

SCHOOLS — ARMADALE AND FREMANTLE — AMALGAMATION

Grievance

MS S.F. McGURK (Fremantle) [9.36 am]: My grievance today is to the Minister for Planning, Hon John Day, representing the Minister for Education, and it is about the announcement last August by the Premier that this government intends to “amalgamate schools in the Armadale and Fremantle area”. My grievance this morning relates specifically to how this announcement affects Fremantle schools. At the time, this seemingly off-the-cuff comment by the Premier was later confirmed a number of times by the Premier and by the minister, including this week in Parliament. It has become clear from various comments by the minister that we are specifically talking about high schools in the Fremantle area.

The minister would be aware that there are two state high schools in the electorate of Fremantle—John Curtin College of the Arts and South Fremantle Senior High School. John Curtin is Western Australia’s only selective art school, with particular emphasis on performing arts. There is also a soccer sports program, and I understand that as much as 95 per cent of John Curtin’s student intake is in its specialist programs. Local intake is limited to families living in the catchments of East Fremantle, Richmond and North Fremantle Primary Schools. The high incidence of intake into the specialist programs of arts and soccer for the currently 1 100-student school has been at the expense of wider local intake, to the frustration of many local parents.

South Fremantle Senior High School in Beaconsfield, the other state high school in my electorate, has a very good reputation in the vocational training field as well as for its environmental credentials. It was the first carbon-neutral school in Australia, and has a very active school community that manifests in the weekly growers green farmers’ market. It has excellent facilities including a music centre, a swimming pool and a brand-new trade training centre. I have heard only good things from the parents of students who go to South Fremantle; however, because overall student numbers are low—currently about 300—it is limited in the number of Australian tertiary admission rank subjects it can offer on site. To address this issue, South Fremantle is working in partnership with other schools in the area to ensure that subject selection is widened through the Fremantle Public Schools Partnership.

We know from everything that the Premier and the minister have said that this government intends to close a school in the Fremantle area. Recently, responses to questions on notice asked by the member for Willagee have confirmed the local community’s suspicions that the government intends to close either Hamilton Senior High School or South Fremantle Senior High School. Minister, my grievance is centred on two issues. Firstly, once it has made the announcement about closing a high school in the Fremantle area, how long will it take this government to come up with a number of options and begin the process and consultation with the local community? Secondly, will this government guarantee that the outcome from this process will involve all families in the Fremantle area so they are given a full range of ATAR subjects at their local high school? To me, this is a central issue and one which most concerns the parents that I speak to in my electorate.

In some ways this announcement was not a complete surprise to the Fremantle community. The High School Options for Fremantle lobby group has been agitating on this issue for some time. John Curtin College of the Arts is a successful school and one sought after by many parents for their children, but because it has such a high intake into its specialist programs, access to the school is essentially cut off for the vast majority of Fremantle families.

South Fremantle Senior High School is also successful, but it is mostly in the vocational trade area. Without wanting to detract from that school, because of its student population it is struggling to offer a decent range of ATAR subjects. The High School Options for Fremantle group is saying that there are no decent alternatives for our Fremantle kids. Fremantle residents have a right to have good-quality state schools, and under the current configuration they do not feel that this is available to them.

The distortion of John Curtin College of the Arts by the 95 per cent intake into its specialist programs means that many students are deciding at a very early age—say, 13 years—that they might be interested in the school’s arts program. But at the age of 15 or 16 years, some students are no longer interested in things they were interested in when they were 12 or 13 years old and they find themselves stuck in the program at John Curtin because they committed to the program so early on. The high specialist program intake at John Curtin has meant that parents have pushed their children into specialist programs that perhaps might not have been their first choice. They push their children into those specialist programs, and this has caused the distortion.

The High School Options for Fremantle group has done a lot of work and research to forward its case. It has put together some figures on the cost per student to schools. Although I cannot confirm the group’s figures, the comparisons I have been given highlight the inefficiencies of low enrolment numbers. For example, based on, I think, 2013 enrolments, the group’s analysis shows that South Fremantle Senior High School has a cost per

student of \$25 734, and Hamilton Senior High School has a cost per student of about \$17 404. In comparison, John Curtin College of the Arts has a cost per student of just under \$15 000. Clearly, having schools with low enrolment numbers is an inefficient way of spending our education dollars. Members needed only to look at the thousands of parents who marched on Parliament this week about education cuts to see how this sort of distortion cannot be justified. I call on the government to make decisions for good-quality outcomes for students in the Fremantle area, one of which involves the provision of a good selection of ATAR subjects.

MR J.H.D. DAY (Kalamunda — Minister for Planning) [9.43 am]: I acknowledge the member for Fremantle's interest in this issue, and thank her for her comments. My interpretation of the member's grievance is that she supports changes to the provision of secondary education in the Fremantle area. That is good to hear because it is realistic in terms of what is necessary to improve the provision of secondary school education for students at, in particular, Hamilton and South Fremantle Senior High Schools, which, as the member said, have quite low enrolment numbers. Currently, Hamilton Senior High School has 452 students and South Fremantle Senior High School has 320 students. It is widely recognised that those numbers are well below the ideal enrolment numbers required to provide the best possible range of subject options and other experiences for children in their secondary school education. Reforming secondary school education in the Fremantle area is, therefore, desirable. From the comments that the member made, which I welcome, I think that is agreed.

There is a number of characteristics of a good secondary school, of course, including the school's capacity to offer a breadth of curriculum choices that parents expect for their children, more courses and opportunities in vocational education, and the capacity to offer a wider range of Western Australian Certificate of Education courses. A secondary school should also be welcoming and nurturing, and a place where there is the opportunity for friendships to be made and where a range of positive role models are provided for students. It is important that students are provided with the opportunity to interact and engage with their peers and that there are resources and support programs specifically designed to support the students, including pastoral care. As the member for Fremantle would be aware, the Premier and the Minister for Education visited the secondary schools in Fremantle late last year and met with the principals and school leadership teams to gain a better understanding of their views and the context of the situation in which their schools operate. I have been advised that the Minister for Education has indicated that he will consult further with the community to inform decisions about the revitalisation of secondary education in the Fremantle area. There will be a period of consultation, with all the stakeholders invited to take part in these discussions. This will ensure that the views and the opinions of the local community are heard before any final decisions are made about the reform of secondary education in the Fremantle area. The consultation will involve local members of Parliament, which will obviously include the member for Fremantle in particular. I understand that this issue is very much on the mind the Minister for Education at the moment, and there will be further interaction with the Fremantle community.

In the 1990s when the Premier was the Minister for Education, I recall that significant changes were made to the provision of secondary education in Maddington and Cannington that produced a much better outcome for students. The former Maddington Senior High School had low enrolment numbers, as did, I understand, the former Cannington Senior High School. Under the reform, education for years 8 to 10 was offered at Yule Brook College, as it now is—formerly Maddington Senior High School, which, coincidentally, is now in my electorate of Kalamunda. The education and the services provided to students at Yule Brook College are outstanding, and the college has some outstanding results in quite difficult circumstances. The college has some students from quite difficult backgrounds, and there is quite a substantial Aboriginal student community. The college provides courses that are appropriate. I cannot quite remember the term the college uses, but I think it is “one student at a time”, and certainly, as I perceive the situation, the outcomes are much better. Although I did not know about Maddington Senior High School previously, I am sure that what the college is able to offer now is much better. The former Cannington Senior High School is now Sevenoaks Senior College. It is a senior campus for students in years 11 and 12. I have not visited the school for some years, but certainly when I did, I think, when I was the shadow Minister for Education, I was impressed with the range of courses and the facilities provided there. I think I am correct in saying that there was a whole rebuilding program—I see the member for Cannington confirming that. The outcome for students in that area has been much better, and I am sure the same improvements can be made for secondary school students in the Fremantle area.

The member for Forrestfield just observed that the same change needs to be made at Cecil Andrews Senior High School in Armadale.

Mr N.W. Morton: Cecil Andrews and Armadale Senior High Schools, and with Byford coming online as well, it is just the economies of scale.

Mr W.J. Johnston: Can I just make a comment about Sevenoaks—I know the minister has only a couple of seconds left. Sevenoaks is close to a train station and about a third of the students go to school on the train. It is absolutely critical that there is proper public transport; otherwise, it does not work.

Mr J.H.D. DAY: Certainly, having proximity to a train line is a major advantage. That is probably harder to arrange in every case, but it is certainly desirable. The member makes the point that by providing a much better offering, students will be attracted and that is actually what we are seeing in many cases in our government high schools.

Ms S.F. McGurk: The announcement was made six months ago and we are still yet to hear any options. There is absolute frustration.

Mr J.H.D. DAY: I see in the notes I have here that an announcement about further consultation at least is due to be made in the very near future. I thank the member for her comments and I am pleased that she is supportive of the proposed changes.