

BALGA SENIOR HIGH SCHOOL - TEEN FAMILY CENTRE

Grievance

MR R.C. KUCERA (Yokine) [9.21 am]: I also grieve to the Minister for Education and Training. My grievance is a flow-on from the previous grievance. I grieve about a remarkably successful program that has been running at the Balga Senior High School for almost six years that is now faced with being scrapped due to a senseless decision to slash federal funding under the jobs, education and training program. Balga Senior High School sits on the border of the member for Girrawheen's electorate and mine. The school runs a teen family centre, which was originally established in recognition of the need to provide assistance and give a future to teenage mothers and parents of high school age who wished to continue their education while caring for their children. In each year since its establishment it has catered for between 14 and 20 young women. These young women are children themselves; some are as young as 14 years of age. Many of them come from extremely disadvantaged backgrounds and it is the first time that they have had access to a sensible, compassionate and effective program that often provides them with the very first stable platform they have known in their lives from which they can launch their future and that of their babies.

The teen family centre provides childcare and parent support services for teenage parents. It allows students with babies to continue their secondary education with their peer group in mainstream education and it has been run extremely successfully for almost six years. It has helped dozens of teenage parents to reshape their lives and achieve employment skills and a more independent future. It is a unique organisation in Australia that has received national recognition on television and in the printed press. The centre is staffed by a loving and dedicated team and is led by the centre's manager, Carole Lyons. She is ably assisted by Laura Allison, a teen support worker, and Kate Maughen, who is the parents support program teacher. They are underpinned by a volunteer management group and committee, which is chaired by Margaret Maassen.

The children who use the facility are guaranteed support to continue their high school education while their babies are properly cared for. In addition to providing these children with parenting workshops, which include recognition of the individual needs of each parent with a particular focus on teenage parenting, the workshops promote strategies that target improving the health of the mother and baby, their wellbeing and the development of personal esteem and parental skills. An outreach program visits the homes of the teen parents and their parents in turn to make sure that the kids are encouraged to re-enter and remain in mainstream education. That segment of the program is supported by The Smith Family, to which I give thanks. The federal Labor candidate for Stirling, Major Peter Tinley, and I visited the school last week. Currently, 14 teenage girls are using the school-based program, all of whom are receiving parenting allowances. Until recently, they were also receiving job employment training assistance funding of up to \$121 a week, which pays for the childcare program. This leaves a gap of just \$6 for these kids to pay out of their weekly stipend of around \$390 that they receive from the government for parenting. Almost one-third of their pay is being saved. The scheme has operated well for six years. Remarkably, many of the young women from totally disadvantaged backgrounds have gone on to attend university and TAFE. As a bonus, many teenage fathers who attend the same school have learnt their roles and responsibilities. The portent of teenage parenting has become so self-evident to the other kids in the school that they realise the consequence of their actions.

The program draws on funding and also relies on whatever amount the girls put in. However, the majority of the funding for the program - about \$130 per person a week - is received through the JET program. At the commencement of the current year, the federal Minister for Families, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs, Mal Brough, made a unilateral decision to withdraw the program's funding and slash the budget. As of 1 July, the JET assistance will be available to students for only 12 months. These kids are 14 for goodness sake! They have three years of their education left to go before they begin university or TAFE studies. This impending disaster was brought to my attention last week by Geoff Harris, the new principal at Balga Senior High School. Until last year, he was the deputy principal of Mirrabooka Senior High School. He is doing a magnificent job and has taken on some enormous challenges sorting out some of the failed programs that we have heard so much about in the house recently. This program has not failed. It has been successful. However, it will be made untenable by a stupid and short-sighted decision made in Canberra without any thought being given to the impact it will have on the lives of these kids. A letter sent to me by the 14 young women who are currently in this program reads -

We are teenage parents completing our secondary education at Balga Senior High School. Our children attend the Balga Senior High School Child Care Centre on school grounds.

We have been told about the changes in JET saying that we can only claim for twelve months of our study. Most of us will be at high school for two to three years, not including if we continue with TAFE or University after graduation . . .

If we have to pay \$127 per week we will not be able to keep going to school because we can not afford that as we live off the parenting payment and tax benefit at the moment.

Why we want to complete our education:

- Because we don't want to be on welfare for the rest of our lives.
- We would rather pay tax than receive welfare.
- We want to get a good job.
- To be more intelligent.
- Will make us feel better about ourselves.
- We want to be a role model for our children.

If we have to pay JET payment:

- It will be a third of our benefit.
- We won't have enough money for rent or nappies.
- We will leave school, stay home . . .

Please review this arrangement regarding JET otherwise we will have to leave school, as we can't afford to use the Childcare Centre. This will have a big impact on our future.

These kids have real issues. What kind of government is it today in Australia that opens a door marked hope and then slams it in the faces of these kids? As late as yesterday, Mal Brough said on *perthnow* that the biggest number of people who cite child care as a reason for not being in the workforce are making the choice to care for their children themselves. He said that it is great for them to feel they have that choice. He said that yesterday. What a nonsense statement. I ask the minister to take up this matter with his state colleagues to make sure that we overturn this myopic and stupid decision that will send these kids back into a grinding cycle of poverty and disadvantage that they have tried so hard to get out of. This decision is an absolute scandal. I will not let this matter rest.

MR M. McGOWAN (Rockingham - Minister for Education and Training) [9.29 am]: I thank the member for Yokine for his grievance. He obviously feels strongly about it. He set out the facts very clearly. The program at Balga Senior High School provides an education for young mothers. The mothers are ordinarily between the ages of 14 and 18, although conceivably they could be younger than that. The aim is to ensure that these young women who have a baby, or even babies, are given an opportunity to continue with their schooling and obtain an education. The reason behind the program is quite obvious. The member for Yokine referred to the principal and his aims. The aims are to ensure that these young women are given the psychological development of mixing with their peers and the opportunity to advance their education. Unfortunately, if they do not attend school, that opportunity will be dramatically curtailed. If statistics are to be believed, it will probably be curtailed for the rest of their lives. We would have a group of young women who left school at age 13 to rear a child and never returned to education. This would no doubt mean the future employment prospects for these young women - which is an ambition that all sides of Parliament hope that young people have and will fulfil - would be curtailed by that decision. These young women have become pregnant and have decided to continue the pregnancy and have a baby. It is an incredibly big responsibility at a young age, and a difficult one. I find a small child a difficult responsibility at my age, let alone for a 13, 14 or 15-year-old. Impossible demands are placed upon a parent by that child at all hours of the day and night. I feel for these young women. It is very easy for some segments of the population to blame them for their predicament, but they are children themselves. They have babies who are completely blameless and we should be trying to ensure these women have the best opportunities in life. A program was offered whereby they receive some additional financial assistance so that they can afford child care and can go to school. I understand the childcare facilities are on the site.

Mr R.C. Kucera: The vast majority of resources are supplied by the state government, but without the payment from the federal government, those programs would have to cease. I do not seek to further burden the state government; I think this is absolutely a role for the federal government.

Mr M. McGOWAN: Social security is a responsibility of the commonwealth government. These women are receiving a \$120 a week payment to assist them with the cost of child care at the centre at the school. If they do not receive that, they will not be able to afford to send the children there because of all the costs associated with having a child and ordinary living costs, which we know are very expensive. The aim was to provide them with a payment that they could use to obtain childcare assistance while they go on with their schooling as a 13, 14, 15 or 16-year-old. The commonwealth has decided it will cut out after one year. It does not seem to me to be a logical decision that a 13-year-old should lose a payment after one year when she hits year nine or year 10. That

will be it for her schooling. I also call upon the federal minister to reconsider this decision. If his ambition is in line with what the commonwealth government says - that is, to have an educated workforce and for people to continue in employment - this decision would seem to be contrary to that ambition. I am happy to take up this issue with the commonwealth government. It is obviously a serious issue for a number of young women and their families in the northern suburbs of Perth. I will take it up with the federal minister to attempt to ensure that the federal government reconsiders what one would have to say is a pretty mean-spirited decision in relation to these young women.

Mr R.C. Kucera: The federal Labor candidate for that area, Major Peter Tinley, has already taken the issue to Canberra. The local federal member has been conspicuous by his absence and silence on this matter. I thank the minister for his offer to take the matter up with Canberra. It is a myopic decision.

Mr M. McGOWAN: If I had Major Peter Tinley beating on my door about an issue, I would certainly be listening. He is a formidable individual. We will also take it up with the federal government.

These are just young and poor girls. I am sure when people are sitting in their offices in Canberra, Perth seems like a long way away and this matter appears to be fairly unimportant. These are young lives and I urge the federal government to recognise that every individual is important and that creating social and employment opportunities for young people is a worthwhile thing to do.