

SCHOOL UNIFORMS, SPORT AND HEALTHY FOODS

Grievance

MR A.P. O'GORMAN (Joondalup) [9.54 am]: My grievance is to the Minister for Education and Training. I thank him for accepting my grievance at relatively short notice. I will raise three issues. The first concerns wearing uniforms in school, the second is about sport in schools and the third relates to eating healthy foods at school. This grievance is a bit different because these issues have not been brought to my attention by parents or teachers but by school students. Although I do not entirely agree with their sentiments, they have approached me as their local member of Parliament to make a complaint and it is therefore appropriate that I take the matters as far as I can to see whether I can either get a resolution to their grievances or at least receive a good answer that I can take back to these young people. It is great that they are getting involved in the political process.

The first issue is an old chestnut regarding school uniforms. In the 1970s I went to a school that did not require students to wear school uniforms. At one time there was a push to impose school uniforms on the students and, of course, we revolted and debated the matter. Three young men have approached me about the prohibition on wearing denim at school because they do not think it is appropriate and they do not feel comfortable with the proposed school uniform. They feel much more comfortable wearing their denim jeans or denim shorts. Some of them like to wear the big and wide baggy trousers that a lot of hip hop people wear. The pants are even bigger than cargo pants, and I have a problem with that. These students are the types of guys who wear boxer shorts and walk around with their jeans hanging on their hips. That is actually good because they are expressing their points of view in a proper manner rather than being disruptive or argumentative. They would like a rationale for the prohibition. I have given them the rationale that I believe is behind the prohibition on wearing denim and other clothing in schools and for enforcing a uniform dress code at the schools.

The second issue concerns sport and was brought to my attention by a couple of young girls who do not want to participate in sport on a regular basis. They feel quite embarrassed getting into their gym clothes and sports gear. In my view they do not have the confidence to participate productively in sport or in the sporting subjects that are offered to them. They queried why they had to do sport and wondered whether they could do an alternative subject. Some of the girls are very interested in performing arts and believe that dancing and performing on stage provides them with sufficient exercise. I must add that none of the girls appeared to be super athletic but by the same token they did not appear to be excessively overweight either. They are well balanced young women. They are concerned that they must participate in sport, and they do not think that it is appropriate. I know that obesity and diabetes are concerning issues for young people. I will touch on diabetes when I talk about the issue of healthy food that was raised with me. Exercise greatly helps people with diabetes. Even if young people with diabetes are insulin dependent and need to inject insulin a number of times a day, they require exercise to get their bodies working correctly to reduce the sugar levels in their bodies so that they can maintain the appropriate sugar levels.

The issue of healthy food was also brought to my attention by a couple of young people who like to eat sausage rolls and meat pies and to drink soft drinks. They have said that they will not comply with the program that the government has implemented in public schools. They do not believe that they must always eat healthy foods because their parents provide them with healthy food at home. When they go out or are at school, they believe that they should be able to purchase what they want. I spoke to the principal and teachers at their school and they told me that they have great problems policing the initiative.

I am talking about high school students, not primary school students. The school is situated directly across the road from a shopping centre at which there are many fast-food outlets, including McDonalds, Red Rooster and Chicken Treat. It is no hassle for the kids to walk across the road to buy the junk food that they feel like eating. As I stated to the people who made representations to me, that is not something that I support. The school has put measures in place to ensure that students do not go across the road to buy fast food.

As an extension of the healthy foods program, I refer to the various diseases suffered by people, such as diabetes. It is very difficult for students with diabetes to get appropriate food at school canteens. In fact, it is difficult for people with diabetes to get food appropriate food at our city and other restaurants and cafes. It is difficult to know whether the food available at canteens, restaurants and cafes is appropriate for those who suffer from diabetes. It would be a great if our schools could lead the way by labelling food that is appropriate for people who suffer from diabetes, similar to the way that the Heart Foundation puts a red tick on products that are healthy. It would be a great help for people with diabetes if our school canteens provided multigrain bread for sandwiches rather than just white bread. I have learnt from talking to various people that the seeds in cape seed and Swiss seed loaves reduce a person's blood sugar levels. I ask the minister to address the issues that have been raised with me.

MR M. McGOWAN (Rockingham - Minister for Education and Training) [10.02 am]: I thank the member for Joondalup for his grievance and acknowledge the obvious fact - it is demonstrated by the number of people he sees to discuss issues in his local community - that he is very much in touch with his local community. Well done!

We have excellent public schools in Western Australia; indeed, they are outstanding. Our public schools have a very good workforce, an overwhelmingly supportive parent body and good facilities. Unfortunately, some people base their judgements about schools on things extraneous to those factors that I have just outlined. We have attempted to ensure that our schools are not only of a high standard, but also that they give the strong appearance of being of very high standard to the broader community. Public schools operate in a competitive environment. It is well known that private schools are increasing in numbers and enrolments. That is the nature of the competitive schooling environment. We want to retain a public school system that is more than a residual system. If we want to provide a public school system that offers excellent educational choices for parents, we must maintain a good level of enrolments. The Department of Education and Training has undertaken a range of measures this year that will improve not only the public's acceptance of public schools, but also a range of the performance criteria for students in public schools.

The member for Joondalup raised a few concerns, one of which related to food choices in schools. The department has ensured that school canteens serve healthy food because previously they were not necessarily serving healthy food. It has implemented a traffic-light system whereby some foods are not permitted, some foods are permitted on certain occasions and other foods are permitted all the time. I have visited more than 80 schools in the past six months. I have visited many school canteens and seen firsthand the outstanding healthy food choices that are tasty and good to eat. Some of the food being provided by public school canteens is not only healthy, it is delicious. I am aware that some students and parents do not like the fact that some foods are not permitted in school canteens. However, the fact of the matter is that the issue of obesity in schoolchildren was brought to our attention many times and we had to do something about it. That is why we have implemented that program. It is an unfortunate fact that many children do not eat healthy food at home. Those children will be helped by eating healthy food at school. Despite the various representations that have been made against the healthy food policy, we will not back away from it.

We have ensured that all students up to year 10 perform two hours of physical activity a week as a result of the high levels of obesity and inactivity in our children. Although I am a strong supporter of embracing new technology, I am very concerned about the fact that after they get home from school, many children - I hear this often - sit in front of the computer until dinner, only to return to the computer until they go to bed. I hate to sound like an old curmudgeon, but when I was a school student, students would play sport, ride their bikes, swim in the river or play with one another after school. That is what everyone did. It was unusual for students to not engage in physical activity after school. I am talking about what happened in the late 1970s, early 1980s. Times have changed; the Internet did not exist back then. Kids are no longer as interested in physical activity because of the alternatives. The department is ensuring that school students undertake physical activity at school. It will not back away from that policy.

Another measure we have put in place is compulsory community service for students in years 10, 11 and 12. Students must perform 20 hours of community service a week to graduate. That community service includes planting trees and helping out in nursing homes. Compulsory community service in our schools is a good thing. It is good for teachers because it gets them out of the classroom and provides them with the opportunity to do different things.

The Department of Education and Training has also determined that the wearing of school uniforms be compulsory. It has issued a guide that schools can follow. The prohibition on denim is not absolute. If a school requires its students to wear denim for safety reasons - for instance, vocational students may need to wear denim - they can apply for an exemption. If a school attracts mature-aged students, it, too, can apply for an exemption. The banning of denim has been controversial among some parents and students. Certain schools have asked that I revoke that policy for them. People's views about the wearing of denim will always be subjective. In my view, if we set standards, they must be adhered to. Standards must be presentational. Denim is an American style of school dress that does not fit with Australian traditions.

Mr R.C. Kucera: In many of the American and English schools in which I have worked as a police officer, they are reintroducing uniforms to keep out those people who should not be in school grounds, such as drug dealers and gang members. It is also a safety issue.

Mr M. McGOWAN: That is a very good point. Uniforms allow teachers to identify people who should not be in school grounds. That is an important component of having uniforms. I am a traditionalist in that sense. I know that our move in that direction has upset some people. However, the department must be the arbiter and enforcer of standards, and that is what it will continue to be.

I have outlined four major improvements to standards in public schools across Western Australia. Parents should consider those standards when they decide which school their children should attend. I cannot claim credit for these improvements. My predecessors - the now Premier and Hon Ljiljana Ravlich - created these measures. I am merely the beneficiary and enforcer of those measures.