

## HANSARD 15 JUNE 2011

### *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.

**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 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 line ball from my assessment of it, but I might be wrong.

Using Riverton as an example, one of the major reasons to push for this is the competition from the private schools; that is, students in the private sector are leaving early in year 6 to go to year 7 in 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 around the metropolitan area—a good contribution.

One of the issues that has been alluded to here is that a very important goal for 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 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 entry 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 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.