolio or any other because of her incompetence, her indecision, her arrogance, her failure to listen and her failure to bring compassion or intelligence to public administration. I have held my punches in this debate today, but there will come a time when the patience of this chamber will be completely tested, and this minister can expect delivery of the fatal blow that will remove her from the cabinet room—if not today, hopefully in the very near future.

MR A.P. JACOB (Ocean Reef) [5.16 pm]: In addressing this issue I will first of all address the question which the member for Pilbara posed at the end of his speech and which was also posed by the member for Forrestfield; that is, what has the minister done?

The ACTING SPEAKER (Ms L.L. Baker): I just remind the member that he has to speak to the motion and not so much to what other members have said.

Mr A.P. JACOB: Absolutely. The motion is that this house condemns the Minister for Education. Clearly, that is the main part to which both those members have been speaking, rather than the issue of year 7 students, although I will get to that. In condemning the Minister for Education, the question was asked: what has the minister done? I think it is a fantastic opportunity for me to correct the record on two very strong key points for the minister. The first point is that the minister has presided over what is probably the largest investment of capital infrastructure in our public education system, and she has presided over it extremely well. The member for Armadale gave the example of year 7s who wanted to study science. One of my primary schools has recently received funding and has put in a purpose-built science laboratory. That primary school is already running those year 7 students through a high school-type situation.

A member interjected.

Mr A.P. JACOB: The minister has run that program especially well as it has been rolled out in WA. A lot of that funding was federal funding, but the minister has presided over that very well and managed what is the biggest capital injection in the public education system that we are probably likely to see in our lifetime.

The second point is a program which is very close to my heart and for which I do not think the minister gets nearly enough credit—that is, the independent public school program. That program could not be more popular, although it is not about the popularity. That program is being eaten up by local public primary and secondary schools. As of this year, every single public school in my electorate wants to be an independent public school. The only frustration —

Dr A.D. Buti interjected.

Mr A.P. JACOB: That is the beauty of it, member for Armadale: they do not have to. To the credit of this minister, it is an opt-in program. She has not rushed headlong into it. She has taken the decision from the outset

Mr Andrew Waddell; Dr Tony Buti; Mr John Kobelke; Mr Tom Stephens; Mr Albert Jacob; Acting Speaker; Mr Martin Whitely; Mr Chris Tallentire; Mrs Liza Harvey; Dr Mike Nahan; Mr John McGrath; Dr Graham Jacobs; Mr Ben Wyatt

that we are going down this road, and I could not applaud her more for that. She has not rushed headlong down this road and made mistakes. It has been a gently, gently approach, and it has been rolled out exceptionally well.

One of the primary schools in my electorate, Beaumaris Primary School, was fortunate enough to be chosen in the first intake. It is a hub school. In the second intake, one of my high schools and, I think, two or three other primary schools were fortunate enough to be chosen, and in the third intake, every school has expressed interest, although I am not sure whether all of them managed to get their applications in on time.

Dr A.D. Buti: Member, the motion is about year 7s.

Mr A.P. JACOB: The motion is condemning the minister. What has been asked by —

Dr A.D. Buti interjected.

Mr A.P. JACOB: I will get to that, member. Most of the members opposite spent their time condemning the minister for inaction, and they asked, “What has she done?” I am just informing the house of what the minister has done.

Several members interjected.

Mr A.P. JACOB: I actually wrote down the comments of the member for Forrestfield, but I will keep going anyway.

The ACTING SPEAKER (Ms L.L. Baker): Members, can we please have just one speaker on their feet at a time, speaking.

Mr T.G. Stephens: To the motion.

The ACTING SPEAKER: Yes, to the motion.

Mr A.P. JACOB: Members opposite do not like hearing the good news about what this minister has done. This is clearly a fantastic success story for a very hard working minister, who has brought in an innovation that was sorely needed in this state.

Mr T.G. Stephens interjected.

Mr A.P. JACOB: The member for Pilbara has been talking about year 7s, and about how the minister’s delay in making this decision will bring the public education sector into disrepute, and how students will struggle in their performance. What is occurring is actually the opposite. Students are being given the flexibility to deal with these situations.

Dr A.D. Buti: Rubbish!

Mr A.P. JACOB: I just gave the member for Armadale an example. One of the independent public schools in my electorate has used its Building the Education Revolution funds to put in a new science laboratory. Clearly, the primary schools tend to want to keep the year 7s. This primary school has put in a new science laboratory. It is quite a large primary school. As an independent school, it has been given the flexibility to arrange its teacher rosters so that the students —

Dr A.D. Buti: What about the decision the minister has made that they have to go to high school?

Mr A.P. JACOB: This is a tricky area. I actually think that the member for Armadale made the best contribution to this debate, and I thank him for that.

Mr T.G. Stephens: If I start attacking you, you might say nice things about me too!

Mr A.P. JACOB: The member for Armadale addressed this issue quite well. This is a very, very tricky issue. This issue goes back to March, when the shadow minister raised it. I have yet to hear what the opposition’s position is on this issue.

Ms R. Saffioti: The issue is that you’re in government, and you have to make a decision!

Mr A.P. JACOB: I know, member, and that is why I am giving credit to the member for Forrestfield. I have yet to hear what the opposition’s position is on this issue. The member for Armadale made a fantastic speech on why this is such a complicated issue. The member for Forrestfield, to his credit, also put forward his position on how he thinks this issue will go. But I have not yet heard the opposition’s position. I think the opposition is trying to keep all bets open on this issue.

Mr T.G. Stephens: Our position is clear—you should do something, one way or the other!

Mr Andrew Waddell; Dr Tony Buti; Mr John Kobelke; Mr Tom Stephens; Mr Albert Jacob; Acting Speaker; Mr Martin Whitely; Mr Chris Tallentire; Mrs Liza Harvey; Dr Mike Nahan; Mr John McGrath; Dr Graham Jacobs; Mr Ben Wyatt

Mr A.P. JACOB: I am just asking what form the opposition thinks that something should take. I believe that I have come across this problem perhaps to a greater degree than many other members in this place. I have an electorate in which demographically it seems to be the norm that children will attend a government primary school and then go to a private high school. In my electorate of Ocean Reef, there are numerous public primary schools, but there is only one public high school; and that is soon to be two, with the redistribution. In recent years, some of the primary schools in my electorate have had as few as seven year 7 students. I am just saying that in my electorate we can see the issue coming through. The member for Armadale talked about that as well. It is a very complicated issue.

One of the other problems, on the flipside, is the situation in regional and remote areas. I was talking to somebody about that on a policy committee the other day.

Mr J.E. McGrath: That wasn't you in the corridor last night, I hope?

Mr A.P. JACOB: No!

Last year, I was at a school graduation for year 7s, and this brought it home for me. The point has been raised about year 6s not having a graduation, and year 7s going on to have a graduation. When I was going through school, the year 7 milestone was not really such a big milestone. It has become one in recent years.

Mr J.E. McGrath: Some of the schools in my electorate have a separate graduation for the ones who are going away.

Mr A.P. JACOB: That is a good outcome, and that has certainly come up at some of the P&C meetings that I have been to. One student at one of the graduation ceremonies that I went to last year said, quite poignantly—this brought it home for me—that her entire life's memories revolve around her time in that primary school. So I can see the attachment of those students to those places.

In my electorate, I also have one of the middle schools that the member for Balcatta talked about. I think the jury is still out on how well these middle schools are functioning. There is a range of challenges with those schools. The middle school in my electorate does not have an intake of year 7s; it has an intake of year 6s. The largest primary school in my electorate is Kinross Primary School. That school goes only to year 5. We then have Kinross Middle School, which goes from year 6 to year 10, and we then have Mindarie Senior College, which is years 11 and 12.

The member for Armadale made a comment about 11-year-olds going to high school. I have to say—I have to be very careful about saying this on *Hansard*—that at the Stepping Up Assembly, which is Kinross Primary School's equivalent of a graduation, and which is held for year 5s, the level of maturity and confidence that we see in those kids sets the benchmark for primary school graduations. These kids are 10-year-olds. But it does depend on the kid. For various reasons, my parents enrolled me in school a year ahead of time, in Wanneroo, so I went through year 7 when I was 11.

Several members interjected.

Mr A.P. JACOB: I did not find that that hindered me in any way academically. But it certainly did not help me very much on the sporting front. What we are proposing is that all age groups would go through school together.

I understand the point about the need to provide certainty, and I know the minister is going to do that. However, this is not a situation that we have created. Once a firm decision is made, it will be very hard to undo it. I therefore believe that in-depth consideration is more than warranted when tackling this issue. The education of children has continued. It is not as though the education of children has stopped and kids have not been going through school. It has been ongoing. We all want what is best for students in Western Australian schools. I do not think that is in doubt here. But I again put the challenge to the opposition that I have not yet heard what the opposition's position is on this issue. I commend the two members who have put their personal positions, while also acknowledging the challenges and the complications, and the fact that any decision that they might make might not be in accordance with their personal preferences.

In closing, I want to commend the Minister for Education for the fantastic job that she is doing. I certainly do not support this motion.

Mr T.G. Stephens: What drug are you taking?

Mr A.P. JACOB: The member for Pilbara wants me to say something nice about him! I seriously mean that. The nature of this place is that we always focus on the negatives. I am still new here, and I am learning that. On the independent public school program in particular—there are a lot of other programs that I could talk about,

Mr Andrew Waddell; Dr Tony Buti; Mr John Kobelke; Mr Tom Stephens; Mr Albert Jacob; Acting Speaker; Mr Martin Whitely; Mr Chris Tallentire; Mrs Liza Harvey; Dr Mike Nahan; Mr John McGrath; Dr Graham Jacobs; Mr Ben Wyatt

but I do not want to stray too far from what the Chair has asked me to do—the Minister for Education has been doing an excellent job. I genuinely mean that. The Minister for Education’s legacy will be extraordinarily well remembered in this state.

MR M.P. WHITELEY (Bassendean) [5.27 pm]: I want to make a brief contribution to this debate. I believe that, basically, there is only one decision that the minister can make. I think it is inevitable that year 7s will end up in high school. Although the minister has failed to recognise the forces that are pushing towards that decision—in other words, the fact that in the eastern states, most kids begin high school in year 7—the fact that the private schools are increasingly directing their intake to year 7s means that it is inevitable, regardless of what we might want, that our education system will come in line with that. I do not think it makes a lot of difference whether kids graduate from primary school in year 6 or year 7, or even in year 5. My children attended Roleystone District High School. They also attended Roleystone Primary School, at a time when kids went into the high school environment in year 6. That was a great model, and they did very well. I think the member for West Swan went to the same school. She is obviously a very high achieving graduate of Roleystone District High School. It does not matter what model we adopt. But we need to have consistency. The forces involved in this decision will lead to one inevitable conclusion. The failure to make a decision will just postpone the planning that needs to take place to make sure that this process is implemented properly. I have to say that I do like the Minister for Education. The minister is a person whom I have come to regard as —

Mr A. Krsticevic: A friend!

Mr M.P. WHITELEY: Yes, as a friend, and as someone with whom I have had a friendly relationship in our time in the Parliament. But I have to say that I am incredibly disappointed with the minister’s performance. The minister has failed to make the transition from being a critic. The minister has spent 17 years in the Parliament, and she has had the luxury of being able to sit back as a critic. The minister was obviously a fierce critic of the Gallop and Carpenter governments and I remember her being a critic at times of the Court government. It is easy to be a critic, especially for someone with the minister’s qualifications and background. Obviously my politics have always been Labor leaning, but from outside the Parliament before I was elected, I used to respect the now minister’s contribution as an Independent member, and I expected much more of her as a minister. The major criticism I have of her is not that she makes bad decisions, but that she does not make any decisions. When the minister has dealt with issues I have raised with her in my electorate, I have had to drag her kicking and screaming across the detail of every one, and I am disappointed by that, not because she makes bad decisions, but because she simply does not make decisions. That is an abrogation of responsibility. In my view the minister has one of two choices: she either accepts the responsibility that comes with her position or she relinquishes that position. Frankly, unless she lifts her game, the second of those options would be the responsible one to pursue.

I remember the member for Central Kimberley —

Mr T.G. Stephens: Pilbara these days.

Mr M.P. WHITELEY: Pilbara these days.

I remember that the member for Kimberley referred to our time on the Education and Health Standing Committee, and while on that committee, I got a taste of how she might behave as minister. The minister may remember that the committee conducted an inquiry into outcome-based education. It was quite a controversial inquiry because it was instigated by members of the committee, certainly not by higher levels of the administration at the time. In fact, the former member for Wanneroo, Di Guise, and I thought something was wrong with OBE and that the parliamentary inquiry was needed. We instigated and conducted that very thorough inquiry, which put a government program in the spotlight and had the potential to embarrass the government. When we got to the pointy end, the decision end of the inquiry, it might have been expected that, given that members of the Labor government who were critics of OBE had instigated the inquiry, the now minister would have been pleased about the resolution of those problems. Instead she had to play politics and was resentful of the resolution developed in our caucus that addressed many of the concerns that we had shared. I could see her white-hot anger on not getting to be the knight in shining armour coming in to save the day. I think that that is an indication of how comfortable the minister was in her former role as a critic, but how uncomfortable she now is with the decision-making process. Frankly, forces such as the changes to the educational system in the eastern states and the need to have national consistency, and more importantly, the private schools in Western Australia changing their high school intakes to year 7, have made the decision inevitable—I do not think that it is a discretionary decision. I speak personally; that is my own perspective. I think that the minister should make the decision, and if I am wrong, if the minister disagrees with me and thinks that high school should not start in year 7, she should make that decision and end the uncertainty. In any case, the minister should make a decision,

Mr Andrew Waddell; Dr Tony Buti; Mr John Kobelke; Mr Tom Stephens; Mr Albert Jacob; Acting Speaker; Mr Martin Whitely; Mr Chris Tallentire; Mrs Liza Harvey; Dr Mike Nahan; Mr John McGrath; Dr Graham Jacobs; Mr Ben Wyatt

because, as I said, the fundamental problem is not that the minister makes bad decisions, it is said that she simply does not make decisions. That is an abrogation of responsibility. She takes the salary; she should do the job.

MR C.J. TALLENTIRE (Gosnells) [5.33 pm]: I support this motion. The uncertainty currently surrounding primary education and the education of students in year 7 is terrible. It is causing us great cost. Primary schools in my electorate, and electorates across the state, are in a situation of great uncertainty. That is not fair, because those primary schools are those that I hear the most support for. Members of the public who send their children to our state government primary schools are thrilled with the quality of the education that goes on in them. To answer the question raised by the member for Ocean Reef, my personal preference would be for year 7 students to stay in primary school. However, I believe that the reality is that the forces that will push us to fit in with the rest of the nation, which I accept, will inevitably result in year 7 students going to high school. That is okay. Preferences aside, we need a decision and we are not getting one. We have this incredible uncertainty. That means that high schools are not able to plan for the influx of new students that would come with the arrival of year 7 students. It is a problem for those running primary schools who want to provide for the year 6 students who will not get the year 7 experience in primary school. Teachers in those schools want to work out how to give the year 6 students, in what would be their final year of primary school, an experience of leadership, which is a very rich part of being in primary school. We must ensure that primary school principals and their staff are informed about when the transition would occur, so that they can plan for students to have that opportunity. I hear arguments from the academic areas with pedagogical background that students are better off receiving the benefits of the more holistic approach of primary schools, in which there are often one or two teachers responsible for a child's education through the whole curriculum. In high schools there is a more specialist educational approach with teachers who are specialists in different areas working on different things. That is an interesting issue, and the evidence I have seen—most of it comes from South Australia—suggests that on those grounds alone it is better to leave year 7 students in primary school, because of the advantages of that pedagogical style of teaching.

Another thing I am concerned about is that this issue has in many ways been driven by decisions made by private schools. Private schools have a vested interest in high school starting in year 7, so that they can get students in earlier, because, as has been mentioned before, many students do their primary schooling in the government system and then switch to the private school system. The private schools quite cunningly saw this as an opportunity to get students in quicker and earlier, make more money out of it and build up the size of their schools. The private schools' marketing strategy needs to be recognised. I do not think that is a good basis upon which we should allow the structure of our education system in Western Australia to be changed.

When I consider the fantastic work that I see going on in primary schools in my electorate, I think that this situation is demoralising for primary school teachers. It is just so unfair that quality teaching staff should be faced with this uncertainty. The minister deserves to be condemned. It falls on her to clarify the situation, to become a decisive minister and to let us know when this transition will occur, if it does occur, and to ensure that everyone can start planning. This is necessary so that schools such as Thornlie Senior High School in my electorate, which is in urgent need of refurbishment, can start planning how it would accommodate students—what classroom space it has. At the moment that school is falling into a state of disrepair. It has \$1 million worth of outstanding maintenance that needs to be done urgently to make that school a happy and healthy environment. I conclude my remarks and implore the minister to show some decisiveness about this matter.

MRS L.M. HARVEY (Scarborough — Parliamentary Secretary) [5.39 pm]: I am very pleased to rise to speak against this motion. I have been very interested to hear other members' contributions to this debate. One interesting aspect of this debate is that a lot of time and effort has been spent on it by members of the opposition who seem to have got to the fourth word of the motion, "condemns", and have pretty much stayed stuck on that word. This debate is really about the entry of year 7 students into secondary schools. We have not had very much discourse on how we find ourselves in this bizarre system. This dual education system we have at present is a complex beast. It is actually a beast that is the product of haphazard decision making in the past. This issue was looked at by the previous government; a report was commissioned by the previous government and released in February 2007. I have the report here. It is titled, "The Future Placement of Year 7 Students in Western Australian Public Schools: A Study". Former Labor government ministers looked at the relocation of year 7 students and estimated it would cost \$835 million over the 2009–15 period. A former parliamentary secretary in the other place, Hon Ljiljana Ravlich, MLC, stated categorically that the whole idea of moving year 7s into secondary school was driven by economics. Clearly that \$835 million figure was one of the key reasons the previous government decided to baulk at and move away from the concept of moving year 7s into high school. We need to bear in mind that decision was made at a time when the government was boasting billion-dollar surpluses—lots of money, lots of budget surpluses, but apparently no money available to put towards

Mr Andrew Waddell; Dr Tony Buti; Mr John Kobelke; Mr Tom Stephens; Mr Albert Jacob; Acting Speaker; Mr Martin Whitely; Mr Chris Tallentire; Mrs Liza Harvey; Dr Mike Nahan; Mr John McGrath; Dr Graham Jacobs; Mr Ben Wyatt

transitioning year 7s into high school. It is very appropriate for this government to take some time to try to work out how we can unravel the mess we have been left to unpick. The dual system was created in December 2006 when the decision was made to allow the Catholic sector to move year 7 students into high school.

A range of members have widely discussed the fallout caused by that decision of the then minister. In my electorate of Scarborough, I have had numerous meetings with parents and citizens, and parents and friends associations from local primary schools. We have regular morning teas. I mix up the people I speak with from private and public schools. Most of the parents whose children are in the Catholic system, who have children in year 7 in high school, speak very highly of the process. They believe that the transition was handled very well. They believe it is appropriate for their children to be placed in high school at that age. I have attended a number of graduation ceremonies. Graduating year 7 students are now six months older than when I was a year 7 student. Some of these children tower over me. There are men who are six-foot tall with deep voices and who shave before they go to school. There are fully developed girls. These are young adults in a primary school setting, playing in playgrounds with children who are three and a half years old, surrounded by primary colours. We need to seriously look at how we address this problem that has been created through haphazard decision making in the past.

It is fair to say that some parents in the public system have expressed grave concerns about the prospect of year 7 students moving into high school. There has been a lot of public debate on this. It is an issue that people are starting to feel comfortable forming an opinion on. As the member for Ocean Reef mentioned, I have not actually heard much about what the opposition policy may be on this issue. The Labor Party has previously categorically and emphatically said that this will cost too much money, regardless of whether it might be in the best interests of students, whether it might be consistent with the way the national curriculum heads or whether it might be appropriate given what other states in this country are doing. It said that it would not do it because it would cost too much money at a time of record revenue and billion-dollar surpluses. That was a fine message to send to people at the time.

Mr M. McGowan: This is a really stupid speech. You obviously have not read the report that came out in early 2007.

Mrs L.M. HARVEY: I have read the —

Mr M. McGowan: Go and ask the head of the department, who is still there, whom I appointed, what the recommendations of that report were. Go and ask before you say dumb things!

Mrs L.M. HARVEY: I have the report's recommendations in front of me —

Mr M. McGowan: Go and ask what the recommendations were.

Mrs L.M. HARVEY: The member for Rockingham had his chance and I am not prepared —

Mr M. McGowan: Hold on!

Mrs L.M. HARVEY: I listened to what he had to say. I have read his report —

Mr M. McGowan: It was not my report; it was the department's report. You need to understand how it works!

Mrs L.M. HARVEY: In my view this departmental report was a report written about how to say no. When we look at the way schools structure themselves in other states —

Mr M. McGowan: So we follow New South Wales?

Mrs L.M. HARVEY: Let us look at what the member says in the report —

Mr M. McGowan: Read the report. If you are going to quote the report, read it!

Mrs L.M. HARVEY: You are saying my commentary is dumb.

Mr M. McGowan: It is dumb.

Mrs L.M. HARVEY: Yet you were minister, were you not, who made a decision to allow year 7s? Were you the minister?

Mr M. McGowan: I made a decision.

Mrs L.M. HARVEY: Were you the minister who made the decision to allow the Catholic sector to move their year 7 students into high school? Did you make that decision?

Mr M. McGowan: My recollection —

Mr Andrew Waddell; Dr Tony Buti; Mr John Kobelke; Mr Tom Stephens; Mr Albert Jacob; Acting Speaker; Mr Martin Whitely; Mr Chris Tallentire; Mrs Liza Harvey; Dr Mike Nahan; Mr John McGrath; Dr Graham Jacobs; Mr Ben Wyatt

Mrs L.M. HARVEY: Did you make that decision?

Mr M. McGowan: If you would let me answer.

Mrs L.M. HARVEY: No, you are —

Mr M. McGowan: Are you being rude?

Mrs L.M. HARVEY: No, I am not being rude. I am asking you.

Mr M. McGowan: Will you let me answer?

Mrs L.M. HARVEY: You interrupted —

Mr M. McGowan: You are asking me a question. Can I answer?

Mrs L.M. HARVEY: Member for Rockingham, I believe I have the call. You interjected on me and now I am returning the favour; I am asking you a question.

The ACTING SPEAKER (Ms L.L. Baker): Members, can I just point out that if someone is on their feet and accepts an interjection, they have to cop what comes from that, but this is still not a boxing match across the floor of this chamber. Member for Scarborough, if you want to accept an interjection, I remind you that you are more than at liberty to do that, but we need to control the debate and not have people yelling at one another.

Mrs L.M. HARVEY: Thank you, Madam Acting Speaker.

Mr M. McGowan: Do you want me to answer the question?

Mrs L.M. HARVEY: I would like the member to answer—did he make the decision?

Mr M. McGowan: What you need to understand is the Catholic —

Mrs L.M. HARVEY: No, no—yes or no?

Mr T.G. Stephens: Come on, don't be a bully!

Mrs L.M. HARVEY: I am not yelling!

Mr M. McGowan: The Catholic school system makes its own decision. It is an independent school system. It makes its own decision. I was the minister responsible for the public system. The Catholic Education Office makes its own decisions. I regard it as having a choice and it made its choice. Don't you support that?

Mrs L.M. HARVEY: I absolutely —

Ms R. Saffioti interjected.

Mrs L.M. HARVEY: I have sat in this chamber and listened to members on the other side of the house criticise and denigrate the fact that the private sector is apparently out there using an unfair marketing system by saying it has year 7s in high schools. The member for Rockingham pointed out to me there was a report by the department that had recommendations. That report was made in February 2007 —

Several members interjected.

Mrs L.M. HARVEY: I would like to place on the record my contribution to this debate. I point out how bizarre it is that the member for Rockingham said that he was in receipt of a report that recommended against allowing year 7s into high school. Despite the fact that the private sector education system is allowed to make its own decisions on curriculum and year 7s moving into high school, it sought approval from the minister at the time and that approval was given. That approval, given by the previous government, to allow the Catholic sector to move year 7s into high school is what started the dual system.

Ms R. Saffioti: So you're blaming the Catholics!

Mrs L.M. HARVEY: The member for West Swan is not listening terribly well. I have noticed she is not very good at that!

Ms R. Saffioti: Are you saying the reason the minister has not made a decision in two and a half years is the Catholic school system?

Mrs L.M. HARVEY: Let me speak really slowly so that the member for West Swan can understand me. I will slow it all down a bit. I am saying that her government was in possession of a report in February 2007 that said, "Don't do this." When the Catholic sector sought permission to do it, her government said, "Yes, go and do that." Then we ended up with a dual system and the fallout of the dual system that the member for West Swan's government permitted and started through haphazard decision making. No-one thought about the consequences

Mr Andrew Waddell; Dr Tony Buti; Mr John Kobelke; Mr Tom Stephens; Mr Albert Jacob; Acting Speaker; Mr Martin Whitely; Mr Chris Tallentire; Mrs Liza Harvey; Dr Mike Nahan; Mr John McGrath; Dr Graham Jacobs; Mr Ben Wyatt

for the public school system of the decision to allow the Catholic system to move year 7s into high school. The consequences for the public school system are now being felt by every single member in this house who attends year 7 graduations where class sizes have decreased from 30 to 17. In some of those schools, parents have made choices based on whatever the particular decision-making process might be. They agonise over their decisions about which high school they are going to send their children to. If they want their children to go to a Catholic high school or a high school in the independent sector, they have to remove them from primary school in year 6. When those year 6 students leave to go into the private sector, they do not take part in any graduation ceremony; they get no acknowledgement of their time spent in primary school or that they are moving on to a high school system. Year 7 is the graduation time. That is the year designated for children in primary school to move to high school. Now we have an awful system in which children, for reasons their parents believe are in their best interests, are removed from the public school system into a high school system. They leave some of their peers behind and get no formal recognition of their completion of primary school. Their parents have exercised choice and I am a great supporter of that.

We need to acknowledge that this dual system is far from ideal. The dual system came as a result of haphazard decision making by the previous government. In Queensland the government spent a long time agonising over this process. It spent well over two and a half years in discussion and debate. Queensland has the advantage over Western Australia because the Queensland minister did not make a decision to residualise the public school system by allowing the private sector to move away from a consistent system that was accepted for the public sector. In fact, having made a decision and been in discussion for more than two and a half years, Queensland had an easier decision to make because it had less of a mess to unravel.

I believe we need to have confidence in the minister. We on this side of the house have great confidence in the minister. I have heard some erroneous comments in this debate that I find quite appalling. The independent public school system has been warmly embraced by the public schools in my electorate. Both the parent community and teachers and principals in those school communities say that it is a revolutionary concept and is the best thing that has ever happened to the public school system in this state—for some of them—in their entire teaching careers. These are people who have been teaching in the public sector for more than 30 years. That is a very telling statement from people who, traditionally, do not necessarily side their views with conservative governments.

A revolutionary decision has also been made in the interests and the comfort of our students and our teachers by a firm commitment that a budget allocation would be made to allow air cooling to be installed in our schools. We live in a particularly hot and uncomfortable climate. I do not know about other members, but I remember in February and March sometimes fainting in hallways and recovering from heat stress. In future, our students will no longer have to put up with these trying conditions. Making that allocation involved a difficult decision and required a minister to go in and bat in a cabinet process to ensure our students had air cooling in their schools.

Several members interjected.

Mrs L.M. HARVEY: Members opposite want examples of decisions. They were in government for eight years and did not do any of that. What did they do in government?

Several members interjected.

Mrs L.M. HARVEY: They got a report that said do not do something and then did it for half the students and wrecked the system, so now we have to fix it. Members opposite need to give our minister the appropriate amount of time to unravel the mess they made. We on this side of the house make no apology for making a considered decision. We will not be going to the people of Western Australia saying that \$835 million is too much to spend so we will not do what is best for students. We will make an economic decision about children's education. Shame on members opposite. They caused the problem and we will fix it. I have full confidence in the minister's ability to fix it.

I will sit down now. I think I have said more than enough on this issue. I would like to say that the minister has my 100 per cent support because I know she will make the right decision.

DR M.D. NAHAN (Riverton) [5.55 pm]: I would like to speak against this motion and will give some examples in the electorate of Riverton to show why it is not so much vital to make an immediate decision but to make the right one and to prepare for it adequately. We have heard from some members opposite. Some made some pretty good contributions and some gave the usual rant as an excuse for debate. The member for Armadale clearly and comprehensively explored the complexities of this difficult decision. I am not an educator as he was until

Mr Andrew Waddell; Dr Tony Buti; Mr John Kobelke; Mr Tom Stephens; Mr Albert Jacob; Acting Speaker; Mr Martin Whitely; Mr Chris Tallentire; Mrs Liza Harvey; Dr Mike Nahan; Mr John McGrath; Dr Graham Jacobs; Mr Ben Wyatt

recently; I cannot judge adequately the pedagogical benefits of moving year 7 from primary to high school, but I am not convinced of its merits. It is a debate; it is a lineball from my assessment of it, but I might be wrong.

Using Riverton as an example, one of the major reasons for pushing for this is competition from the private schools; that is, students in the public sector are leaving early in year 6 to go to year 7 in a private high school. In the Riverton electorate, even though there are some very fine private schools nearby such as the Catholic schools of Corpus Christi, Aquinas and All Saints, 90 per cent of kids in local public primary schools go to the local high schools.

Dr A.D. Buti interjected.

Dr M.D. NAHAN: Yes, I know.

The flight in Riverton to private schools, outside the Catholic system, is almost nonexistent. That is because the two major public high schools are exceedingly popular and effective. They are, indeed, the jewels in the crown of the public education system—Rossmoyne and Willetton. As a sign of their success, they are also very large schools. The last I heard, Willetton had 1 850 kids, even with the half-cohort streaming through, and Rossmoyne has 750 kids, also with the half-cohort. We might say that that is very successful. It is. The benefits of both these schools are not just that they provide a very fine educational system for the people of Riverton; they also absorb in their gifted and talented program approximately 900 kids from around the metropolitan area—a good contribution.

One of the issues that has been alluded to here is that a very important goal of the public education system should be to improve its market share for the whole of our education system. As members opposite have said, we have a very fine dual system in Western Australia. I have no problem with that at all. The private system, particularly the Catholics and the independents, do a good job. But it is very important, as I think the member for Balcatta said, that public education, particularly for those people who do not have access because of money or otherwise to the private system, provides an essential system for those at the margins. As with most systems, when there are successful schools such as Willetton and Rossmoyne—there are others—we have to protect and use them as models for elsewhere.

I have met with the P&Cs of every primary school in my electorate and with all the high school councils. This is a legitimate issue. People want to know not so much what the decision will be and when it will be made and whether the right decision will be made, but rather whether adequate preparation will be done and whether the problems of schools in the electorate of Riverton will be taken into consideration. The fundamental issue is that we should not be in a big hurry. Around the state of Western Australia, we have invested billions of dollars into our primary schools through the Building the Education Revolution program. Every primary school, private and public, in my electorate has new buildings—primarily, science labs, among other things. We have significantly increased the facilities at primary schools. Why should we be in a big hurry to move year 7s out of those facilities and into high schools? Unfortunately, the BER program focused overwhelmingly on primary schools, not secondary schools. There was not too much choice at a state level in that regard. In my electorate, there is no pressure to go to the private system outside the Catholic schools, but the public schools are very large. If the full year 7 cohort from the public primary schools went to public high schools, 2 100 kids would be pushed into Rossmoyne and Willetton Senior High Schools. Both those schools have no spare capacity to absorb year 7. In fact, the biggest threat to the success of those schools is that if we made such a decision to include year 7 in high school and did not invest in additional capacity in those two schools, people would start fleeing those schools to the private system. That is what people tell me. They want to know when the change will happen, whether the government will put capital into the schools, and whether it will be done in a hurry. Their biggest concern is as follows. They moved into the area to get into the public school system, and they are worried that the public high schools, despite their rightly deserved reputation, will simply be too big to provide the educational excellence that they moved into the area for. This is a decision that we have to go at carefully. Certain public high schools in certain areas have plenty of spare capacity and there will be no problem moving year 7s to many such high schools. In fact, if year 7s were moved to some high schools, they would probably get more enrolments because fewer families would flee to the private system. However, that does not apply in Riverton. If Rossmoyne and Willetton were forced to take year 7s, it would probably be at the expense of the GATE program—that is, the gifted and talented education program—that takes kids from around the state.

Mr J.E. McGrath interjected.

Dr M.D. NAHAN: Yes; that is an option.

These are the complexities that we face. Firstly, we have a lot of spare capacity and have just invested in a lot of good facilities, although some are not yet complete, in our primary schools. Secondly, we have great diversity of

Mr Andrew Waddell; Dr Tony Buti; Mr John Kobelke; Mr Tom Stephens; Mr Albert Jacob; Acting Speaker; Mr Martin Whitely; Mr Chris Tallentire; Mrs Liza Harvey; Dr Mike Nahan; Mr John McGrath; Dr Graham Jacobs; Mr Ben Wyatt

capital needs across the various high schools; some will need a lot if they are to absorb the year 7s, and some need nothing. There is no competition from private schools in some electorates; in others, the competition is huge and profound. This is a complex decision. I think that the minister and the government have gone about it in a proper manner. They have not run away from the decision but are ensuring that the decision they make is right. More importantly, if they decide to move the year 7s to high school, they ensure that they have adequate funds to invest in the high schools that need investment, such as Willetton and Rossmoyne.

The essence of the opposition argument was, “Make a decision!” That is what we have done for certain capital works projects in the past, such as Fiona Stanley Hospital. We made a decision. It was a good decision to build that hospital. It followed from the Reid report. We rushed the decision and said that the hospital would cost \$450 million, and it is ending up costing in the vicinity of \$1.7 billion. Make a decision to send or to not send, yes, but then the government must find adequate funds to invest in schools that will, as a result of that decision, need additional investment. I refer to schools like Rossmoyne and Willetton. If not, the quality of our public education system will be undermined. Make the right decision, make it in a timely fashion, make sure it is followed with resources and ensure there is no huge rush.

MR J.E. McGRATH (South Perth) [6.04 pm]: The member for Riverton has inspired me to get up and say a few words in defence of the Minister for Education. We have all been in opposition. We know what it is like. I remember that when we sat on the other side of the chamber, we attacked ministers using the same terminology used today. However, the subject raised by the opposition today is, as members on this side have indicated, a very, very difficult proposition for the government and the cabinet to go through. The minister has said that the matter is at present before cabinet, which has to make a very big decision.

All members understand the complexities of the issue. Like the member for Riverton, I have always thought that young people should stay at primary school until year 7. However, I must admit that my view has been gradually changing. I think it has been changing because of what I have seen in the private education system with year 7s in high school and the impact that it has had on government schools, particularly on year 6 students who have been denied the opportunity of a graduation. The system has become very lopsided. I think we will have to go down the path to bring year 7s into high schools in unison with private schools.

As other members have said, a lot of preparation work is needed before we can go down this path. I want to mention one school in my electorate, Como Secondary College, which the Minister for Education has visited with me on not one but two occasions. The minister has genuinely shown an interest in supporting that school, which has been getting some quite outstanding results since it formed an alliance with Curtin University. It wants to set itself up as a school of excellence in maths and science, and I think that is already underway. There are plans for it to become a K–12 school, which the minister is supporting, and hopefully that will be budgeted for in the next budget. There is room for expansion. It is a school of about 800 —

Mr M.P. Whitely: Are they going to —

Mr J.E. McGRATH: The member is an old Como secondary —

Mr M.P. Whitely: Yes, I am, but are they going to move the Koonawarra school?

Mr J.E. McGRATH: The Koonawarra school, now Curtin Primary School, will move to Como secondary, which will become a K–12 school. Parents at Curtin Primary School want that change, and the Como Secondary College —

Mr M.P. Whitely: Are they going to actually physically move it?

Mr J.E. McGRATH: They will shut it down and move the students over. That is a \$45 million project. I think that will be a substantial investment in education in that region. We have already heard the member for Riverton say how fully packed his two high schools are; that is, Riverton and —

Dr M.D. Nahan: Rossmoyne.

Mr J.E. McGRATH: That is Rossmoyne and Willetton. Therefore, somewhere else is needed for the kids in the southern region to go. I know that Como Secondary College would like to become a gifted and talented program school, and when we look at the member for —

Mr P. Papalia: It’s only up from there!

Mr J.E. McGRATH: Does the member think the member for Bassendean has improved since he left the school?

Mr M.P. Whitely interjected.

Mr Andrew Waddell; Dr Tony Buti; Mr John Kobelke; Mr Tom Stephens; Mr Albert Jacob; Acting Speaker; Mr Martin Whitely; Mr Chris Tallentire; Mrs Liza Harvey; Dr Mike Nahan; Mr John McGrath; Dr Graham Jacobs; Mr Ben Wyatt

Mr J.E. McGRATH: I put it on the record that the member for Bassendean is a former student of Como Secondary College, along with many other eminent Western Australians, who have gone on to —

Mr M.P. Whitely: There is Bradley John Murdoch, the Falconio murderer—yep!

Mr J.E. McGRATH: We are not mentioning him.

Mr M.P. Whitely: He was in the year above me at Como, and at Manning Primary School; my alma mater!

Mr J.E. McGRATH: There is a bit of frivolity on the other side, but this is a serious matter. I am sure that cabinet will take its time to ensure that it comes up with a considered —

Mr M. McGowan interjected.

Mr J.E. McGRATH: Could I please get some protection from the member for Rockingham? Since the member for Rockingham regaled us yesterday with his jokes about the member for Mount Lawley's cashmere coat —

Mr M. McGowan: The camelhair coat affair!

Mr J.E. McGRATH: He has now become the —

Mr M. McGowan: Fashion guru.

Mr J.E. McGRATH: No, the comedian of the Legislative Assembly.

Mr M. McGowan: I want to see that coat come back!

Mr J.E. McGRATH: It has been consigned to places where it will never be seen again —

Mr M. McGowan: I want to see him wear it when he meets the Queen.

Mr J.E. McGRATH: I will not speak for much longer. This is a big issue and we all understand that it is a big issue. The minister is well aware of the issue, but it must be a decision for the full cabinet. It will be a major change for the public education system in Western Australia. The system is suffering. I see a lot of cases of primary school students in my electorate going on to the colleges. There are some good colleges in my electorate—Wesley College, Penrhos College and Aquinas College. There are three very, very good private colleges and only one government high school. A lot of those kids who go to some very good government primary schools in my electorate all move away to the private education system. The risk is that if we do not intervene and focus very strongly on our public education system, the divide will become greater.

I am someone who went to a public school; I went to John Curtin Senior High School, which was a great school. When I went to John Curtin, it was a school of hard knocks. Now it is an art school, so it has changed a bit since those days. It was a very, very good school. We must be very careful not to allow this trend towards private schools to erode the confidence of the parents of Western Australia in our public schools system. We must be very careful about that. If we go down the path of having year 6 students go into high school, it could be part of a huge evolutionary change in our public education system. I support the minister. The minister is well aware of the needs in this regard. I think that cabinet is well aware. A significant financial contribution from the government will be required before this change happens, but if and when it does—I think it probably will; it is more likely than not—it must be rolled out in the right way.

DR G.G. JACOBS (Eyre) [6.12 pm]: I would like to make a couple of comments, particularly from a regional perspective. I empathise with the minister. It is a very difficult issue and a difficult decision. Indeed, the minister has been with me on various trips to various small schools in the region. There is a legion of small schools in the region, such as Salmon Gums Primary School, Cascade Primary School, Grass Patch Primary School, Munglinup Primary School and Moorine Rock Primary School. There is an enormous number of primary schools in my region and I try to attend the final year presentations, but I do not get to all of them because there are about 30 of them. I tend to cover them all with the help of staff and friends. For those schools in the regions whose final year presentations that I go to, there may be a critical mass of students—in the vicinity of 25 to 30. The future and viability of those schools is an issue. The year 7 cohort might contribute half a dozen students; it might contribute 10. I have a number of letters—unfortunately, I do not have all of them today—from school councils and parents and citizens associations imploring me to put the case that if we take year 7s out of those schools, the schools will not be viable; they will collapse. These letters ask me to paint the picture that this is not all that easy and that if there is a solution, there has to be a different solution for the regions. As I have said, those legions of schools will fall below the critical mass and will not be viable.

The other issue that parents of those students put to me is that in many areas over the past few years there have been significant pressures, including financial pressures and the need to keep a child in a nurturing family environment before they are sent away to, for instance, the residential college at Esperance or Perth to board at

Mr Andrew Waddell; Dr Tony Buti; Mr John Kobelke; Mr Tom Stephens; Mr Albert Jacob; Acting Speaker; Mr Martin Whitely; Mr Chris Tallentire; Mrs Liza Harvey; Dr Mike Nahan; Mr John McGrath; Dr Graham Jacobs;
Mr Ben Wyatt

one of the private schools. That will happen a year earlier. As a parent I understand, and parents in this room would understand, that children often grow up very quickly and move on. For the time that we have with children, those years in primary school are very valuable.

Mr J.E. McGrath: Does the member want a city system and a country system?

Dr G.G. JACOBS: This is the issue that I put, member for South Perth. This is not a one-size-fits-all solution. It is not an easy solution; it is a difficult problem. As I said, I understand that the minister must go through all these considerations. There may be pressure within the metropolitan area, for instance, to do this, but if members go out into the bush to some of the places that I go to, they will see that there is definitely the counterargument.

The other thing is the increased financial impost on those families to send their children away a year earlier. Members might say, "It is only a year," but there are significant imposts in sending a child away to either a residential college or a boarding school. For a boarding school such as, for instance, Wesley College, there is not much change in a year from \$40 000. I know that because I sent a couple of my boys to Wesley College. Today there is not much change from \$40 000 by the time tuition and boarding fees are included. It is another impost, if members like, on families in rural communities that are already feeling cost pressures. Members might say that, well, these are not major considerations, but it is a major concern where I come from and for the people I represent. I did not come prepared with all the letters that I have received from school councils and P&Cs, but those organisations want me to put that case today about year 7s going into high school. There may be some obvious educational advantages, such as those we have heard today. For instance, children grow up and become adults quicker and they want stimulus and education in high school. I must also consider these considerations today from the regional perspective. This is not an easy fix. I understand what the minister is going through with this. We must get this right. There indeed may also be a regional solution for this. I do not support condemning the minister for this issue, because it is most important that we get this decision right. When the minister is ready with that decision, I am sure it will be a well-considered one.

MR B.S. WYATT (Victoria Park) [6.20 pm] — in reply: I thank all members who have spoken on this motion today condemning the Minister for Education and asking the minister to announce her decision on year 7s entering high school. It is clear that the minister has made the decision; the issue is getting her to announce the decision. The contribution of the member for Eyre in particular is worthy of some comment. This issue was last debated in March, and in that motion I raised the concerns of schools, students and families with some strength. The member for Eyre will be pleased to know that back in March I raised similar concerns about the impact on regional families to those which he raised tonight. The member for Eyre needs to speak to the Minister for Education. I will read from *Hansard* the minister's response to what I said in that debate. The minister stated —

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.

That is the issue that was raised by the member for Eyre. The minister continues —

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.

Clearly, the member for Eyre disagrees with the minister, as I do. As a regional member of Parliament, the member for Eyre knows there is not only a huge cost burden to send a student away for another year, whether it is to the city, Esperance or wherever those students are being sent, but also an impact on the family unit. I support wholeheartedly the member for Eyre's comments on those issues.

The member for South Perth and the member for Riverton raised legitimate issues, which were also raised on this side of the house. The member for Ocean Reef and the member for Scarborough gave a good example of why we should not believe everything that we receive from the Minister for Education's office. I appreciate the contributions to this debate from all members this evening.

Ultimately, the key issue, as the member for South Perth said, is that the cabinet will not be rushed. The cabinet certainly will not be rushed! This issue has been in the cabinet process, as stated by the minister, for at least three months. We debated this issue in March when the Minister for Education told this house that it was in the cabinet process. I have questioned the minister twice since then, and it was still in the cabinet process. This is without question the longest cabinet process that a government has ever had. So far, it has been in the cabinet process for three months and we are still waiting for a decision to be made.

Extract from Hansard

[ASSEMBLY — Wednesday, 15 June 2011]

p4295a-4317a

Mr Andrew Waddell; Dr Tony Buti; Mr John Kobelke; Mr Tom Stephens; Mr Albert Jacob; Acting Speaker; Mr Martin Whitely; Mr Chris Tallentire; Mrs Liza Harvey; Dr Mike Nahan; Mr John McGrath; Dr Graham Jacobs; Mr Ben Wyatt

Back in March I made a point on a personal level. Like the member for Armadale, I would prefer my two girls to do year 7 in primary school, but the right policy decision is a decision that the minister wants to make—it is the decision that the minister will inevitably make—which is to have year 7s in high schools. There will be some tinkering with that to accommodate the regional concerns that the member for Eyre has raised, which will be necessary in a state like Western Australia. There will have to be some tinkering as it will not be a one-size-fits-all solution. However, the minister needs to make the decision.

As I said last night, the minister is no longer a political commentator. As a member of the executive government, the minister needs to make a decision. In October last year the minister said that the decision was two to three months away. Here we are in June and another budget has come through with no money allocations for the obvious cost implications for either making a decision or not making a decision. As the Minister for Water knows, there is a cost implication in making either of those choices. The opposition's questioning in estimates hearings highlighted that new high schools to be constructed do not accommodate year 7s. The government continues to move slowly, whilst we wait. We have been waiting two years. The minister raised this issue on 27 May 2009. It is not unreasonable to expect that after two years a decision is made.

I note the announcement by the Queensland Premier, Anna Bligh, on 9 June this year. After a similar time period the Queensland Premier made her decision. I will quote from a transcript of her press conference —

From 2015 Queensland high schools will welcome year 7 students for the first time. This reform bills on the introduction of prep and the change to the entry age of schooling. By 2015 our year 7's will be turning 13 and they will be in their eighth year of schooling.

The Premier of Queensland then sets out the two main reasons for this, which are the same reasons that our Minister for Education raised back in March—the age of the students and the impact of the national curriculum.

As I said before, personally I would like my two girls to stay in primary school for as long as they can, but the right policy decision, ultimately, which has been accepted by most members, is to move year 7s into high school. The national curriculum now makes that inevitable. We all know that. The Minister for Education knows that. We know that the minister received a report on the national curriculum in December. The minister just needs to make the decision.

What was impressive about Premier Bligh was that she had a plan, and she went on to set out how it was going to happen. I will quote Premier Bligh again. She stated —

We estimate that this will require an extra 1300 high school teachers. We will give our primary school teachers on a voluntary basis who want to make the move into high school teaching the chance to do so with 500 scholarships that will underpin their ability to get the qualifications necessary between now and 2015 if they want to be part of that change. This is an exciting moment for education in Queensland.

Later in that press conference, Premier Bligh stated —

It will be a program that will require \$328 million of new capital in state schools. That is new buildings to accommodate these students over the next four years. In addition to the buildings that will be required in state schools there will be an additional funds of around \$300 million;

The report prepared by the Department of Education in 2007 made a finding that the cost to do this in Western Australia would be \$835 million. The minister has said that it is nowhere near that cost. I suspect it is probably not. I daresay that the department applied a methodology that saw it happen in all schools. I do not think that the government is going to go down that path and not every single high school will require huge capital works to accommodate year 7 students. However, there will be a capital cost and a cost in retraining teachers to become specialist teachers in various areas. We know that. Everybody in this place knows the complexity of the issue and the concerns that the minister must consider. The minister has been considering those issues for two long years. The minister raised the issue and put it back on the agenda in October last year when she said she was two to three months away from making a decision. The key for the minister is to make the decision. That is the point being argued by the opposition.

I suggest to the member for Eyre that with rural and remote schools we have a construct that can be rectified in respect of the impact this will have on resource allocations to small schools in regional areas. That is something we can fix and that the minister can guarantee to factor into the costings. What the minister cannot do at this point is provide the Parliament, teachers, students and families with a timetable and a process that she should have undergone throughout this whole ordeal.

Extract from Hansard

[ASSEMBLY — Wednesday, 15 June 2011]

p4295a-4317a

Mr Andrew Waddell; Dr Tony Buti; Mr John Kobelke; Mr Tom Stephens; Mr Albert Jacob; Acting Speaker; Mr Martin Whitely; Mr Chris Tallentire; Mrs Liza Harvey; Dr Mike Nahan; Mr John McGrath; Dr Graham Jacobs; Mr Ben Wyatt

I want to highlight a number of points tonight, because most members were not here for the initial debate back in March. I put a number of questions to the minister. Firstly, I asked the minister about the timetable. The Premier of Queensland has provided a timetable. Will our Minister for Education give us a timetable? We know that this will be rolled out over a period of time. The minister has had two years to decide, so surely she must know what that timetable is. Secondly, will the minister's decision apply to all schools? The member for Eyre raised that issue. It probably will not, but that is up to the minister. Will the Minister for Education answer that question? What is the cost of making the decision to put year 7s in high schools under the National Curriculum, what is the cost of keeping year 7s in primary schools, and what is the impact that will have on education? Fourthly, has the minister considered training primary teachers to provide specialist education in primary schools? That flows on from the issue of cost. Fifthly, why has the minister not issued a discussion paper? Why has there been no government-initiated public debate on the issue? There has not been one media release or one public document! At the very least, Queensland had a discussion paper that raised the problems and issues to allow school communities to have input in a meaningful and constructive way. Not one media release has gone out on what may be the key decision the minister will hopefully make in this term of government. The member for South Perth highlights the fact that it is a hard decision over which cabinet has agonised for months, but there has not been one media statement on the issue. No wonder people are not beating down the member for Scarborough's door. People do not know the context in which this debate is taking place. It has to be more than simply the minister wandering around on a Cook's Tour of various schools and asking, "What do you think about this?" It has to be more than that. This is a significant policy decision that will have significant cost and educational implications. It is not too much to ask for the minister, at the very least, to perhaps mention in a media statement that she is considering this issue.

The member for Scarborough spent some time talking about a report by the Department of Education, titled "The Future Placement of Year 7 Students in Western Australian Public Schools: A Study", dated February 2007, that made a number of recommendations. Ultimately one of the key recommendations was that there is no evidence at either the state or the national level that outcomes improve when year 7 students are in secondary settings. If the minister will make this decision, which I think she will, she needs to make the case in here and out in the community. Why is she putting the member for Eyre's constituents through extra costs? Regardless of the fact that the cost findings were probably lower than those the report found, a right decision ultimately has to be made in respect of education.

The member for Armadale raised concerns regarding bullying, which was the subject of a report prepared by Julian Dooley from Edith Cowan University. That report highlighted bullying implications for 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. All these issues need to be considered. We know it is complicated. The minister's response was that she could not answer all the member for Victoria Park's specific questions, because it is in the cabinet process and therefore she could talk about it. She then presented the reasons why year 7s should ultimately be in high school. As was highlighted by Premier Bligh, it came down to the age and the impact of the national curriculum. Ultimately, I think the right policy decision is to go down that path, despite the fact that, as I have said many times, I would prefer my two girls to spend a lot more time in primary school than high school. However, I understand the reality of modern education. Having year 7 in secondary school is the right decision, and it is a good time for the government—it has had two years—to get on and make it.

As the member for Armadale has said, "Dump, delay, delegate, do." I have seen a lot of dumping, delaying and delegating, but I have not seen much doing by this minister, and, indeed, by this government. This is the perpetual frustration. I have not been in the job that long, but my perpetual frustration and that across education stakeholders is that the minister simply will not make a decision. We all know that that is the case. I know that backbenchers opposite know that that is the case. It is not that hard to make a decision. We know the issues. We in opposition know the issues. The minister needs to get on and make that decision.

The member for Scarborough and the Minister for Education referred to some comments made by Hon Ljiljana Ravlich about making economic decisions in respect of our kids' education. They looked down their noses at those comments. I do not think the member for Scarborough and the Minister for Education were listening to my question on conductive education during question time today. The minister said —

... there is no evidence to suggest that this is a program worthy of our continued financial support.

The minister makes these decisions, member for Scarborough, on perhaps some of our most vulnerable students on the basis of a financial consideration. The member cannot sit there now and look down her nose. Ultimately, it was an insipid effort in defending the minister, whose performance I think she knows has not been up to par. We all know that; I think members opposite all know that.

Mr Andrew Waddell; Dr Tony Buti; Mr John Kobelke; Mr Tom Stephens; Mr Albert Jacob; Acting Speaker; Mr Martin Whitely; Mr Chris Tallentire; Mrs Liza Harvey; Dr Mike Nahan; Mr John McGrath; Dr Graham Jacobs; Mr Ben Wyatt

I again make the point that the minister should make a case and make a decision. There has been no public commentary and no discussion paper. There has not even been a media release. Media releases from government are ways of making announcements and informing the public. That is a big part of what ministerial communication with the public is about. It is about getting things in the media so that members of the public are aware. For heaven's sake—the minister has put out media releases on trivial issues, but she will not mention what will be the most significant decision she will hopefully make before she retires at the end of this term of government.

The opposition has made its case. The minister should be condemned.

Mr J.E. McGrath: I thought you were in the courtroom when you said you had made your case.

Mr B.S. WYATT: We have made our case. I think the minister deserves to be condemned, because there has been two years of dithering over what will be the most significant decision she hopefully makes while she is Minister for Education. As I said, the minister has made the decision; she just needs to announce it.

Dr A.D. BUTI: She needs to prosecute the decision.

Mr B.S. WYATT: Correct; and she needs to convince us why it is the right decision.

I do not think the member for Ocean Reef was in the chamber when I mentioned his comments before. I know the member for Scarborough was here. Members should not believe everything that the minister's office gives them when they have to get up, against their own better judgement, and defend the minister. They should not believe everything the minister says. I think the member's comment was, "Never before in my life has there been such capital investment in education", or outrageous words such as those. No doubt those members were taken in by the minister's media release on budget day about the \$660 million that was being heavily invested in education capital works. Imagine my surprise when I found that, of that \$660 million, \$404 million is unspent money from the current financial year. The real money is \$250 million. The member for Ocean Reef should think about those things before he makes those sorts of statements. He should not believe everything the minister waves under his nose for him to read out. He will just get himself in trouble, as the member for Scarborough did—umming and ahing her way through all sorts of funny little things she was saying about the history of this matter. I know the member for Scarborough can do better than that. She should not believe everything the minister tells her.

I want to conclude by highlighting the comments of the member for Eyre. The minister does not get regional issues. Her response, which I read to the member, highlights the fact that she does not understand the impact that this will have on the member for Eyre's constituents. I refer to the issues that the member for Eyre raised 20 minutes ago in his contribution. I daresay the member needs to have an urgent meeting with the minister.

The minister spent 17 years sitting in the house as a political commentator. She has not made the transition to a member of the executive government. Reams and reams of different and important issues in education remain outstanding upon which a decision must be made. This is probably the most wide-reaching one. Members opposite should get onto the minister. They are the people who have influence over her. Get the minister to make some decisions and start pushing these issues through the cabinet. This issue has been in the cabinet process for three months. The members for Ocean Reef, Scarborough, Eyre and Riverton should start getting these things pushed through. Members opposite talked about their wonderful schools. Ask those schools whether they would like a decision made and whether they would like a timetable. I can guarantee that they will say yes. The schools may disagree on what the decision should be, depending on whether they are a primary or a secondary school, but it has been two years. They want a decision so that they can plan.

Follow what Premier Bligh did. She has a plan for 2015; she has a plan to get it there; she has a plan to get the teachers there; she has a plan to train the teachers; and she has funded the plan. That is what the government needs to do, and that is what the government needs to announce. It needs to get out there and make the case so that everybody involved in education, whether it is us in here or whether it is parents, teachers or grandparents, can at least have some vague understanding that there is a minister who seems to be in control and seems to want to make decisions but seems completely and utterly incapable of doing so.

Question put and a division taken with the following result —

Extract from *Hansard*
[ASSEMBLY — Wednesday, 15 June 2011]
p4295a-4317a

Mr Andrew Waddell; Dr Tony Buti; Mr John Kobelke; Mr Tom Stephens; Mr Albert Jacob; Acting Speaker; Mr Martin Whitely; Mr Chris Tallentire; Mrs Liza Harvey; Dr Mike Nahan; Mr John McGrath; Dr Graham Jacobs;
Mr Ben Wyatt

Ayes (23)

Ms L.L. Baker
Dr A.D. Buti
Ms A.S. Carles
Mr R.H. Cook
Ms J.M. Freeman
Mr J.C. Kobelke

Mr F.M. Logan
Mr M. McGowan
Mr M.P. Murray
Mr A.P. O’Gorman
Mr P. Papalia
Mr J.R. Quigley

Ms M.M. Quirk
Mr E.S. Ripper
Mrs M.H. Roberts
Mr T.G. Stephens
Mr C.J. Tallentire
Mr P.C. Tinley

Mr A.J. Waddell
Mr P.B. Watson
Mr M.P. Whitely
Mr B.S. Wyatt
Ms R. Saffioti (*Teller*)

Noes (26)

Mr P. Abetz
Mr F.A. Alban
Mr C.J. Barnett
Mr I.C. Blayney
Mr I.M. Britza
Mr T.R. Buswell
Mr G.M. Castrilli

Mr V.A. Catania
Dr E. Constable
Mr M.J. Cowper
Mr J.H.D. Day
Mr B.J. Grylls
Dr K.D. Hames
Mrs L.M. Harvey

Mr A.P. Jacob
Dr G.G. Jacobs
Mr R.F. Johnson
Mr A. Krsticevic
Mr W.R. Marmion
Mr P.T. Miles
Dr M.D. Nahan

Mr C.C. Porter
Mr D.T. Redman
Mr M.W. Sutherland
Mr T.K. Waldron
Mr J.E. McGrath (*Teller*)

Pairs

Mr D.A. Templeman
Mrs C.A. Martin
Mr W.J. Johnston

Mr J.M. Francis
Mr A.J. Simpson
Ms A.R. Mitchell

Question thus negatived.