

SCHOOLS, VANDALISM

**311. Ms M.M. QUIRK to the Minister for Education:**

In the aftermath of last weekend's fire at Balga Senior High School, can the minister inform the House of efforts to reduce vandalism and other forms of wilful damage at Western Australian schools?

**Mr A.J. CARPENTER replied:**

I thank the member for Girrawheen for the question. It was very disappointing, to say the least, to see the fire at Balga Senior High School over the weekend. In fact, it was more than disappointing; it made me and a lot of other people extremely angry and caused us to think about actions that we probably would not ever be able to put in place. Balga Senior High School has developed a reputation as a very innovative and creative school that provides very relevant and successful courses for the student population in its catchment area. I am sure the member for Girrawheen would agree with me that a lot of the success of Balga Senior High School can be attributed to its remarkably innovative, creative and brilliant leader, Principal Merv Hammond, who is currently principal of the year. The member for Girrawheen is constantly speaking in glowing terms of Mr Hammond's efforts at that school, and I agree with her remarks. The fire has left well over \$200 000 worth of physical damage. However, a greater damage occurs to the community and the school population, both students and staff, when these sorts of events take place. It appears from the early indications that the fire was almost certainly deliberately lit. The security and emergency personnel did a very good job in containing the fire to the extent that they could. Smoke alarms triggered an alarm at the Department of Education, and I think the emergency people attended the blaze within 10 minutes; nevertheless, the damage was extensive.

Earlier this year I launched with the Premier the smarter schools program, which seeks to address some of the issues related to deliberate damage, arson and so on in schools. An extra \$1 million has been spent this financial year to upgrade alarm systems in about 70 schools, and more schools will be upgraded next year. Unfortunately, fencing is now a pre-requisite to minimise damage at schools. I think one day all our schools will need to be fenced. Nineteen schools have been fenced this financial year, at a cost of \$900 000, and more schools will be fenced next year. Four extra security patrol vehicles are now operating, which takes the tally to 10, which is effectively almost a 50 per cent increase. Nevertheless, incidents like the fire at Balga Senior High School still occur, and we need to do a lot more. We have reduced the incidence of arson, break and enters, and theft in our schools this year over and above last year and the previous year. The vandalism figure so far this year is 54 per cent below last year's figure, although it is very unwise to crow about this sort of achievement because we run the risk of inciting people to ruin the track record. I am not seeking to make a political point, but just want to let people know the extent of the damage and the cost that is borne by the State because of arson, vandalism, break and enters, deliberate damage and so on. In 2000 the total damage bill was \$16.5 million, last year it was \$19 million, and so far in 2002 it is \$7.93 million; so we are well ahead of where we were, and that includes the damage at Balga Senior High School. I telephoned the school yesterday and it is operational, but it obviously has not been easy to cope with the damage. We need to reassure not only the people of Balga but also school communities that we are vitally interested in protecting their human property and the physical infrastructure of schools. We need to do more than we are currently doing. So far, the programs we have put in place have had a positive impact and I look forward to that impact continuing.