

EDUCATION AND HEALTH STANDING COMMITTEE

*Sixteenth Report — “The role of ICT in Western Australian Education:
Living and Working in a Digital World” — Tabling*

DR J.M. WOOLLARD (Alfred Cove) [11.04 am]: I present for tabling the sixteenth report of the Education and Health Standing Committee, entitled “The role of ICT in Western Australian Education: Living and Working in a Digital World”.

[See paper 5411.]

Dr J.M. WOOLLARD: The report the committee has tabled today describes how school students are now living and working in a digital world. Information and communications technology, which we refer to in the report as ICT, is revolutionising the way we live. As a Parliament, we must ensure that school education is up to the challenge of making sure that children in Western Australia do not fall behind children in other states and countries.

ICT is in our homes, shops, schools, social lives and sports. It is also used on our daily transport—buses, trains and cars. They all involve information and communications technology. ICT should support greater student learning in our schools with performance-based curricula, inquiry-based activities in the schoolroom, student-based learning, online learning and the sharing of learning resources. That is currently happening in WA with some metropolitan schools linking in with regional schools. It is also happening in the south metropolitan area, where schools are linking into a class at another school that cannot run a particular subject. The challenge for the Department of Education is the fact that schools in Western Australia are connected by fibre optics and satellite and copper sites. There are 150 000 computers on the educational network. However, we must remember that we are now living and working in a digital world and, because of that, we must ensure that students are being helped with ICT at school and that they are able to cope with ICT when they leave school, because it is now in every environment.

Western Australia has made improvements in this area over the past 10 years; sadly, however, those improvements have been a bit slow. Eight years ago, the Western Australian Department of Education initiated a project to use a standard operating environment, called SOE3, which involved learning with information and communications technology. The SOE3 program that commenced in 2004 is now in 211 Western Australian schools. It was a big step forward in the provision of information technology in schools. When it was introduced, SOE3 was applied to the school network operating system. It reduced the costs to configure, maintain, support and manage school computers. The introduction of SOE3 in our schools in 2004 was a big step forward, but since then the state has not funded further development and a flow-out of that operating system.

The federal government, as part of its Digital Education Revolution initiative, is funding a more improved standard operating environment, which is known as SOE4. The committee’s first recommendation is that the government roll out SOE4 to all Western Australian schools by 2015. SOE4 is based on a wireless network and an overnight data backup. SOE4 cuts back on the need for school servers—indeed, schools need only one, not three servers—and it reduces the overall cost of information and communications technology to schools by 66 per cent. SOE4 in schools means that school students and teachers can use any physical device within the school. Using wi-fi, students in schools that have SOE4 can use personal computers, Apple computers, tablets or iPads. New high schools are being connected to SOE4. Schools using SOE3, which the state government started rolling out eight years ago, will be converted when they need infrastructure. Again, remember that with SOE 4, there is less need for hardware and less need for IT support, and that is why the committee’s first recommendation is to get this out there in the schools: let us make the schools the best learning environments they can be. SOE4 has not been rolled out because of restricted funding. We know that 400 primary schools do not have this new operating environment, and of those 400, 55 per cent are in the regions and 45 per cent are in the metropolitan area. Also, 108 high schools do not have the new standard operating environment. We were told by the Department of Education that schools need the wireless SOE4 and that rolling out SOE4 would pay for itself in a few years.

We know that students live with technology on a daily basis, and we also know that a national curriculum will soon be rolled out. Teachers and students will not gain the full benefits of that national curriculum unless they are ITC proficient. Therefore, we need to upgrade and ensure that professional development programs for teachers focus on information and communications technology. Earlier in schools, there was an emphasis on the three Rs. The three Rs are to some extent a little outdated now, because, although they are still relevant, the three Rs are now taught to students through ICT. Students are taught to read using electronic whiteboards, computers, tablets and iPads. They are taught writing skills using computers with grammar checkers, and we all know how much time is saved with arithmetic by putting the figures into a computer rather than sitting there trying to calculate things the way some members in this chamber would have done in their youth.

The report also discusses cloud computing. Cloud computing is a relatively new mobile technology that allows businesses, consumers and schools the ability to access services and their computer programs through the internet. We know that cloud computing reduces costs and increases efficiency. I am sure many members in this place use cloud computing. Cloud computing will also empower students and teachers by allowing them to access their data from any location with wireless on any device. Again, if schools have SOE4, students will be able to use laptops, tablets, phones, printers and iPads from anywhere within the school and to use cloud computing. Cloud computing will free up teachers. For those schools currently fortunate enough to have ICT technicians, cloud computing will reduce the time needed by those technicians to do their work, it will reduce student time students need and it will reduce the overall cost to the schools.

How is ICT support given to schools? Some schools get support from head office via a customer service centre. The education department has a private company looking after the schools and school devices. Again, we have to think that the 400 primary schools and 108 high schools that do not have SOE4 cannot be supported remotely by the customer service centre, and this therefore reduces the customer service centre's response. Support to some private schools and our independent schools is now often given by technical support officers who are funded from the school budgets. However, for most schools, the funds for using third parties for technical support come from the school budget and the money that is given is based on the number of students in the school and the school location. The committee heard in relation to this support that regional schools often have great problems with technical support. Schools are meant to have one computer to five children in high schools and one computer to 10 children in primary schools. In relation to support, we were repeatedly told that the ICT budget and the level of support given to schools in the metro and regional areas was inadequate. The education department does not allocate ICT technicians or offices to schools as part of a staffing or computer-number formula. As a result of that, the level and quality of support varies from school to school. So, our second recommendation was that additional funding be provided in next year's budget for ICT support staff so that schools have one full-time equivalent ICT support technician to 200 computers or have a shared resource for schools with fewer than 200 computers.

What do these ICT officers do? Within the school, they set up the computers and they support the teachers and students in learning about new equipment. They maintain and plan for upgrades to the equipment. They maintain the electronic whiteboards, the photocopiers and the printers. They organise access to interactive websites. They look after the audiovisual and videoconferencing equipment, and they can help students learn how to use their own mobile devices. We were told that as schools do not have these ICT officers, when the equipment breaks down in schools—some schools are very lucky and have things fixed straightaway—some schools have to wait several weeks before equipment is fixed. Currently we have a Technology in Public Schools Alliance, which also recommended that there should be a ratio of technicians to schools of one support technician to 200 computers. The alliance worked out the cost of that to be \$60 million to \$70 million; however, we were told that when SOE4—the new standard operating environment—is rolled out, the cost of the ICT support would be reduced.

This report is about students living and working in a digital world, so having schools today without ICT support is in some ways like having hospitals without doctors and nurses. Learning in schools is now archaic without adequate ICT support. Many of us have gone to school parents and citizens and parents and friends meetings and we know that the school communities purchase computers, iPads and tablets for children in schools so that their children get a good start to their education. However, not all parents can afford to buy the equipment and that is why we have to make sure that schools have that equipment so all students have the same chance in education. Any student who leaves school today without a good understanding of how to use information and communications technology will have trouble functioning at work, socially and at home. We must have ICT for students from kindergarten to when they leave school. As I said before, when standard operating environment 4 is rolled out, full-time equivalent staff costs will be cut, and the committee included a recommendation that from 2014 the government review, on a biannual basis, the need for FTE support staff in schools. As to e-schooling, a growing body of evidence shows that digital technologies improve student outcomes, that incorporating online learning in class assists students more than just face-to-face learning, and that young people with a home computer are less likely to play truant between the ages of 14 and 16 and more likely to be motivated to attend school. Also, home computers boost self-confidence. Because of the introduction of e-learning, continuing professional development for teachers is important in confidence building. If the government implements wi-fi and cloud computing with the rollout of SOE4, student learning will be enhanced, as will the role of teachers.

I conclude by thanking our research staff—our principal research officer, Dr Brian Gordon, and our research officer, Lucy Roberts—who have worked very hard on this area. Through this inquiry, committee members learnt a great deal about e-learning and computer technology in Western Australian schools. We now know how much emphasis must be placed on this in the future. Brian and Lucy worked very hard in organising hearings and preparing this report, and the committee appreciates their support. I also thank the other committee

members: the deputy chair, the member for Albany; the member for Southern River; the member for Eyre; and the member for Maylands. Everybody worked very hard on this inquiry.

I commend this report to the house, and I hope that after the government looks at it, it will consider including funding in next year's budget to ensure that Western Australian children are no longer behind children in other states who have greater access to information and communications technology.

MS L.L. BAKER (Maylands) [11.23 am]: I have a brief contribution to make in relation to the ICT inquiry our committee completed. Obviously, I must firstly thank Dr Brian Gordon and Lucy Roberts, our intrepid interpreters of the evidence and writers of the report.

Mr P. Abetz: Hear, hear! They do a great job.

Ms L.L. BAKER: They are truly awesome.

I want to focus on one recommendation in our report, and in doing so I refer to finding 3, which states —

Under the Federal initiative, the National Secondary School Computer Fund, schools can purchase netbooks, laptops, tablet computing devices, install more desktop computers or deploy a mix of mobile and stationary devices. This has seen the ratio of computers to students in high schools rise to 1:1.

Finding 4 states —

The cornerstone of the Department of Education's ICT strategy into the future is the deployment of a wireless standard operating system known as SOE4.

Our chair referred significantly to that in her contribution. Finding 4 continues —

However, funding is severely restricted and is largely dependent on Federal funding through the National Secondary Schools Computer Fund.

That is the point I want to talk about.

I will start by saying that I have received communication from schools—I do not know whether any of my colleagues have received similar communication—and I have brought one email to the house today from the president of one of the primary school parents and citizens associations in my electorate. He has written to express his concern that the Department of Education has not been allocated adequate funds to provide information technology resources for schools, according to the information provided to him in his role as chair of the P&C. His email reads —

Although many schools now have technology such as laptops and iPads, I believe that the state government has failed to provide adequate funding and resources to ensure this new technology can be fully utilised. Schools are being asked to do more with limited and out-dated software, hardware, and infrastructure. This situation is only set to worsen with the introduction of the Australian Curriculum, as children without adequate access to the necessary technology will be severely disadvantaged.

The Department of Education does not provide each school with IT support officers to maintain technology, and most schools cannot afford to employ IT support officers. School staff are not sufficiently trained in the use of IT, which impacts on the ability of the school to function effectively and for teachers to utilise technology in their classrooms to engage with and teach our kids.

I am concerned about the lack of resourcing for IT in schools, and the effect this will have on our children's education. Therefore, I am asking you to ... support of funding for:

- Software solutions to replace out-dated and unsupported database systems currently in schools
- IT officers for schools at a ratio of 1 officer for every 200 computers
- IT training for school staff (including school administrators, teachers, and support staff)

In order for our children to stay up to date with new technology and develop essential IT knowledge and skills, the state government must properly resource IT in schools.

I thought that email was particularly pertinent, and I have received several emails of that nature. The matters expressed in that email relate directly to recommendation 1 of the committee report, which states —

The Committee recommends to the Minister for Education that additional funding be provided in the 2013–14 state budget to allow the 'roll-out' of SOE4 to all schools in WA by the end of 2015.

I would like to reinforce the fact that so far in this state, compliments of the federal government through the Digital Education Revolution initiative, all but 108 senior high schools have had significant improvements in their standard operating environment. A committee media release states —

Because of similar budget constraints, the Committee found that there is a notably underfunding ‘technology support’ in schools which is inhibiting the take up and application of technology by some teachers in affected schools.

Four hundred primary schools and 108 senior high schools do not yet have the new standard operating environment. I have had many conversations about this because I sit on the board of two independent public schools in my electorate, both of which are experiencing difficulties in ICT support. One has been an IPS for a couple of years and has taken advantage of the flexibility in its budget to try to redirect some of its staffing resources to fill the gap. The school is very advanced and has some really innovative programs, and it runs e-learning with other colleges and schools across the state; in fact, the school I am talking about has an online program it runs in conjunction with Northam students. The school does an amazing job, but it is resourcing it itself and receiving no additional funding. The school has had to divert funding from staffing and other areas to fill the gap the need is creating.

My final comments are on the replacement and upgrade of hardware in schools. I acknowledge things are changing rapidly; the cloud computing system will change things immensely. It is good that the Department of Education is heading in that direction—heading for the clouds. But I still see problems while we do this transition. People from John Forrest Secondary College talked to me about what they do to replace the big, lumpy, clunky bits of hardware that are sitting in computer rooms at the school. They are trying to work out what to do with them and how to replace them. They were hoping to pass on the notebook computers when students graduated, and then follow that up with a replacement, but they simply do not have the money to do that. So, somebody else’s notebook will be held over and reallocated to a new student in the following year, and that is probably not the best outcome.

In conclusion, I recommend this report to the house. It raises some significant issues that I hope the government pays attention to because this is about future learning environments for our children, and they need to be of paramount importance to everyone in this house.

DR G.G. JACOBS (Eyre) [11.30 am]: I, too, being a member of the committee, look forward to making some comments about this very important report. According to my children, I am not the most savvy IT person around. However, as the member for Alfred Cove said, we all learnt a lot about information technology and, in particular, the new term, information and communications technology. This came home to me very recently when the Minister for Energy visited my town and, indeed, visited Nulsen Primary School. There was an interactive session, with a class using a computer and an interactive whiteboard, in and around energy: they were learning about energy, circuits and how power and energy are not only generated, but also delivered to households. I have to say to members that I believe the amount of attention and concentration those children had and the amount of interaction that was happening significantly reinforced and sped up the learning process because these kids were involved. In my day, we would go and read a book about it and then talk about it. Here we have it happening in front of the children in an interactive way, in real time and with motion, with things being shown to them. Obviously, in many cases a picture says a thousand words. That is the technology at work. Information and communications technology is vital in the learning environment for our kids in the twenty-first century and beyond.

I want to reflect on how the political process can work in an interesting way. Sometimes it is a little slow for us, but it does work. I want to show members how this political process can institute change and why this report and its recommendations are so important. On 23 December 2009, a James and a John, who worked as colleagues at the Esperance Senior High School and provided IT support, requested an appointment with me to discuss IT funding in schools. They presented two issues. The first was that the department will fund only 0.4 of a full-time equivalent computer technician for the Esperance Senior High School. At that time, there were 390 computers in the school. The Esperance high school has two FTEs, with the school paying the extra 1.6 FTEs from its own budget. The second issue that they brought to me in 2009 was how the feds relate to the computers in schools program. This is known as the national secondary school computer fund. The federal government recognised the need for technical and infrastructure support—for example, furniture, installation and troubleshooting—to run the computers and to run the program. Therefore, it provided \$1 500 per computer supplied. However, the allegation was that the state government had captured this funding and did not necessarily plan to pass it on to the schools that the computers had been sent to. Although it has taken some time, I hope that James and John will be encouraged that down the track—today—we present a significant recommendation that in fact reflects their concerns those years ago.

I wrote to the then Minister for Education about those matters. I will quote a paragraph in and around the national secondary school computer fund and the \$1 500 allocated to each computer, which was introduced under the federal government program. It states —

The funds will be managed centrally to ensure that individual schools are treated equitably and that each school receives appropriate funding when they are ready to acquire and install the computers.

Finding 13 of the committee's report reflects the concerns and the issues that have been grappled with, if you like, to get us to this point. It states —

The issue of the provision of ICT support has been in and out of the Industrial Relations Commission for three years without resolution. An alliance of six major stakeholders has now been formed to try to secure additional funding from the government to address:

- Funding for ICT systems and infrastructure;
- Funding for ICT support staff at 1FTE per 200 computers, ...
- Funding to provide training for IT officers and other school staff.

In order for this important technology to work for our kids, I recommend this report. Recommendation 2, which has been quoted by a number of us, states —

The Committee recommends to the Minister for Education that additional funding be provided in the 2013 budget for ICT support staff to schools at 1FTE per 200 computers, with a shared resource for schools with less than 200 computers.

We have a process that works. It was a great privilege to be involved in that process, particularly after the representations I received from people such as James and John over the concerns they had about resourcing and delivering ICT to our schools. There is no more important resource than our children and their education. I certainly commend this report to the house.

I would like to thank Brian Gordon and Lucy Roberts for the incredible work that they do. As I have said in this place before, I have been involved with committees over the years since 2005. Those two people provide drafts that I have never experienced before, because I have never had to do a lot of work on what they present. That is how good the work that is presented to us is in order to get true meaning and make a difference, particularly in this case, in providing excellent ICT for our children in the twenty-first century.

MR P.B. WATSON (Albany) [11.39 am]: I rise today to comment on the Education and Health Standing Committee's report titled "The role of ICT in Western Australian Education: Living and Working in a Digital World". Firstly, I thank our staff, Dr Brian Gordon and Lucy Roberts, who have done a tremendous job. As the member for Eyre said, they make our job very easy.

The Western Australian Department of Education's information technology section spans an area of 2.5 million square kilometres. The Department of Education in Western Australia has one of the largest operating networks in Australia; it reaches across the state to connect all schools with up to 10-megabit per second telecommunication services. In addition to fibre optics, schools are connected through 36 satellite sites and about 170-odd sites that are still copper based. It is in this context that the department has developed its information and communications technology strategy. The department states that it is trying to maximise the value of education in terms of technologies in the classroom. It is a very big and complex organisation; there are 150 000 computers on its network. It is a very large and complex technical environment. The department runs email systems and collaboration tools. Up to one billion emails a year go through the department's gateway. It delivers to schools services such as the internet, with up to 30 terabytes of data a month being delivered to schools.

The main issue, I know for schools in my electorate, is the fact that no training is done for IT people in schools. What happens is that money is allocated to the school and the school has to find someone in the school to do the IT work. We in the chamber are very lucky that we have the member for Forrestfield in case anything goes wrong. I think on the other side of politics, we have what we call an expert on it —

Several members interjected.

Mr P.B. WATSON: However, that is not the case in some regional schools. In one country school, the gardener was the only person who had any IT experience, so if anything went wrong, he was the person people went to. In schools that do not have an IT person who is properly trained, if something goes wrong, especially in a regional area, someone has to explain to the helpdesk, which generally is in Perth, what is wrong. They say, "This little thing here doesn't go in that little thing there", so the poor old person at the helpdesk in Perth has no idea what the person in the school is talking about, and the regional school has to get someone to come in and look at it. All this comes out of the school budget, and schools in some regional areas would have to bring someone in from probably 200 or 300 kilometres away and pay for their overnight accommodation. All those costs come out of

the school's budget. Therefore, we need not only a single place in Perth where everybody knows what is going on, but also training in schools to ensure staff have adequate access to and know the IT systems. It is all right to have computers in all schools, but we need to have teachers who are competent enough to teach IT. Therefore, the committee's recommendation 4 states —

The Committee recommends to the Minister for Education that by 2014 the Education Department mandate ICT as part of continuing professional development. ICT should be integrated into the classroom curriculum and aligned with the teacher's approach to student learning.

I know that the education department's philosophy is that a good teacher will teach a good class, but without the top facilities, it is very hard for a top teacher to do these things.

The Victorian Department of Education and Early Childhood Development is undertaking an iPads for Learning trial as a joint initiative with Apple Corporation. This trial provides some 600 accessible iPads to participating students on a one iPad to one student basis, 24 hours a day, seven days a week for the term of the trial. The trial is investigating progressive and effective use of learning technologies in learning and teaching with a view to develop independent and self-initiated learning in students, thereby extending their learning beyond the classroom. I think this is a great idea and I hope it is successful. A lot of students get distracted in the classroom; I was one of them! However, if students have the opportunity to take their homework home with them on their iPad and it is with them 24 hours a day, seven days a week, in this current day and age, as long as the iPads are used properly, it will be a tremendous advantage.

The Community and Public Sector Union—Civil Service Association has a number of reservations about the current situation in schools. The union states —

The real issue that we have identified is that the Department of Education does not allocate ICT officers to schools as part of the staffing formula for the schools, so schools must fund positions from their own budget or trade-in part of their teacher allocation for ICT officers.

Some schools are more able to do that than others —

Large schools can incorporate ICT officers much more easily than some of the smaller schools, for which this can become a real problem. The union also states —

... Primary schools in particular tend not to have a lot to play with and for the most part they do not have ICT officers, although there may be some exceptions to the rule. Where they are employed, ICT officers are responsible for the set-up, maintenance and ongoing support of technology in the school.

Where they are employed they are responsible for setting up computers and other devices; supporting staff and student computers; service support; maintenance and upgrades; other technologies ...

Although the Department acknowledges here the importance of ICT Officers in delivering eLearning to schools, this is not reflected in the resourcing.

ICT officers are not allocated to schools from the Department of Education; instead, the schools must fund the ICT officers themselves. Metropolitan high schools have varying levels of ICT officers employed, and regional and remote schools can have no ICT officers. As I said, if something goes wrong in regional areas, there are huge issues; the schools either have to get someone in from a long way away or try to fix it themselves. As I said before, someone who experiences a hardware problem needs to be able to describe that problem in detail. Depending on the person's understanding of technology, they may not be able to do that and may not understand the instructions that come from the person on the helpdesk at the other end of the phone—I have been through that! These consultations can be a time-consuming process, so, basically, it means there are delays in resolving issues, and it is not done very effectively. In some cases, the issues cannot be resolved in that way at all. In some instances, if there is no support, contractors can be brought in to do some of the more complex work, but this tends to be quite expensive and uses much of the school's budget.

In current and future developments, mobile devices and applications are increasingly valued as important learning tools in K–12. Once banned from the classroom, mobile devices and apps have become such compelling tools that schools are beginning to rethink standing policies, and some are even beginning to implement bring-your-own-device programs.

I congratulate my colleagues on the committee for this report. I think this is something that is very important for our future. We are going forward with e-learning, but I think we have to take the education department with us. I know it is a huge, huge project for the department, and I acknowledge its hard work on this so far. However, if we want to keep our young children up with the rest of Australia and the world, we need to ensure that we implement policies so that every school has properly trained teachers for e-technology and that there are properly trained people who can work the computers, especially in regional areas. I think it is very, very important that our young people in regional areas are not left behind.

MR P. ABETZ (Southern River) [11.48 am]: I will keep my remarks on the Education and Health Standing Committee's tenth report reasonably brief because I think much of what needs to be said has already been said.

The ICT area is rapidly moving. When I graduated from university in, I think, 1973, nobody had heard of the personal computer. In fact, the university had one computer in conjunction with the Hydro Electric Commission that took up a double-storey building and I do not know how many technicians were employed to keep the computer's contact points clean. I am told that computer's capacity was a lot less than that of my first 586 computer with a 20-megabyte hard disk! Therefore, technology is certainly moving extremely quickly. It is encouraging to see the way that schools have embraced information and communications technology. Often that is because a teacher has a personal interest in information technology—or is a computer buff, as people would say—and is willing and able to bring his expertise into the school and is often willing to stay behind after working hours to fix whatever needs to be fixed.

I remember the case that the member for Albany mentioned. We were at one of the country schools and we were told that the ICT person is the gardener. He knows all about computers; he is a computer buff. He comes in when it rains and fixes the computers. Although those kinds of situations have been very valuable and appreciated, the time has come to move on and engage ICT technicians or support staff—whatever you want to call them—in each of the schools, and naturally that requires funding. Until the standard operating environment 4 that has already been mentioned is rolled out, one technician to roughly 200 computers seems a reasonable figure from what we have learnt. The Department of Education is to be congratulated on being technically innovative and having also developed the SOE4 system, for which it has been awarded by various IT groups for its innovativeness and so on. The education department has also developed its own cloud system and, in the long term, that should lead to more cost savings as individual schools will no longer need to have servers, which we were told generally have a life span of three to four years. Also, the SOE4 platform allows remote access to the computers from a support centre in, say, Perth. Issues can then be resolved quickly and, of course, that makes very good use of people's time.

Local school-based technicians are needed to assist with hardware and other mobile devices such as interactive whiteboards and so on, so I am very keen to see recommendation 4 implemented. It states —

The Committee recommends to the Minister for Education that by 2014 the Education Department mandate ICT as part of continuing professional development.

That is for teachers —

ICT should be integrated into the classroom curriculum and aligned with the teacher's approach to student learning.

There is no point in putting the ICT equipment into classrooms and schools if teachers are not trained to get the best use out of it. From what we could gather, there is currently no coherent mandate or strategy to achieve that.

The other exciting thing with the move to the national curriculum is that because it provides a skeleton framework, resources can be tagged to that curriculum framework, and there are so many good resources available. I cannot remember which group it is, but one group is indexing those resources so that excellent resources for all the different subject areas will be available to teachers around the country at the click of a mouse. That is something that will hopefully improve the quality of education.

The other thing I want to briefly mention—I do not think any of the other speakers mentioned it—is that the education department has trialled the so-called “Connect” concept. “Connect” is not about teaching but about administration. It is a system for use by teachers, parents and students to allow parents ready access to their child's performance and attendance data, school announcements, class details and what is happening in class generally. It is basically a “cloud” kind of concept whereby people can login on their iPads and find out information about their children, such as what is happening in the school and so on. It also allows parents to individually update their contact details with the school. It really has a lot of potential. It is being trialled in a number of schools and it seems to be working very well. Teachers find that they can communicate to the parents through that site and they can put up photos of class work and so on, and they can also report to or leave a message for parents. It has tremendous potential and saves an awful lot of time.

ICT in Western Australian education is well used, but it could be even better. The committee's recommendations would certainly help to get the best out of the ICT investment we are making with taxpayers' dollars, and with some finetuning and some increased funding, particularly for ICT support, the education department and teachers will be able to make optimum use of that resource in education.

As other members have done, I commend our staff, Brian Gordon and Lucy Roberts, for the excellent work that they have done.

DR J.M. WOOLLARD (Alfred Cove) [11.56 am]: I present for tabling the seventeenth report of the Education and Health Standing Committee titled “Annual Report 2011–2012”.

[See paper 5412.]

Dr J.M. WOOLLARD: Tabling this report gives the committee the opportunity to look back at the different reports it has tabled throughout the year and the government’s response to some of those reports, and perhaps to provide some feedback to the government on its response. Today I will focus on the recommendations from the fourteenth report titled “Report on key learnings from the Committee research trip 11–17 March 2012”, which trip was to the north west.

As members will be aware from that report, the committee made only one recommendation about hearing problems in children. It encouraged the government to look at the memorandum of understanding so that the currently unacceptable rates of hearing problems for Aboriginal children in remote and regional areas can be reduced and those children can have a better start in life. Paediatricians made a recommendation to the committee that school health nurses could play a role in this area. The school health nurses, particularly in the wet season, could examine the children’s ears on a Monday morning. If the child has otitis media, the nurse could then, through the memorandum of understanding and through a minor change to the Poisons Act, diagnose and treat the child or, without a change to the Poisons Act, phone a general practitioner or an ear, nose and throat specialist or send, through telemetry, an image of that glue ear—that middle ear infection—and then be given directions to give that child antibiotics to clear up that infection. In the government’s response to that recommendation it stated, under “Background”, that it has a memorandum that supports the early identification of hearing problems. It may support the identification of hearing problems, but it is no good just identifying that there are hearing problems if they are not treated. It also states that the treatment is delivered by a number of health providers. Again, that is currently inadequate. It also states that the level of ear disease in the Aboriginal population remains much higher than that in the general Australian population, but this reflects the heterogeneity of the Aboriginal population and the environmental conditions in which they live.

Although I am very pleased that the government has said that the Department of Health is currently strengthening its response to the prevention, screening and treatment of ear health issues, and that it will be appointing an expert panel of clinicians to inform best practice and investment, we know that the problem exists now. We know also that often when things are referred to a committee, it is basically a wave. Something needs to be done about these ear problems and about these children who are falling behind from the very beginning. That is why we need the child health nurses to check, as part of those universal visits, the ears of the children. We also need, particularly in the wet season, the school health nurse, or it could be another health professional, to look at the children’s ears on a Monday morning and ensure that, if they have an infection, they get treatment. The government’s response said that there is a legislative restriction in diagnosing illness and prescribing antibiotics. Yes, the school nurse could play a role through that modification to the Poisons Act. But I remind the government that it does not need to be done through a modification to the Poisons Act. The nurse could contact the general practitioner or the ENT specialist, who could prescribe the antibiotics. The school nurses could play a vital role now.

The Aboriginal children in these communities who have hearing problems are not learning. We know that we need to hear to learn. The committee heard of a school in Roebourne in which 94 per cent of the children in grades 1 to 3 had some form of hearing loss. If children do not have strong hearing, they do not have a good start, because if a child cannot hear, they cannot learn; and, if they cannot learn at school, they cannot be educated. So, it is not just a case of identifying and accepting that there is a problem and getting a committee to look at this. We need to treat the problem. That was why the committee said to the government, “You have got school health nurses there, so use the school health nurses; or, if you want to use Aboriginal ear health workers, use Aboriginal ear health workers. But someone needs to be put in that position now, not in six months or 12 months’ time.” Children need to hear to learn. In Indigenous communities in the Pilbara and the Kimberley, one child in two has some hearing loss. We know that there are social and behavioural impacts of hearing loss. These include unwillingness to attend school, low employment levels, antisocial behaviour, increased risk of using drugs and alcohol, repeated contact with the juvenile and criminal justice systems, and higher rates of criminal activity.

The Health and Education Committee is a good committee, because we know that health and education go hand in hand. That is why we looked at this matter and presented this report to the government. We will, I hope, as part of our final report, present further information to the government on this issue.

We know that the earlier the intervention for these children, the better the chance they will have in life. If the intervention is in the first two years, they have a good chance; if it is in the first year, they have a better chance; if it is in the first six months, fantastic; and if the child is treated as a newborn, outstanding.

In April this year, 3 500 children between the ages of zero and 16 were waiting to access specialists, particularly ear, nose and throat specialists. The number of children waiting to access other specialists—endocrinologists, gastroenterologists, pathologists, neurologists, respiratory medicine, rheumatology and psychiatry—did not even come up to 1 000. So there is a big waiting list for children to see ear, nose and throat specialists.

The committee heard about a child who had been identified as needing treatment when they were two years old, when the surgery would have been crucial, but that child was still waiting five years later for that surgery. At the moment, children in the north west of this state with ear problems are not getting access to basic health care. There is a fragmentation of services. The hospitals in the north west are not dealing with this issue.

When we presented our report, we congratulated the Telethon Institute for Child Health Research on its mobile children's ear clinics. They have one clinic in the Pilbara and they have two in the south west. In fact, I believe that in the Labor Party's current election policy it commits \$3 million to extend the rollout of those ear clinics. I have to tell the Labor Party that although that is wonderful news, I would like another \$2.5 million for those clinics, because we also need a mobile surgical bus that can go around the north west and treat these children. A smart ear fix trial is currently being conducted at Fremantle Hospital. Under that trial, the operating time for ear surgery has been decreased from 35 minutes to five minutes. This service can be done as an outpatient service. So this could be done on a mobile surgical bus that travels around the Kimberley and the Pilbara.

I go back to the government's response that the Department of Health is strengthening its response to the prevention, screening and treatment of ear health issues. In the statistics that we presented to the government, we said that Indigenous children in Australia experience an average of 32 weeks of middle-ear infections. This compares with just two weeks for non-Indigenous children. There is, therefore, an urgency for this issue to be addressed now. The World Health Organization states that a threshold of four per cent for ear drum rupture is a massive public health problem. The committee reported that the rate for Indigenous children in the north west is 15 per cent—almost four times as high. The time that it takes to correct a ruptured ear membrane is six minutes, and the cost of surgery is between \$40 and \$50 per child. Imagine that—\$50, and that child will get a good start to school and to their life.

I have said that the government should look to fund a mobile surgical service. Mr Acting Speaker, I ask to lay on the table today some photos of the mobile surgical bus—one of the outside, and one of the inside—so that members can see what this bus looks like.

[The paper was tabled for the information of members.]

Dr J.M. WOOLLARD: We know that having strong hearing gives children a good start in life. We want to break the silence that currently exists for these children who have hearing problems.

The reason this mobile surgical service is required is that the only hospitals in the Kimberley and the Pilbara that have operating suites and equipment that enable them to do anything more than minor surgery are Broome, Derby and Kununurra. That means that patients and their families have to travel to these hospitals, or on some occasions they have to travel to Perth for more specialised surgery. The mobile surgical service would provide an operating suite that was staffed by proceduralists and specialists, anaesthetists and nurses, and it could visit regional non-equipped towns to perform day procedures, or occasionally short-stay, overnight procedures. The mobile surgical service could go to Wyndham, Halls Creek, Fitzroy Crossing, Onslow, Tom Price or Newman in the Pilbara, and be sited next to the local hospital so that if post-operative recuperation were needed, that could occur in the hospital. If the government funded a mobile surgical service in addition to changing the memorandum of understanding so that school health nurses could identify the children who needed to be referred to an ear, nose and throat specialist, the types of surgical procedures that could be performed on the bus would include ear procedures, grommets, adenoid surgery, cataract surgery and hernia and laparoscopic procedures, and paediatricians could perform minor operations for undescended testicles, cystoscopies and prostate biopsies. A mobile surgical service is needed and some costing has been done on it. If two proceduralists accompanied the bus, one could consult while the other operated. Those two people could go from town to town and the service would be used probably for a minimum of 200 days a year.

There are big advantages to this government addressing as a matter of urgency the hearing problems of children in the north west. As I said before, the rates are unacceptably high. When children are sent to Perth or to a major town, it disrupts the families and is costly. The Indigenous community has been very accepting of undergoing surgery in the local communities. A school health nurse could screen the children on a Monday morning and treat them twice daily with antibiotics for a week and then check them again on Friday to see whether the infection had cleared up. If it had not cleared up, the school nurse could organise a community health worker to continue administering antibiotics over the weekend and to check the children again on Monday. If we screen and treat the children early enough, they might not develop the types of hearing problems that they are developing now at such unacceptably high rates. A school nurse would assess the children, call the general practitioner or ENT specialist and treat the children on two or three occasions. The referral would then go to the

ENT specialist. A mobile surgical service would benefit the whole community. It would benefit those who have private insurance as well as those who rely on Medicare for their support.

Advances in medical technology over the next five years could make it possible to perform two-thirds of the surgery that is being conducted in hospitals as day cases. A mobile surgical service could be a great cost-saving measure to the government as well as a life-changing experience for the children in the north west who have hearing problems.

I thank the government for its response to the report but do not believe it will address the problem that we have in the north west. It may address the problem at some time in the future, but we cannot afford to wait any longer. For many years the state and federal governments have been talking about closing the gap. This is a prime example of how this government could close the gap and assist these children during their early years and ensure that they get a good start in life. Hopefully, that good start in life will see them through to when they leave school and become parents and members of the community.

MR P. ABETZ (Southern River) [12.15 pm]: I want to briefly address the Education and Health Standing Committee's annual report. Having served on this committee for four years, it has been an interesting and informative journey. The past year has again been one of learning about and gaining a greater understanding of the interconnectedness between the health and educational issues facing our state. I pay tribute to the work of the committee staff, Dr Brian Gordon and Ms Lucy Roberts.

[Quorum formed.]

Mr P. ABETZ: The inquiry into improving educational outcomes for Western Australians of all ages did not emerge out of a vacuum. To me, it seemed to be a logical follow-on from our inquiry into the adequacy and appropriateness of prevention and treatment services for alcohol and illicit drug problems in Western Australia and the inquiry into the general health screening of children at preprimary and primary school level. If we are to improve the educational outcomes for all Western Australians, we need to address a number of interconnected issues, including alcohol use and abuse during pregnancy. To cause a child to have brain damage for life when the cause is totally preventable is surely child abuse. We would not tolerate parents hitting their children in the head and causing them brain damage, so the question is: why do we turn a blind eye to mothers causing brain damage to their children by drinking during pregnancy? Doctors do not like diagnosing foetal alcohol syndrome because the mother might feel guilty and ashamed, but unless our community faces the reality that alcohol and pregnancy should not be mixed, the educational future for many children will be bleak indeed. We have succeeded in getting alcohol road deaths down by sending the message that drinking and driving do not mix. We have managed to change the public perception on smoking, so much so that smoking prevalence has come down from around 50 per cent to around 14 per cent. We need to mount a similar program for drinking while pregnant.

The other interconnected issue with health and education is ear health, which the member for Alfred Cove has spoken about at length. We need a major focus in our Aboriginal communities to get parents to understand the importance of ear health and addressing infections early so that their children's hearing is not damaged. If we are to improve the educational outcomes for all Western Australians, we must address this issue.

In addition, we also need to address the problem of illicit drugs. Contrary to the spin that is put out by a small but politically powerful group—it is well funded by George Soros—which is pushing for the legalising of illicit drugs, that is certainly not the way to go. Illicit drugs are illicit for a very good reason. They damage a person's health in general and many, particularly cannabis and methamphetamines, damage the brain. The latest spin document posted by that group arrived in the offices of all members of Parliament earlier this month. It is titled "Alternatives to Prohibition" and it claims that the views contained within the document are evidence-based which, sadly, has come to mean that those involved in its production have selectively cherry-picked and manipulated the data to suit their purposes. They promote the legalisation of illicit drugs and state that evidence suggests that it leads to better outcomes. They tell us the wonderful results that decriminalising illicit drugs has had in Portugal. What they do not tell us is that decriminalisation has led to drug usage going from 7.8 per cent of the population to 12 per cent, which is a 50 per cent increase in the number of people who regularly use illicit drugs. Switzerland's soft approach to illicit drugs has meant that the use of cannabis for males aged between 15 and 39 years has increased to 40 per cent of the population. The legalising brigade mock and oppose the renewed focus on the recovery approach to drug addiction because their ideology precludes that approach. They ridicule the tough law and order approach to drugs in Sweden. What they do not tell us is that Sweden used to have the highest illicit drug-taking rate in the western world; however, through its approach it now has the lowest drug-usage rate in the western world and, coupled with that, it has now moved to having the best educational outcomes in the western world. We know from research into alcohol availability that increasing the availability and accessibility of alcohol leads to increased drinking. It would be utterly foolish to think that if illicit drugs were made legal and much cheaper it would be any different.

Professor Neil McKeganey, a researcher at the University of Glasgow who has done much to expose the myth of the benefits of the harm minimisation approach to drugs, wrote in *The West Australian* of 9 May —

The proposal to legalise illegal drugs is a policy in search of a disaster. This is a policy that is often called by well-meaning middle-class professionals who live far from communities that have been most affected by the problem of illegal drugs.

It is a call that one rarely hears from those living cheek by jowl with a drug problem. When those people speak, what one hears most often is not the call to make drugs more available in their community, but to make them less available and for protection against the drug trade, not a green light to its further extension.

If we are to increase education and health outcomes of those using illicit drugs, we need to get them out of the all-consuming drug culture and reengage them with their families and mainstream society.

Another problem that the drug legalising brigade will not own up to is the fact that drug addicts generally do not send their kids to school regularly. A young man came to my office recently. He is in a broken family situation. His nine-year-old daughter is in the custody of his wife, but she misses 40 per cent of school because when the mum is spaced out, the little girl has to look after the new baby that she has had with her new drug-taking partner.

I commend the Dalgarno Institute and Drug Free Australia for their ongoing work of making people aware of the massive damaging effects that illicit drugs and the overuse of alcohol have on our community. If we are to improve the educational outcomes for all Western Australians, we must start with improving them for our children. The best way to do that does not need to cost more money; rather, it needs good teachers and healthy children who come from healthy and functional homes. If our committee helps us as a society move in that direction, the time invested by the committee should yield a very rich dividend.

MS L.L. BAKER (Maylands) [12.25 pm]: I will not make a long contribution. It has been a great pleasure to work with my colleagues over the course of the past several years on a number of reports, particularly the three that have been tabled about education and the many others we have tabled about early childhood and child health. Today I will refer to a report that the committee tabled about its learnings from its trip north to the Kimberley to undertake research. I will talk about that specifically because it relates to the health of our young people and, in particular, of our young Indigenous people.

The level of ear disease in the Aboriginal population in our state remains much higher than that of the general Australian population, particularly in rural and remote communities. The level of one condition, otitis media, is of great concern. Correct diagnosis is key to effective management. Antibiotics and other medical therapies, including audiological interventions and surgical interventions, might be recommended for the disease when it is established. The Education and Health Standing Committee visited the Kimberley and Pilbara because of this significant problem and was confronted with the reality that middle ear infections in children existed all over the area. In fact, there were some very high rates of infection. The committee report states that up to 80 per cent of Aboriginal children in some regions were affected by hearing loss. In one school it was reported that 94 per cent of children in grades 1 to 3 had some form of hearing loss. Hearing loss, of course, affects a child's learning and engagement in and out of school. The committee proposed an expansion of school health nurse roles to address this hearing problem. Part of the rationale for that was because we were told that even when middle ear infections are diagnosed, there may be a lack of compliance by families in treating their children.

I will refer to the committee's recommendation and then comment on the Department of Health's response to the recommendation. The committee's recommendation reads as follows —

The Committee strongly recommends that the Minister for Health and the Minister for Education develop a Memorandum of Understanding with the purpose of preventing, identifying and ensuring prompt treatment of middle ear infections in children.

This Memorandum will facilitate the examination of all children in primary school by an appropriately qualified school or community nurse. Such examinations should be more frequent during the wet season.

A protocol should be developed to allow the school or community health nurse to examine a child at the beginning of the week and where a middle ear infection is present to treat ear infections during school hours with antibiotics either kept at school or purchased from the local pharmacy.

Telemetry linked to a medical specialist can be used where there is any doubt as to the presence of an ear infection.

When a child misses school who is being treated for an ear infection, the school health nurse is to notify child development services and the local community health services to ensure another appropriately qualified person is able to visit the child at home to administer antibiotics.

We received a response from the Department of Health, which was tabled by our committee earlier this week and which basically says nothing. It refers to the establishment of a committee; it is always a good thing for a department to establish a committee when it does not want to put any further resources into an area. I am not saying that the interagency ear health network is a bad thing; indeed, it is a good thing. But a committee is a committee—we all know that. A committee is not hard dollars, it is not mobile treatment, it is not early diagnosis and it is not a part of any of the steps that our committee recommended. I am extraordinarily disappointed with the ability of the Ministers for Education and Health to flick off what is a massive problem in our state and, again, ignore the committee's recommendation. That is not going unnoticed by the public and it is certainly not going unnoticed in the north of our state.

In conclusion, I have read for members some information that indicates that not only is prevention really important, but also it has to be followed up with suitable treatments. I totally understand that. I am very proud to reinforce that WA Labor has pledged \$3.6 million to expand the Earbus program in the northern part of our state, which will be extended out to the Kimberley region. I would like to put on the record a few details about that \$3.6 million. I quote from a media release by the Leader of the Opposition, which appeared on the WA Labor website on 26 September and which reads, in part —

Indigenous children were prone to middle ear infections, which created hearing problems and could lead to learning difficulties, behavioural problems and a drop in school attendance.

“It is important for Indigenous children to have their ears screened for infections and hearing problems,” ...

“These problems could be mitigated if these children had access to quality primary health care and specialist services like the Earbus.

Ending the quote from the Leader of the Opposition, my comment is that he is absolutely correct. This is just one part, but I am so proud that WA Labor is pledging to put some money into the first component of dealing with a critical problem that needs help. The Leader of the Opposition continued his remarks by saying —

“The Earbus program is a network of mobile clinics that travel throughout the Perth metropolitan area and the South West and Pilbara regions to screen children's ear health and hearing.

“The program needs extra funding to expand its services.

“In recognition of the great work of the acclaimed Earbus program, WA Labor will provide \$3.6million over three years to expand the program to the Kimberley.”

... in 2011, Earbus screened 3344 children, with only 50.5 per cent passing, 34.5 per cent needing further screening and 14.9 per cent needing treatment by a GP or ear, nose and throat specialist.

Of course, this is where the follow-up is required and we have referred to how that might happen in our report. I congratulate my party and I am very proud that we have made this first commitment and I am just speechless that the government can continue to ignore this critical problem.

DR G.G. JACOBS (Eyre) [12.31 pm]: My comments will be very brief because there are other reports pending and I know the member for Kingsley is very keen to present her report, as is the member for Wanneroo. Just commenting on the annual report for 2011–12 of the Education and Health Standing Committee, it is a very hardworking committee, which from 1 July 1 2011 to 30 June 2012 conducted 29 briefings, 22 deliberative meetings and six formal evidence hearings. It had 52 witnesses appearing at hearings and 92 appearing at briefings, and it tabled four reports, 24 report findings and six report recommendations. We wanted to make these reports and recommendations significant and we wanted to make a difference. Around the issues my colleagues have talked about, we were actually bowled over when we went to the north because of the prevalence and incidence of deafness in children and the impact it had on their learning. We were bowled over by the fact that when we went to classrooms there was surround sound to boost the teacher's voice, because so many children were deaf—basically more than three out of four children had some form of ear disease and some form of deafness, as has been said by my colleagues.

I want to address one issue. It is often said that the issue is a socioeconomic one, which is about living conditions and hygiene, and not about looking at the acute problem, whether it be glue ear, ruptured eardrums or ongoing deafness, because they are acute problems and their causation is one step back. It is about hygiene and living conditions, and the propensity for children's Eustachian tubes to get blocked, which leads to all the problems that we see. Talking about those other issues is a bit like in medical practice seeing a patient with appendicitis and

saying the appendicitis is due to the patient's diet, that they must address their diet and if we address diet in the community, we will not have appendicitis; however, the patient has appendicitis and is suffering before us now. If one of us was that patient or that patient was our kid, we would want treatment for that child. We can talk about the epidemiology and we can talk about all of that, but we have acute issues in the north now that we have to deal with. Yes, we have to deal with those socioeconomic issues and the living conditions and all those things that impact on this, which take time to address, but it really is about dealing with the acute issues now to relieve all the consequences for those poor kids in the Kimberley.

I have to say that the responses the committee got from my government were basically the party line that just goes along and says that the government is strengthening its response to this issue with prevention, screening and treatment. However, the government does not actually go on to say how we will deliver a program on the ground for these unfortunate kids who are suffering now. As a regional practitioner for over 25 years, I have to say that the model of care is very much urban. Primary care providers, including community health nurses, raising concerns will always be followed by a referral to an accessible service. But it does not work like that in the regions. There are major issues with accessibility for communities and people in the communities accessing services—the tyranny of distance if you like. The paucity of services on their doorstep makes it almost impossible for this particular demographic to engage the services. So, we have to take the services to them. If Fred Hollows could deliver a program to restore sight in the Third World and have the cataracts of children and adults operated on in the field to restore their sight, surely in Western Australia we can deliver a program for kids to restore their hearing. I understand, Minister for Health, that if we step back, there are significant issues. I understand about social issues, living conditions and hygiene—I understand all that—but we have people, and kids particularly, with acute problems now.

Dr K.D. Hames: If you ever want to ask me, I'll tell you all the things we are doing.

Dr G.G. JACOBS: Yes, I understand all that, but we have a significant prevalence of conditions such as glue ear, ruptured eardrums and hearing issues now. While we address all of those other issues, it is important to address the acute issues that are impacting on kids now. This is about restoring health and this is about restoring hearing. I encourage our government at least to match the spend that the opposition promises to deliver services to the Kimberley and the north. The committee understands the issues and I am sure members of the house understand the issues of people, and particularly kids and families, accessing services thousands of miles to the south. This needs to be addressed. I think of all the reports we have delivered this one was good value for money. All that work was done—as members can read in the report—and delivered for \$114 000 over that time. I think that is good value for money and I think it is important that reports such as this one get acted upon to make a difference for children who are suffering and whose learning is being impacted upon.