EDUCATION — SCIENCE, TECHNOLOGY, ENGINEERING AND MATHEMATICS

378. Ms S.E. WINTON to the Minister for Science:

I refer to the McGowan Labor government's commitment to create jobs, grow the economy and provide training opportunities for workers across Western Australia. Can the minister outline to the house how the state's first ever science, technology, engineering and mathematics strategy will ensure WA workers and WA businesses are prepared and skilled for the jobs of the future?

Mr D.J. KELLY replied:

I thank the member for Wanneroo for that question.

When we came to government, we made a commitment to diversify the Western Australian economy. Part of that was to ensure that we have a workforce that is prepared and has the skills to take on the jobs of the future. Today most people understand that ensuring we have a workforce that is well skilled in STEM is one of the most important priorities we can have if we want to take up some of these future job opportunities. We do not have enough students studying STEM subjects. In particular, we do not have enough women or students from poorer backgrounds studying STEM. All the research shows a real bias against young girls taking up STEM. Of those students who study STEM, the more affluent they are, the better the chance they have to take up those opportunities. That leaves us with a real problem. When we came into government we committed to Western Australia's first STEM strategy. We got the Chief Scientist to put together a panel including people from academia, government, universities and industry, to come up with Western Australia's first STEM strategy. A few weeks ago, I was very pleased to announce with the Minister for Education and Training the first elements of that STEM strategy. That task force identified that the quality of teaching is one of the most important aspects of inspiring young students to study STEM subjects at school. The first element of this STEM strategy is a $3.3 million commitment of new funding to give additional professional development to 1 000 teachers in public schools over the next two years to give them the confidence and the skills to inspire young students to take up STEM subjects. That funding will be directed towards getting more young women in particular and more students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds to study STEM. That is an important first part of the STEM strategy. In addition to that professional development, there will be a follow-up mentoring program for those teachers so that they can continue to get the support they need to teach young students.

As a government, we understand that to have a skilled workforce willing and able to take on the challenges of the future, we need to make sure they are exposed to STEM and taking on those STEM skills. This builds on the $17 million commitment that we made to put 200 dedicated science laboratories into public primary schools in Western Australia, and we are doing that. It builds on the partnerships that we are building with business. Rio Tinto recently announced a $2 million commitment to develop Australia's first course in automation in partnership with South Metropolitan TAFE. That is a great example of the partnerships we are forming to make sure that existing workforces are also reskilled. I am very proud, member for Wanneroo; thank you for the question. We understand that if we are going to diversify the Western Australian economy, we need to improve our exposure to STEM skills in this state and we need to make sure that young women in particular and students from poorer backgrounds also get those opportunities so that the new digital economy is not a source of future division in our community.