

Review of Educational Standards in Lower-Secondary Schools in Western Australia

Western Australia. Education Department, 1981 (Chair: T. A. Priest)

Overview of the document

127 page report of the panel appointed to review educational standards in lower-secondary schools in Western Australia. The panel were required to review school practices in the first three years of secondary education and to consider the performance of students in the core subjects, with a particular emphasis on poorly performing students studying at 'Basic level'. This review can be seen as a response to widespread criticisms of basic standards in Year 10 school students as the result of the implementation of the Dettman Report (Secondary Education in Western Australia, 1969) recommendations. The review panel offers several short and long term recommendations for lower secondary schools in Western Australia.

Keywords

Secondary Education in Western Australia (1969); lower-secondary schooling; Board of Secondary Education; the Achievement Certificate; basic skills; literacy and numeracy standards; mastery learning; school organization; comparability testing; poorly-performing students; low-ability students; core subjects; the Research Branch; item-banking; moderation methods; levels and grading; 'labelling' of students; student motivation; public examinations; homework; rural schools; school leavers.

Terms of Reference

1. To act as a steering committee over viewing the following investigations to be undertaken by the Research Branch of the Education Department:
 - a) An analysis of the Board of Secondary Education Comparability Test Scores of 1979 students, including a comparison between these objective test results and the results of earlier populations of students undertaking the same tests.
 - b) An objective test study of the literacy and numeracy performance of fourteen-year-olds with, if possible, comparisons with the results of similar testing in the past.
2. To accept or modify – or to indicate its degree of acceptance of – the report that the Research Branch will prepare on its activities in the two areas outlined above.
3. To report on the policies and procedures of the Board of Secondary Education, especially as they bear on the question of standards in the basic subjects.
4. To report on the Departmental and school practices which relate to remedial techniques and the improvement of standards of poorly performing students.

Table of Contents

LETTER OF TRANSMITTAL

MEMBERS OF THE REVIEW PANEL

CHAPTER 1 – INTRODUCTION

Purpose of the review

Terms of reference

The review panel and its approach

Some general observations

CHAPTER 2 – BACKGROUND TO RECOMMENDATIONS

The Dettman Report

The Board of Secondary Education

Motivation

	Public examinations at Year 10
	Accreditation
	School organization
	Caring for students
	Community involvement
	Homework
	Suggested longer-term changes
CHAPTER 3 – SUBMISSIONS AND REPORTS	
	Confederation of W.A. Industry
	Perth Chamber of Commerce
	Albany Chamber of Commerce
	W.A. Public Service Board
	Trades and Labour Council of W.A.
	Country Women's Association
	W.A. Council of State School Organizations
	W.A. High School Principals' Association
	Catholic Education Commission
	Independent Schools
	State School Teachers' Union of W.A.
	The Martin Report
	Visits to Schools
	Other
CHAPTER 4 – THE BOARD OF SECONDARY EDUCATION AND THE ACHIEVEMENT CERTIFICATE	
	Statutory functions
	Courses and course approval
	Constraints on mobility
	Time allocations
	Moderation of assessment
	Comparability testing
	Regional meetings
	Small schools
	Assessment of optional subjects
	Certification
CHAPTER 5 – MEASUREMENT OF TRENDS IN STUDENT PERFORMANCE	
	Studies carried out by the State Education Department's
	Research Branch
	Series 3 comparability tests as indicators of performance levels over time
	Approaches to assessment of student performance
	Application of item-banking to the assessment of literacy and numeracy
CHAPTER 6 – POORLY PERFORMING STUDENTS	
	Definition
	Students in Basic-level courses
	Early leavers
	Provisions and practices
	Schools Commission Disadvantaged Schools Programme
	English
	Mathematics
	Science
	Overview
CHAPTER 7 – CONCLUSION	
APPENDICES	

Summary of Contents

LETTER OF TRANSMITTAL

MEMBERS OF THE REVIEW PANEL

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

- Notes that the Secondary Education in Western Australia (1969) report, otherwise known as the Dettman Report, had profound effects on education in Western Australia, the most visible of which was the discontinuance of the Junior Certificate and the introduction of the Achievement Certificate awarded by newly created the Board of Secondary Education whereby external examinations were ceased and replaced by in-school assessments moderated by the Board of Secondary Education.
- Argues that with the Achievement Certificate entering its second decade of operation, a review is considered timely.
- Outlines the members of the review panel and argues that it is broadly representative of the profession and community and of a diversity of views.
- Makes the following general observations:
 - “Our review leads us to the general conclusion that there can be no firm confirmation or rebuttal of claims that standards in the basic subjects have fallen in recent years. This is an area of debate in which opinions are strongly held but in which clear-cut objective evidence is lacking.” (p. 3)
 - “Members of the teaching profession are generally in no doubt that students in lower-secondary schools are better educated than formerly, and that teachers now have greater opportunity to develop courses and teaching strategies better suited to individual student needs.” (p. 3)
 - “Nevertheless, we have had our attention drawn to a number of features of the Achievement Certificate system in which changes might be made with a view to its more effective working” (p. 3).
- Notes that a variety of suggestions and recommendations are made in this report, some of which should be tackled immediately and others of concern in the longer term.
- States that much criticism of the standards in lower-secondary schools has a nostalgic flavour and seeks a return to the pre-1970 public examinations.

CHAPTER 2: BACKGROUND TO RECOMMENDATIONS

The Dettman Report

- Reviews the changes and major points to come out of the Dettman Report including:
 - The discontinuance of the Junior Certificate and the introduction of the Achievement Certificate awarded by newly created the Board of Secondary Education.
 - The replacement of external examinations by in-school assessments moderated by the Board of Secondary Education.
 - The establishment of four compulsory ‘core subjects’: English, Mathematics, Science and Social Studies.
 - The discontinuance of ‘streaming’ to be replaced by development of “bands of student ability” which were to be developed for each of the core subjects.
- Notes that the Dettman Report emphasized that developments along these lines would: provide greater freedom to teachers to exercise professional judgement/responsibility; remove stigma of failure from students; and provide better information to prospective employers (in the form of the Achievement Certificate which included graded subjects).

The Board of Secondary Education

- Briefly reviews the role of the Board of Secondary Education, which was established to carry the recommendations of the Dettman report into effect.
- Notes that the Board of Secondary Education established a moderation procedure for each of the four core subjects, whereby it could indicate to schools appropriate allocations of students to levels and of achievement grades to students.

Motivation

- Notes a measure of apathy towards school in a substantial proportion of students in lower-secondary schools, particularly those working at the Basic levels and that while this is by no means new, the Achievement Certificate system has not resolved the problem. Lists several potential causal factors for this including: the no-fail nature of the Certificate; that students are promoted each year by age rather than achievement; the labelling effects of the nomenclature employed; the non-availability of appropriate courses available for low-ability students; and the frequency of testing aimed at the production of cumulative assessment to justify returns of achievement levels to the Board.

Public examinations at Year 10

- Notes that a number of submissions to the report panel suggest that discontent exists with the discontinuance of the public exams. Argues that several misconceptions exist around such discontent, including the incorrect view that the Junior Certificate provided an objective guarantee of standards.
- States that “We fully support the concept of a certificate of achievement for all students, and we do not recommend a return to a system of external examinations at Year 10. In this we agree with the views expressed in the Dettman Report”. (p. 7)

Accreditation

- The review panel has looked at the possibility of expanding the number of schools accredited by the Board to inform it of the information to be entered on the Achievement Certificate.
- The Board of Secondary Education has made it clear for some time that it would be sympathetic to such a development and it is a matter of speculation as to why this opportunity has not been seized.

School organization

- Reviews the current organization of schools. Several key points are covered including that:
 - Schools largely comprise subject specialist teachers, which may be inconsistent with the intentions of the Dettman Committee, whose philosophy was that students would pursue a three-year programme of general education in lower-secondary school.
 - There is a considerable emphasis on the homogenous grouping of classes, which “is likely not only to perpetuate the tendency to teach to the average level of the group but also to perpetuate the notion that teaching is in the main a matter of instruction by specialists”. (p. 8)
 - “Schools should be given considerable freedom to vary their organization and approach.” (p. 8)
 - Treating all students the same is problematic, whereas on the other hand streaming is also problematic. The Schools Commission believes the organizational pattern of schools should take into account these factors and

within each school the suitability of organizational details must be judged by the criterion of how far each student is accorded valued treatment.

- The continued existence of high schools that only cover Years 8-10 tends to limit the educational horizons and aspirations of some students and a long-term objective should be that all secondary schools, irrespective of size, and including district high schools, should provide courses to Year 12.

Caring for students

- Expresses some concern over the extent to which students may become 'lost' in secondary schools. This is not attributed to teachers, but to the organizational situation in which teachers work.
- Notes discontinuities between primary and secondary schooling, particularly in terms of the transition from the primary classroom teacher tradition to the subject-department specialist secondary teacher.
- Argues that fundamental changes in approach may be necessary if schools are to better meet the emotional, personal, social and academic needs of the student.
- States that "it has been suggested to us that the Achievement Certificate system has led to an organization of the school timetable that to some extent has brought about the disappearance of the stable year-class and its teacher" (pp. 10-11), with students frequently changing class groups and teachers throughout each week.
- Suggests that until secondary schools are given considerable freedom to re-organize their operational structure and their course and teaching strategies, many students will be denied a supportive atmosphere and may not perform to the best of their individual capacities.

Community involvement

- Notes that several submissions to the review panel have stressed the desirability of a closer relationship between communities and schools, although there are tensions surrounding such relationships. Argues that there is a lack of close understanding and cooperation between schools and parents in the government system, when compared to the non-government system.
- Notes that employer groups have informed the review panel of their wish to relate more closely with schools and school authorities, to gain a greater understanding of educational trends and practices and to make their experiences of school leavers available by providing feedback on students who enter the workforce.

Homework

- States that "From our discussions with parents and students we gained the impression that there is considerable variability in the attitudes and approaches of teachers to the setting of homework in the lower secondary years". (p. 12)
- Draws attention to the seemingly incorrect yet "widespread belief among teachers that students from poorer socio-economic backgrounds respond less well to homework than do those from better socio-economic backgrounds". (p. 12)

Suggested longer-term changes

- Repeats the earlier point that no currently available evidence exists to suggest that standards in the basic subjects have fallen in recent years.
- Argues that "We are satisfied, however, that there is scope for improvement, and one of our concerns, in addition to making recommendations for immediate implementation, is to suggest general directions for lower-secondary education in the longer term if this improvement is to occur." (p. 13)

- Lists the desirable changes of emphasis in lower secondary education for the longer term as:
 - a. “A wider use of general teachers, to reduce the fragmentation of student programmes and to enhance the capacity of teachers to perform their pastoral-care role.
 - b. A greater use of mixed-ability, i.e. heterogeneous grouping of students, rather than homogenous grouping, to diminish the labelling effects of grouping according to levels.
 - c. Development in the core subjects of a subject-matter organization better suited to individual students’ learning rates than are the present multi-level courses – as, for example, units of work through which students may progress at their own rates.
 - d. The availability of all schools of distance education materials and technology for partial provision of specialist teaching.
 - e. The provision of courses to Year 12 in all high schools, including district high schools, irrespective of size, to be achieved not necessarily by school organization along traditional lines of specialist teachers and departments but by utilizing general teachers and new communications technology.
 - f. Active encouragement of a variety of approach in schools, and of differences in their size and organization.
 - g. The development in all schools of effective co-operative interaction between the school and its supporting community – as, for example, by the establishment of school councils, where such do not exist, including elected lay members.
 - h. The systematic provision of opportunity for all students irrespective of background and ability to participate in homework as part of the total time on task, and for parents to be informed of school homework policy.
 - i. In general, the promotion of a level of freedom to schools such that they may develop arrangements whereby all students are given the opportunity for learning in subject matter and skills to the fullest extent of their motivation and ability, irrespective of whether they intend to leave at the age of 15 years or proceed to Year 11 or beyond, and under conditions that provide to each a clear incentive to maintain momentum and to improve performance.” (pp. 13-14)
- Notes that it is hoped these general suggestions will be adopted as guidelines for forward planning by Government and non-Government education authorities.

CHAPTER 3: SUBMISSIONS AND REPORTS

- Lists and summarizes some of the main points that have been presented as follows:
 - Confederation of W.A. Industry: Argues that the Achievement certificate is not well understood by employers, there are problems with the ‘wording’ of the certificate and greater interaction between schools and employers is needed (e.g. teacher-led visits, work experiences programmes, etc).
 - Perth Chamber of Commerce: Argues that standards have fallen since the introduction of the Achievement Certificate, criticises the whole philosophy of the Certificate and promotes the view that there needs to be a complete reappraisal by the teaching profession of what have been termed the three R’s.
 - Albany Chamber of Commerce: Provides a similar view to that of the Perth Chamber and believes that Year 10 leavers lack basic skills in reading writing and arithmetic, that the system has become too complicated, that students are

confused and no longer appreciate why it is important for them to succeed in school and that a more realistic and disciplined education is needed.

- W.A. Public Service Board: Argues that the Achievement Certificate does not provide it with an appropriate way of measuring applicants for factors such as skills and intelligence but does not believe basic standards have fallen.
- Trades and Labour Council of W.A.: Argues that standards have not fallen, that they compare favourably with those in other developed countries and that students leave school with a better all-round education, a greater depth of knowledge and a more balanced personal development than ever before.
- Country Women's Association: Expresses concerns over the difficulty experienced by students in moving upwards from one stream to another. Also notes that: there should be more courses for students who are less academic, which emphasize more practical/manual skills; it is difficult to establish norms for various streams in many country schools because of low student numbers; and discipline in some country schools is inadequate.
- W.A. Council of State School Organizations: Argues that: in the core subjects at least, there has been an overall improvement in standards; students who experience difficulties in their secondary years do so because of inadequate preparation and remedial support in primary school; and the Certificate is not fulfilling its intended role because: it has been wrongly adopted and interpreted by teachers and employers, there is a tendency to 'label children' and the certificate gives students a false sense of security and the 'no fail' attitude is neither honest nor practical.
- W.A. High School Principals' Association: Believes that the opinions of employers and other groups regarding the quality of applicants are based on misconceptions. Argues that it is generally agreed that successful provision has been made under the Achievement Certificate Scheme for each student to have the opportunity to experience a wide range of subjects before being required to specialize. Notes that too much time is spent recording for Board of Secondary Education assessment, especially in core subjects.
- Catholic Education Commission: Holds a general view that the present criticisms of standards, and certain pressure groups that were putting forward these criticisms, were expressing subjective and self-interested points of view. Despite this, several Catholic School Principals expressed views that: many students proceeding from Year 10 to 11 lack basic skills in English and Mathematics, but this can be attributed to a decline in motivation not standards; the present mode of operation of moderators is problematic; the definition of a 'core' subject is rather narrow and the equal time allocations for core subjects are unnecessarily restrictive; and a "considerable administrative burden had been placed on teachers". (p. 20)
- Independent Schools: Outlines advice from the Association of Independent Schools as well as points from submissions made by Wesley College, Hale School and Perth College.
- State School Teachers' Union of W.A.: Refers to findings of the report entitled Report of the Committee of Enquiry into the Achievement Certificate.
- The Martin Report: Case studies from Government High Schools in Western Australia (1980): brings together the findings of a major survey of the teaching and learning of English in W.A. government secondary schools. Makes three key conclusions including: 1. The current system of external monitoring of student achievement levels according to predetermined norms was achieved as an interim measure. It has now served its purpose and should be discontinued;

Priest Report (1981) Western Australia – 1985

2. If any statewide monitoring is thought desirable it should be by sampling and should therefore not appear in any one school more frequently than say every three or four years; and 3. Individual schools should from time to time in conjunction with advisory officers from the Education Department engage in school-based monitoring of levels of reading using available instruments as advised by the Research Branch.

- Visits to Schools: Notes that visits to various schools confirmed the wide variety of views presented in this report. Notes an agreement among teachers that the work of schools today is much better attuned to the abilities and needs of students than was the case under the public examination system and despite problems of a lack of student motivation, parents and teachers agree there is an impressive variety and scope of studies and exciting things going on in schools.
- Other: Notes that other submissions are contained in the Appendices.

CHAPTER 4: THE BOARD OF SECONDARY EDUCATION AND THE ACHIEVEMENT CERTIFICATE

Statutory functions

- Notes that the statutory functions of the Board of Secondary Education are related to three main operations: approval of courses of study in secondary education; moderation of assessments and issue of certificates.
- Notes that whilst the board has developed policies/procedures in relation to these operations, schools have developed policies/procedures in relation to the actual assessment of student performance.

Courses and course approval

- Reminds the reader that the Board established course-approval procedures in response to the recommendations of the Dettman Report.
- Notes that the Board requires proposed new courses to be detailed in terms of their rationale, objectives, programme structure, resources and assessment procedures.
- Notes that the Board describes rather than prescribes courses and does not direct curriculum development as this is done by the Department's Curriculum Branch.
- Notes that despite an increasing amount of curriculum development going on in schools, most schools (government and non-government) adopt the syllabuses prepared in the Curriculum Branch and approved by the Board.
- States that "We are satisfied that there has been no relaxation in the standards required by the Board for new courses of study in core or optional subject areas". (p. 27)
- Suggests that the review panel is not satisfied that the Dettman intentions are being fully realized under the present system. Argues that whilst it supports general education in Years 8-10 (leading to specialized education in Year 11 and 12), there are concerns that the higher levels of study in Year 8-12 prepare students well for Years 11-12, but none of the levels are necessarily well suited to the needs of students who wish to leave school in Years 9, 10 or 11.

Constraints on mobility

- Notes the criticisms that have been levelled at the difficulty experienced by students in moving upwards through the levels in the core-subject courses.
- Suggests that the solution to this ultimately lies in considerable fundamental changes: "...we look forward to the replacement in due course of multi-level courses in the core subjects by re-organized subject matter and learning conditions that will better match the learning rates and levels of motivation of individual students". (p. 28)

Time allocations

- Notes that the Board recommends that six 40-minute periods per week should be allocated to each core subject for all levels, although a variation has been permitted for some students performing at Basic level in all core subjects and studying pre-vocational courses that are related to skills associated with trades.
- Suggests schools should take responsibility for the variation of allocated times according to their perception of student needs.

Moderation of assessment

- Notes that the Board's moderation process consists of three main procedures: comparability testing programmes; visits to schools by Board moderators; and regional meetings of teachers.

Comparability testing

- Discusses several problematic aspects of comparability testing and makes two key recommendations:
 - Key Recommendation 1: "That compulsory comparability testing programmes involving all students in a given Year at a given time be discontinued." (p. 30)
 - Key Recommendation 2: "That such monitoring by comparability testing as the Board of Secondary Education considers necessary be so arranged as to involve any particular school at intervals of no less than three or four years." (p. 30)

Regional meetings

- Notes that Appendix 3 discusses the system of regional moderation meetings of teachers and makes the following recommendation:
 - Key Recommendation: "That the Board of Secondary Education consider for full accreditation any schools which seek such status." (p. 31)

Small schools

- States that the current scale of visits by moderators to small country schools is inadequate for the purpose of comprehensively evaluating students' work and advising teachers and makes the following recommendation:
 - Key Recommendation: "That Board of Secondary Education moderators schedule visits of greater duration and frequency to small country high schools, and to other schools that need them, than is currently the practice." (p. 31)

Assessment of optional subjects

- Discusses problems with the assessment of optional subjects, including the fact that currently only two possible grades are allocated: 'pass' or 'credit pass'. Notes that there is a lack of criteria and consistency in determining these grades and makes the following recommendation:
 - Key Recommendation: "That optional subjects be freed from the percentages of awards of pass and credit pass as currently set down by the Board of Secondary Education." (p. 32)

Certification

- Discusses several ideas relating to certification all which relate to three key recommendations:
 - Key Recommendation 1: “That the Board of Secondary Education reconsidering the wording on the Achievement Certificate to ensure that it describes accurately the bases of assessment.” (p. 33)
 - Key Recommendation 2: “That the Board of Secondary Education make arrangements with schools whereby the Achievement Certificate will contain only assessments for the school-leaver’s last completed full year of study.” (p. 33)
 - Key Recommendation 3: “That the Board of Secondary Education consider the means whereby certificates may be issued to students who leave school on completion of Year 11.” (p. 34)

CHAPTER 5: MEASUREMENT OF TRENDS IN STUDENT PERFORMANCE

Studies carried out by the State Education Department’s Research Branch

- Notes that in accordance with the terms of reference, two studies were arranged to be carried out by the Research Branch of the State Education Department: an analysis of the Series 3 comparability test results as indicators of performance levels over time and an investigation of the application of item-banking to the assessment of literacy and numeracy. Notes that the full reports are available at Appendices 4 and 5.
- Argues that from the first report, and on currently available evidence, “we are unable to confirm or rebut claims that standards in the basic subjects have fallen in recent years; but from the second report we are optimistic that a body of evidence in relation to such claims in Western Australia will become available in due course.” (p. 35)

Series 3 comparability tests as indicators of performance levels over time

- Notes that the Research Branch investigated the feasibility of using Series 3 comparability-test results in a retrospective comparison of performance levels in the core subjects, and deemed this method legitimate for this purpose.
- Notes problems with subject English, in which scores appear to have dropped more than the other core subjects, however, argues that the multiple-choice format of the test is possibly less appropriate for English.
- Argues that the findings of the Research Branch accord with a fairly widespread opinion that standards of performance in English have declined and states “we strongly suggest that it be brought under close scrutiny within the schools systems”. (pp. 37-38)

Approaches to assessment of student performance

- States that “the data on which the above study was based was collated by the Board of Secondary Education in order to rank students throughout the State, and to indicate to individual schools the number of students they could be expected to have working at each of the levels (Advanced, Intermediate, Basic, and the like)”. (p. 39)
- Notes that comparability data are used to establish State norms for student populations studying courses at the various levels in the core subjects.
- Notes that as the data was collated not for the purpose of monitoring standards but to achieve comparability, the Research Branch are cautious in reading significance into the findings of the study reported in the section above.
- Notes that there is a strong body of opinion that suggests explicitly criterion-referenced rather than norm-referenced tests are needed to judge standards effectively.

- Argues that in the Achievement Certificate system “there is a strong tendency for students allotted to lower-course levels to remain in those levels.” (p. 40)
- Notes that comments from critics of WA schools suggest there should be a specification of essential minimum skills that schools develop in their students and that tests should be devised for their measurement. Argues that the notions behind minimum competency testing are deceptive and nowhere has it been possible to reach a consensus on ‘minimums’: “This approach has attracted wide criticisms also because of the distorted view it engenders of the curriculum and because of the narrowness of assessment criteria that its adoption can impose on certificates.”(p. 41)
- States that “A development that has gained a wide measure of support throughout the world is the provision in item-banks of a large pool of tested, classified and retrievable test items”. Discusses several benefits of ‘item-banks’ and refers the reader to a proposal of the Research Branch on item-banking. (p. 41)
- Summarizes the report as follows: “Throughout this report we have stated our view that schools should be organized in such a way as to provide opportunity for a student to be rewarded for effort, and that in organization and strategy, schools should see all students as being potentially upwardly mobile in performance...To adopt a mastery-learning strategy would seem to us to be to accept a considerable burden of responsibility for success or failure in student learning. We ascribe deficiencies in this regard not to the teachers in our schools but to the organizational patterns within which they work, and our recommendation for the discontinuation of compulsory comparability testing is intended to free the schools for appropriate re-organization.” (p. 42)

Application of item-banking to the assessment of literacy and numeracy

- Notes that the Research Branch proposed the development of an item-bank of criterion-referenced test items relating to basic literacy and numeracy and makes the following recommendation:
 - Key Recommendation: “That the Research Branch of the Education Department be assured on a continuing basis of the resources necessary for the development and maintenance of an item-bank test facility for use by schools – in English and mathematics in the first instance.” (p. 43)

CHAPTER 6: POORLY PERFORMING STUDENTS

Definition

- States that the review panel was asked to report on “the Departmental and school practices which relate to remedial techniques and the improvement of standards of poorly performing students.” Notes that this report is concerned only with those students who are in regular classes and not those in special schools or classes. (p. 44)
- The panel distinguishes two broad groups of students with whom they are concerned:
 1. Those who, even if well motivated and working fully to capacity, cannot achieve at better than a rudimentary level in the core subjects.
 2. Those who are performing well below their capacities in core subjects.
- States that for students in the first category above, “it seems apparent that the presently approved Basic courses ... are to some extent inappropriate”. (p. 45)
- Argues that these are the kinds of students destined for the sort of ‘failure’ to which some of the submissions in Chapter 3 referred.
- Notes that many students fit into the second category above and that poor levels of student motivation are evident, as are assertions to the effect that the present system provides insufficient challenge and reward for effort at all levels. Also notes many

other socio-cultural factors, “which undoubtedly contribute to the existence of our second category of poorly performing students.” (p. 45)

Students in Basic-level courses

- Discusses students who represent the bottom 25 percent – that is, those who will receive records of achievement at the Basic level or no awards.
- States that “Of this population we believe that a good proportion, possibly up to one half of the total, could be raised in performance to the level of Intermediate given good class-room conditions and motivation.” (p. 46)
- Notes that the system of awards in the core subjects should allow for this move way from the normal curve toward a skewed curve which records actual student performances.
- As some students will still be unable to perform beyond a rudimentary level (around 10-15 percent of student population), the review panel questions the appropriateness of the current Basic courses.

Early leavers

- Notes that each year, fewer students are granted exception to leave school early (in order to pursue firm employment).
- Suggests that this has resulted in an increasing number of poorly performing students remaining in lower secondary education, and the majority of these are in Basic-level courses. Argues that this may add to the serious difficulties teachers face in motivating students at that level in potentially inappropriate syllabuses and may have contributed to the belief by employers that school leavers are now less well schooled than was formerly the case.

Provisions and practices

- Provides a dot-point overview of current provisions and practices relating to the improvement of standards of poorly performing students, as advised by three bodies:
 1. The Schools Directorate of the Education Department:
 - Increased teaching personnel have led to better individual student assistance.
 - Diagnostic/remedial work is expected of all teachers as part of the normal teaching process.
 - Most Government secondary schools have a remedial reading teacher.
 - There are approximately 150 advisory staff state-wide who assist teachers.
 - Staff from the Special Education Branch of the Education Department may be appointed to schools to form special classes for very low achievers.
 - Guidance services are provided through the Department’s Guidance Branch.
 - Several schools have formed small remedial classes for students.
 - Schools often select less demanding learning materials for less able students.
 2. The Association of Independent Schools:
 - Specialist remedial teachers assist poorly performing students.
 - Although the temporary withdrawal of students for assistance is common, most remedial work is accommodated within normal classes.
 - There is a variety of different strategies and materials adopted by different schools within the independent schools system.
 - The Association is giving considerable attention to remedial education and employing sophisticated procedures for teaching, testing and evaluation.
 3. The Aboriginal Education Branch of the Education Department:
 - There has been wide acceptance and use of various ‘language experience’ approaches.

- Aboriginal liaison officers, teachers' aides and local committees on education are helping to bring schools and Aboriginal communities together.
- There are 21 special Aboriginal schools conducted by the Education Department of WA and these cater for 15 percent of the Aboriginal secondary school student population.
- Special staffing arrangements have been made to cater for alternative secondary programmes for Aboriginal students.

Schools Commission Disadvantaged Schools Programme

- Notes that the Disadvantage (Priority) Schools Programme of the Australia Schools Commission also helps support poorly performing students.
- Explains key details of the programme.
- Argues that it is of considerable importance that proposals for support under the programme come from schools and communities, particularly for proposals linked to adapting the curriculum and learning experiences of poorly performing students.

English

- Notes that English has experienced changing curriculum emphases over the last decade, which has seen a broadening of experiences that students encounter, "in order to make the experiences of the less able students more closely related to their educational, vocational and social needs, interests and abilities". (p. 51)
- Advises that this has made it more possible to give attention to the media, including television and cinema programmes, newspapers and magazines.
- Notes that English teachers have increasingly preferred to work with students in groups where a wide spread of interests and abilities is evident.
- Notes that increasing emphasis on 'speech' has emerged in English programmes.
- States that English superintendents (Education Department) believe that "an arrangement whereby the very poorly performing student could work for most of his time with one teacher would be beneficial". (p. 51)
- Notes that the Reading Association of Western Australia argues that: the skills of reading in English are complex; lower-secondary-school students are ill-prepared to deal with reading tasks due to inadequacies in initial reading instruction in the primary school; normally it is in Year 8 that students are first required to work with textbooks (and other reading materials organized in a non-storyline manner) and are ill-prepared to do so, contributing to poor performance; and special provision is needed for students with inadequate reading skills.
- Presents the view of The Specific Learning Difficulties Association of Western Australia that: the Achievement Certificate system has compounded the problems of the under-achiever; the 'dilution' of the curriculum caused by schools having to meet diverse requirements (e.g. driver education, sexuality, drugs, politics etc) has prejudiced the teaching and learning of basic skills; and the problems of literacy and numeracy cannot be isolated from the experiences of students in primary schools.

Mathematics

- Notes the suggestion by the Education Department superintendents of mathematics that the less able, poorly performing students require an integrated programme based on language development and skills rather than independent subject content, with work experience and vocational guidance as an integral part of the course. Notes that this cannot easily occur within the existing school organization, with students shifting between teachers so often during each week.

- States that “Increased emphasis is being given to the development of mental and oral skills in mathematics lessons, and teachers are being encouraged to adopt the view that ‘each teacher is his own remedial teacher’” (p. 52). Notes that a number of basic numeracy programmes, which cater for remedial needs, currently exist in trial form.
- Notes that despite problems regarding ‘labelling’, the superintendents see difficulties in addressing poorly performing students if classes are organized on a mixed-ability basis.

Science

- Notes that statements received from individual members of the Science Teachers’ Association suggest that some teachers see major problems in the motivation of students, which they attribute to attitudes engendered by the broad levels of the Achievement Certificate.
- Notes that the Association suggest that problems of motivation and standards of performance can be resolved only by instituting an external moderation examination, or by completely abandoning moderation. The use currently made of the comparability test results is seen as the major inhibiting factor.
- Argues that under the current system all students are treated the same in the manner of teaching and assessment, irrespective of differences in content of the courses at the various levels.

Overview

- Draws three key conclusions from evidence presented to the review panel concerning standards of performance:
 - The actual operation of the Achievement Certificate system appears to militate against full effort and achievement on the part of a substantial proportion of lower-secondary school students, and thereby contributes to poor performance at all levels.
 - The designated levels of ability for which syllabuses are prepared and approved in core subjects are too gross to permit the sensitizing of teaching of courses to the educational needs of students who cover the entire range of ability from the least able to the gifted.
 - In particular, the existing systematization of Basic level courses is inappropriate for those students who comprise the lower 10 per cent to 15 per cent of the ability distribution. (pp. 53-54)
- Notes other key points of concern and argues that although the review panel is impressed with current initiatives for intellectually gifted students, it is a matter of urgency that schools and the Board of Secondary education continue to collaborate to adjust courses for the needs of poorly performing and low-ability students.
- Makes the following recommendation:
 - Key Recommendation: That the suggestions for the longer term, given in para 2.32 of this report, be taken as guidelines for policy formation with respect to W.A. lower-secondary education.

CHAPTER 7: CONCLUSION

- Reiterates the key aims, findings and recommendations of the report. No additional findings are added and no additional recommendations are made in this chapter.