

# ***Report from the Select Committee of the Legislative Assembly upon the School Certificate***

New South Wales. Parliament, Legislative Assembly, 1981 (Chair: Brian McGowan)

## **Overview of the document**

151 page report (plus appendices) of the Select Committee of the Legislative Assembly upon the School Certificate. The Select Committee was established in November 1979 by a notice of motion by the Minister for Education, Eric Bedford, to examine the School Certificate. The Committee made 39 recommendations, including the abolition of the School Certificate and its replacement with a new credential called the Certificate of Secondary Education and the abolition of the practice of zoning.

## **Keywords**

The School Certificate; certification; assessment and reporting; essential learning; core curriculum; school-based assessment; examinations; community involvement; child-centred curriculum; age streaming and ability grouping; item banking; comparability of awards.

## **Terms of Reference**

1. That a Select Committee be appointed –
  - a. to examine the requirements and procedures currently governing the award of the School Certificate and to report whether these conditions meet the concerns of the community regarding the education of students in the first four years of secondary school;
  - b. to develop proposals including costs for the award of the School Certificate.
2. That such Committee consist of Mr Duncan, Mr McGowan, Mr Pickard, Mr Rogan and Mr Whelan.
3. That the Committee have leave to sit during the sittings or any adjournment of the House, to adjourn from place to place and make visits of inspection within the State of New South Wales and other States of Australia and the Australian Capital Territory.

## **Table of Contents**

TERMS OF REFERENCE

INTRODUCTION

RECOMMENDATIONS

EXTRACTS FROM SUBMISSIONS

CHAPTER 1: BACKGROUND TO THE PRESENT POSITION: THE EDUCATION ACT OF 1961

CHAPTER 2: BACKGROUND TO THE PRESENT POSITION: DEVELOPMENTS SINCE 1961

CHAPTER 3: THE PRESENT POSITION

CHAPTER 4: PROBLEMS IN THE PRESENT SYSTEM

CHAPTER 5: TOWARDS THE ADAPTIVE SCHOOL: THE RECOMMENDATIONS EXPLAINED

CHAPTER 6: THE SEMESTER COURSE PROPOSAL IN MORE DETAIL

EXTRACTS FROM THE VOTES AND PROCEEDINGS OF THE LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY

APPENDICES

PROCEEDINGS OF THE COMMITTEE

LIST OF WITNESSES

LIST OF SUBMISSIONS

## **Summary of Contents**

### **INTRODUCTION**

- Notes that the Committee first met in November 1979 and elected Brian McGowan as Chairman.
- Advises that the Committee obtained from the Secondary Schools Board submissions following its “Invitation to the Community to Comment on the School Certificate” as well as details of the requirements and procedures currently governing the award. Notes that it received 280 written submissions, examined 35 witnesses, received expert testimony and visited a number of states and schools in Australia.

### **RECOMMENDATIONS**

- Summarizes the reports 39 recommendations as follows:
- Recommendation 1: “The School Certificate should be abolished and replaced by a credential of greater value”. (p. 3)
- Recommendation 2: “There should be a new credential called the Certificate of Secondary Education which should:
  - a) be available to all students beyond the legal leaving age
  - b) be issued by schools on behalf of and within guidelines determined by a central authority, such as the Secondary Schools Board
  - c) comprise a record of achievement demonstrated by the student in the years leading up to its award
  - d) be available to students whenever they leave school, be it in Year 9, 10, 11, or 12
  - e) contain two parts, a transcript of approved courses passed and a school-provided cover on which should be recorded any relevant information not included on the transcript.” (p. 3)
- Recommendation 3: “Schools should be able to develop courses that take account of the special needs and interest of their students; such courses must gain the approval of the central authority for their implementation. Only approved courses shall be eligible for inclusion on the Certificate of Secondary Education.” (p. 3)
- Recommendation 4: “Students should have greater opportunities than at present to include a range of subjects in their courses and to change subjects as their needs and interests develop.” (p. 3)
- Recommendation 5: “All courses should be offered in half-yearly semester units. Students should be able to select new courses every semester.” (p. 3)
- Recommendation 6: “The first semester of Year 7 should be a time in which students are assisted to adapt to secondary schooling. Approved courses should begin in the second semester of Year 7. Each semester course passed should be added to a student’s record of achievement.” (p. 3)
- Recommendation 7: “There should be a system of checks and balances on the curriculum of secondary schools. This system should provide for at least the following”:
  - a) “the vesting of ultimate authority for the curriculum of secondary schools in the Minister for Education” ;
  - b) that a central authority should have the power to develop courses;
  - c) the continuation of existing practice which requires schools to be registered with the central authority; and
  - d) that school developed courses should be endorsed by school curriculum committees before being submitted to central authority for approval. (p. 4)

- Recommendation 8: Outlines responsibilities of the central authority in relation to the registration of secondary schools, the approval of courses proposed by schools, the withdrawal of courses, the maintenance of student records and the provision of transcripts, compulsory courses (if any), assistance to schools with course construction, assistance to employers and the community with interpreting Certificates of Secondary Education, and research in areas related to the curriculum and assessment of student achievement.
- Recommendation 9: Relates to the resourcing of the central authority.
- Recommendation 10: “While all courses should be designed in semester units, in the major subject areas they should be so designed as to provide opportunities for students to engage in sustained study. Therefore, most courses should be part of course sequences.” (p. 5)
- Recommendation 11: “Every course that is part of a sequence should be a pre-requisite for every later course in that sequence. Students should not be eligible to choose a course until they have passed all its pre-requisites or co-requisites.” (p. 5)
- Recommendation 12: “In addition to sequences in the major subject areas, schools should provide special courses for special needs. These should not normally be part of sequences, but would be provided to meet the needs of students who require remediation, or who are about to enter the work force, or who have special talents and interests.” (p. 5)
- Recommendation 13: That schools should continue to assist with course selection and planning.
- Recommendation 14: That schools must publish outlines of the courses they offer.
- Recommendation 15: That students should know exactly what is required of them and that published course outlines should include aims and objectives, material to be covered and learning experiences provided, material required and the cost, achievements that will need to be demonstrated to pass, and specific details of assessment procedures and course requirements.
- Recommendation 16: That students should be assessed in each semester course.
- Recommendation 17: “The assessment should be carried out by the school.” (p. 6)
- Recommendation 18: “Students who do not demonstrate the achievement specified in the approved course proposal should fail that course. There should be two consequences of failure:
  - a) That course should not be added to the student’s record of achievement.
  - b) That student should not *normally* be eligible to select pre-requisite until such time as the failed course has been successfully repeated.” (pp. 6-7)
- Recommendation 19: That students who fail should have a right to repeat courses.
- Recommendation 20: That schools should provide full and frank reasons for failure to students and parents.
- Recommendation 21: “The central authority should have available two kinds of semester courses described as in R15:
  - a) courses which, on the advice of the authority, have been declared by the Minister to be compulsory for all students;
  - b) other approved courses which schools may choose to offer from those courses approved by the Authority.” (p. 7)
- Recommendation 22: “Students should be able to select courses on the basis of their readiness and ability to undertake them rather than on the basis of their age of their Year. That is, it should be possible for classes to reflect ability grouping across years.” (p. 7)

- Recommendation 23: That it should be possible for “talented students” to engage in accelerated progression.
- Recommendation 24: “Accelerated progression should only occur after the student, parents and the school have discussed its implications.” (p. 8)
- Recommendation 25: “For students who reach an apparent limit in their progression through course sequences in major subject areas, schools should provide alternative courses.” (p. 8)
- Recommendation 26: “There should be no attempt to categorize students into permanent groups. All students at all times should be free to select either mainstream, academic courses or specific purpose courses, but schools should provide appropriate counselling services to parents and students.” (p. 8)
- Recommendation 27: On the grounds of enhancing the status of all courses and to simplify timetabling, all semester courses should be allocated the same number of teaching periods. Subjects which warrant relatively little time overall should be given a full allocation over one or two semesters, while subjects that warrant deeper and more sustained study should be available through two or more complementary courses.
- Recommendation 28: Concerned with the allocation of personnel and resources.
- Recommendation 29: “As there is no need to change such concepts as teaching faculties and mastered departments to implement these proposals, there should be no attempt to change them suddenly.” (p. 8)
- Recommendation 30: “At the conclusion of each semester, schools should provide the central authority with a list of all approved courses to be added to each student’s record-of-achievement, and the central authority should update each student’s record. The authority should provide schools with an updated copy of each student’s record.” (p. 9)
- Recommendation 31: “Students who are about to leave school should be able to request from the school a Certificate of Secondary Education (CSE).” (p. 9) This should include a transcript and a cover documenting the student’s other achievements. “The student should be responsible for alerting the school to the other achievements which warrant formal acknowledgement on the Certificate of Secondary Education.” (p. 9)
- Recommendation 32: That the central authority should be able to provide a transcript of student achievement at other times, such as in the case of changing schools or after the student has left school.
- Recommendation 33: That the central authority should monitor the language schools use to convey information to ensure consistency. “We suggest that the terms “Distinction”, “Credit” and “Pass” should be used in all schools.” (p. 9)
- Recommendation 34: That there should be a clear distinction between school reports intended for the student’s family and those intended to provide public information to the wider community.
- Recommendation 35: That schools should be encouraged to continue issuing school diplomas.
- Recommendation 36: “An evaluation should be undertaken urgently of the feasibility of developing a test in what the community regards as ‘basic skills’ with a view to making such a test available not only to school students but to adults who may benefit from having their basic skills formally assessed and certified. If such a test can be developed in such a way as not to undermine the other recommendations we have made, then students should be able to require that their results be included as a component of their record-of-achievement.” (p. 10)

- Recommendation 37: That consideration should be given to accrediting courses offered outside schools.
- Recommendation 38: That consideration should be given to making provision for persons to add to their record-of-achievement as part of continuing education.
- Recommendation 39: “Zoning, the practice which directs all government school students to attend the school designated for the area in which they live, should be abolished. The Committee note that the Department of Education is currently re-examining zoning and should be given every assistance to complete its examination.” (p. 10)

#### **EXTRACTS FROM SUBMISSIONS**

- Provides extracts on a range of issues from submissions provided to the Committee.

#### **CHAPTER 1: BACKGROUND TO THE PRESENT POSITION: THE EDUCATION ACT OF 1961**

- Outlines educational developments in NSW up to 1961.
- Notes that the School Certificate was born of the Education Act of 1961 but was first proposed in the Wyndham Report in 1957.
- Refers to the Wyndham Report as one of the most important statements ever made about secondary education in New South Wales and argues that the most significant change that followed was the extension of secondary education from five to six years, and its division into two stages (7-10, and 11-12). Notes that many of the other changes envisaged in the report were never realised.
- Notes that many changes have occurred in NSW since Wyndham including: increased enrolments, retention and numbers of schools; the rise in numbers of students sitting for the School Certificate and the HSC; that by 1980 virtually all high schools had become comprehensive high schools, with the exception of some partly selective government high schools; and that all pupils are now entitled to a place at their local high school.
- States that “secondary education is now mass education.” (p. 28)
- Provides details of the Education Act of 1961, including the reforms aimed at providing all adolescents with a general education and a core of compulsory subjects.
- Concludes by noting: “We believe that the guiding principles adopted by the Wyndham Committee are at least still partly pertinent, and possibly timeless. For example, we agree that the primary purpose of secondary education is not to produce university matriculants, but to give all adolescents the best possible preparation for adult life... We believe that the junior secondary years have for too long been organized with the needs of the potential university student paramount, and that this must change.” (p. 34)

#### **CHAPTER 2: BACKGROUND TO THE PRESENT POSITION: DEVELOPMENTS SINCE 1961**

- Details changes since 1961 in procedures leading to the award of the School Certificate.

#### **CHAPTER 3: THE PRESENT POSITION**

- Begins by noting that the responsibility for the School Certificate is in the hands of the Secondary Schools Board which was established under the Education Act of 1961.
- Sets out the requirements specified in the Act, the requirements determined by the Secondary Schools Board, the assessment of student achievement, and discusses the grading of English and mathematics.

## CHAPTER 4: PROBLEMS IN THE PRESENT SYSTEM

- Outlines a number of problems in the present system including the following:
  - 1. Exceptional children:
    - Suggests that the present system cannot adequately cater for exceptional children including both those with disabilities and special talents.
    - Suggests that although the School Certificate “no longer climaxes in a rigorous, end-of-course external examination, its rules continue to reflect the time when it did”. (p. 68)
  - 2. The value of the School Certificate as a Credential:
    - States that “This is probably the only issue on which all witnesses agreed. Even the Secondary Schools Board has indicated that substantial change is needed for the School Certificate to regain any value as a credential”. (p. 70)
    - Notes that where witness did not agree was on the question of how to restore its value.
  - 3. The effect of an external examination on student motivation:
    - Notes the view of many witnesses that students are not motivated to work unless they are required to sit a major public examination. The Committee argues that it found this view inadequate.
    - Discusses the history and organization of the first four years of secondary schooling and general expectation of these years culminating in an examination. The Committee notes that “there seem to be two appropriate reforms available, either reinstate the major assessment event or change the students’ expectations. We favour the latter.” (pp. 70-71)
  - 4. The diversity of the school population:
    - Discusses the profound change in the student population over the last 20 years.
    - Notes greater cultural diversity and cites “community languages as a good example of an area in which schools need increased curricular and organizational freedom.” (p. 72)
    - States that “With respect to uniformity of outcome, we believe it may be possible to delineate a core of skills and opportunities which all schools should acknowledge. For the rest, we accept the view, convincingly argued before us, that schools must be allowed to progress towards those common goals in their own ways.” (p. 73)
  - 5. Literacy and numeracy:
    - Notes the widespread belief that standards of literacy and numeracy have declined but that this view is not supported by reliable evidence.
  - 6. External examinations and accountability of schools:
    - Notes the view put forward in many submissions that external examinations “provide the best, or even the only means by which school can make themselves accountable to the community. This is an emotionally charged view and we want to say at once that schools ought to be accountable to the communities they serve. However, we do not accept that external examinations provide the best form of accountability. We do not even accept that they provide an adequate measure of accountability.” (p. 75)
  - 7. Age streaming verses ability grouping:
    - Notes that in NSW students have traditionally been placed into classes based on their age. “In secondary schools in particular, this has resulted in

the progress of students occurring in what is known as ‘lock-step progression’.” (p. 76)

- Outlines issues associated with ‘lock-step progression’.
- States that “The recommendations we have made are compatible with an ability-grouping organization. Indeed we believe that ability-grouping sits very easily with the new kind of school credential we have recommended. Nevertheless, ability-grouping may not be acceptable in all communities and schools, and we point out that students in schools which use some other organization will be at no disadvantage with respect to gaining a Certificate of Education”. (p. 78)
- 8. First and second class subjects:
  - Discusses disparity in views between the perceived value of different subjects.
  - Makes recommendations for improving the esteem of ‘second class’ subjects.
- 9. Timetabling:
  - Argues that the recommendations of the Committee about equal allocations of periods to all courses and grouping students into classes on the basis of their ability rather than their age will simplify timetabling.
- 10. Private reporting and public reporting:
  - Stresses the sharp distinction that should be made between different types of reporting.
- 11. Continuing education and access to education:
  - Notes changing occupational and educational trends and suggests that while it has not been the task of the Committee to make recommendations on how existing educational facilities may be used for education for the unemployed, and for adults generally, it is an area the Committee commends for urgent study.
- 12. Comparability of awards:
  - Suggests that recommendations for change outlined in this report may raise concerns about loss of comparability of awards that students receive.
  - Notes that the question of comparability was very important to many witnesses.
- 13. Item banking:
  - States that “The Committee detected some support for the use of item banks as an alternative to other forms of moderation” (p. 88) and discusses the use of item banks in Tasmania and by the NSW Teachers Federation.
  - Argues that “In view of the Committee’s belief that the curriculum should become much more localized and diversified, we do not see how the existence of large item banks in a relatively few subjects could do other than inhibit the process of curriculum development if those banks are to be used by all schools as a whole subject moderating device.” (p. 89)
  - However, outlines the possibility of their use in certain key areas of “basic skills” which may be of assistance to teachers in evaluating their programs and reporting directly and only to the local communities.
- 14. Relevance of the curriculum to the needs and interests of students:
  - “Many witnesses asserted that the existing curriculum is irrelevant to the needs and interests of the students. We have a measure of sympathy for this view, but we also have some reservations about it.” (p. 89)

- Argues that “We believe that schools should continually appraise their curricula, and that nothing should be taught unless it can be justified in terms of its immediate or future value to the students. We also believe a better reason is needed for omitting something than that the students do not perceive its immediate relevance to their needs”. (p. 90)
- 15. The school-based curriculum:
  - Discusses the view put forward in submissions that the school is the only sensible place where curriculum decisions can be made.
  - Notes that “We accept that schools ought to have increased freedom to determine their own curricula. We cannot, however, accept that the freedom should be unfettered. We believe that the State must retain the right to determine what its children will be taught.” (p. 90)
- 16. The child-centred curriculum:
  - Notes the increasing support for the view that curriculum should be child-centred rather than subject-centred but argues that references to the child-centred curriculum versus the subject-centred curriculum assume a conflict where none exists.
  - Notes that there are already several schools with no planned subject curriculum and while the Committee believes that parents have the right to send their children to such schools, they should not be the norm.
  - States that “We believe that schools have an obligation to teach subjects, no matter how broadly that term needs to be regarded, and to say clearly and in advance what those subjects are to be.” (p. 91)
- 17. A core of essential learning:
  - Notes that “a very large number of witnesses argued that a central authority should specify a core of essential learning; very few had thought out what that core should comprise”. (p. 91)
  - Notes a confusion of views from the community concerning what should be core.
  - Refers to the Curriculum Development Centre’s publication Core Curriculum for Australian Schools and its argument that there are certain skills which are essential.
  - Does not make recommendations of core subjects but states that it is an important function of the central authority to make rules on behalf of the community about what students should learn.
  - States, “However, we are concerned at the possibility that a given set of subjects should become enshrined as a permanent, compulsory set... We propose that a central authority should have the power to place constraints on the total curriculum which students should follow but we urge that any such constraints be kept under continual review.” (p. 93)
- 18. Community involvement:
  - Notes conflicting views on the question of community involvement in curriculum development.
  - States “We favour a situation in which the task of constructing a curriculum would remain the responsibility of the teacher professionals, but in which the local community would play a role in setting the guidelines within which the curriculum is constructed. We propose that schools should set up curriculum committees which would afford the opportunities for the parents, students, and the wider local community to



- join with teachers in making decisions about the areas in which courses should be provided.” (p. 94)
- 19. Examination versus assessment:
    - Notes that “the manner in which candidates for a public certificate of achievement should be assessed was hotly contested by those who gave evidence.” (p. 94)
    - Points out the view of the Committee that “there are many instances where an examination or test can play a useful role in the assessment process, and therefore we believe that examinations or tests should continue to be used in secondary schools. Whether or not they should be used in a given case depends on the nature of the information which the assessor needs.” (p. 94)
  - 20. Passing and failing:
    - Notes that “some claim that when the boards abolished failure they also abolished success. We were impressed by this opinion”. (p. 95)
    - Suggest that failure should not be reported on public certificates of achievement, but that success should be, and outlines how this might be put into practice.
  - 21. Trusting schools to assess students:
    - Discusses concerns about the responsibility of assessment being that of schools and endorses the view that there should be avenues of appeal in a system which relies on school-based assessment.
  - 22. Standardized testing:
    - Makes the following observation: “The evidence of standardized testing was not consistent. Very few witnesses mentioned it and those who did were either avid supporters or strong opponents. One point of view that has been given serious consideration suggests that an increased use of standardized testing is a necessary concomitant of school-based assessment. We believe this view would be especially important if assessment at Year 12 ever became internal because there is a need for comparable statewide measures of achievement at that stage for such purposes as tertiary entrance. We are not so convinced there is an equal need in the junior secondary school.” (p. 97)
    - Notes that the Committee would not oppose standardized testing in the junior secondary school if they do not negatively influence curriculum or play a role in the eligibility for a certificate of achievement. Argues that the community should be given an opportunity to express its views on the matter.
  - Summarizes certain principles which have been agreed upon by the Committee under three broad headings as follows:
    - Curriculum:
      - “Schools should play a greater role in developing courses so that they can better meet any special needs of their students.
      - Before being implemented, all school-developed courses should be approved by a central authority that is representative of all school systems and the wider community.
      - The curriculum should be more diverse; it should continue to provide opportunities for students to pursue academically oriented courses but it should also offer realistic alternatives for students for whom an academic orientation is not appropriate.

- The curriculum should be more flexible; it should enable students to experience a wide range of subjects, and it should be able to accommodate students who wish to change their learning orientations.
  - The curriculum should be more relevant to the present and future needs of students, and therefore it should be capable of being changed at short notice.
  - The curriculum should be flexible enough to capitalize on the temporary availability of special resources, both personnel and material.
  - The curriculum should be based on the primacy of knowledge and skills; attitudinal growth and development should be seen as an important concomitant to cognitive growth.
  - At the local level, there should be increased community involvement in curriculum decision-making, and therefore there should be machinery for harnessing community opinion.
  - There should be provision for parts of the curriculum to be prescribed but any central authority should impose no more constraints than are needed to reflect widely-held community views.” (pp. 97-98)
- Assessment:
  - “Assessment of student achievement should be the responsibility of the school.
  - Each student should be assessed at the end of each semester or half-yearly course.
  - The purpose of assessing should be to establish whether students have demonstrated the achievement that was specified before the course began.
  - Students who do not demonstrate the specified achievement should fail the course. Failure should carry the meaning ‘has not demonstrated the necessary achievement *yet*.’
  - In general, students who fail a course should be able to repeat it.
  - Failure should not be recorded on any public certificate of achievement, but all successes should.
  - Every student should receive a public certificate of achievement irrespective of the number of successes it records.
  - When schools propose new courses to a central authority, they should set out clearly the achievement which students will be required to demonstrate and how it is proposed to be assessed.
  - Schools should be given all necessary assistance to refine their assessment technique.” (pp. 98-99)
- Organization:
  - “All courses should be able to be taught as half-yearly or semester length units.
  - Students should be able to move outside their age or Year cohort when selecting courses.
  - Students who fail a particular course should be able to repeat that course without prejudice to their progress in other areas.
  - Students who wish to engage in such activities as staging school musical productions or producing the school magazine should be able to do so as part of an approved semester course for which they can be given credit on their certificate of achievement.

- Students who wish to specialise in a specific area of the curriculum should be able to take two or more different but related semester courses during the same half-year.
- Students should be able to take a break from a specific sequence of courses for one or more semesters, and resume study of that sequence at the break point in a later semester.
- Students who wish to take advantage of accelerated progression should be able to be assessed in two or more sequential courses in the same half-year.
- Students for whom work-experience opportunities can be provided should be able to engage in them as an approved semester course for which credit will be given.
- Teachers who are both competent and willing to offer courses outside of their designated subject area should be able to do so.
- Where local resources, either personnel or material, can be legally utilized to provide worthwhile courses, they should be provided as approved courses for which students can gain credit.
- All semester courses should receive equal allocations of teaching time.” (pp. 99-100)

#### **CHAPTER 5: TOWARDS THE ADAPTIVE SCHOOL: THE RECOMMENDATIONS EXPLAINED**

- Begins by endorsing the call for a reappraisal of school put forward in the Schools Commission publication, *Schooling for 15 and 16 year olds*.
- Notes that: “We accept the view of the Schools Commission that all schools should have the opportunity to develop in ways which will enable them to meet more effectively the needs of the whole age group. We would say that schools need to become ‘adaptive’ and that in doing so they are likely to develop most, if not all, of the following characteristics:
  - warm and friendly relations between students and staff, based on mutual respect;
  - a range of course options which give the emphasis to both practical and theoretical knowledge and to practical and academic skills;
  - a comprehensiveness, not merely in the range of students for whom they cater but also in the range of educational services they offer;
  - an awareness that the prime purpose of their existence is to serve all students while they are within the compulsory schooling period;
  - programs consistent with the notion that all post-school options for students require them to be able to function autonomously and effectively;
  - close connections with the community being served and through it with the wider society.” (p. 107)

#### **CHAPTER 6: THE SEMESTER COURSE PROPOSAL IN MORE DETAIL**

- Discusses a range of issues in relation to the proposed model of semester-based courses, including: comparability of records, sequential courses, horizontal and vertical courses, enrichment and acceleration, establishing and maintaining standards, standardized testing, the format of the Certificate of Secondary Education, the logistics of record keeping, costs and possible formats.