

## SCHOOL CANTEENS

### *Grievance*

**MR R.C. KUCERA (Yokine)** [9.53 am]: My grievance is to the Minister for Education and Training and relates to the general situation of the difficulties being experienced by school canteens in my electorate. It is a fairly lengthy grievance, and so I have provided a copy of my full written grievance to the minister.

Two weeks ago I met with the president of the Mirrabooka Senior High School Parents and Citizens Association, Mr Andy Boys. He is a remarkable man who, despite suffering a debilitating neurone disease that confines him to a wheelchair, is a tower of strength in the school community. Since then I have also had discussions with other canteen managers and P&C representatives, such as David Ladner of Sutherland Dianella Primary School. As the minister is aware, the Department of Education and Training, at his direction, has implemented the so-called traffic-light system to encourage healthy food and drink choices in school canteens. I have a copy of the minister's circular in which he spells out the new regime.

First, as a previous state president and national board member of the Heart Foundation, and also a previous health and sport minister, I encourage the concept of healthy eating in schools. In that regard, I support the principles behind this program and those primary schools in high socioeconomic areas that have adopted it. Those schools in particular are well supported by volunteer workers or parents who are prepared to support the program. However, there are plenty of schools, particularly in my electorate and in low socioeconomic areas, in which the new system is not working. An article in *The Weekend Australian* of 31 May states that the findings on obesity seem to be exaggerated, and that the findings, based on measurements taken from thousands of Australian children, found that the growth in childhood obesity overall had slowed to a crawl. The most important point is that the slight increase relates specifically to boys and girls from low-income homes. This is the difficulty in my electorate. The obesity rate in boys from low-income homes almost doubled from 5.4 per cent to 9.3 per cent in 2006. On the face of it, this program seems to be the answer. However, it also came as a revelation to me that this system is not a voluntary system in government schools; it is imposed on those schools, whereas in the private and Catholic school systems, it is not. Young people and children constantly compare and exchange information and quickly come to realise what they do and do not like. I know from personal experience that the only systems that work are those that are accepted rather than those that are rigidly imposed. This regime has been imposed on all government schools, and the heading on the publication indicating that there is a choice is somewhat of a misnomer.

Mr Boys advised me that as the P&C is allowed to operate only under the auspices of the DET policy, it must adhere slavishly to it; any deviation will render its occupancy of the canteen in doubt and compliances will be imposed on the principal. The third paragraph of section 2 on page 3 of the policy effectively states that the principal may give permission for school premises to be used for an activity such as a canteen, and that implementation of the policy on healthy food and drink is a condition upon which permission will be given. That is the view of many P&Cs that I have spoken to. As this is the case, they have no option or flexibility in applying the policy, and principals have essentially been turned into food police, when they have enough to do simply in running a school. Having read the policy and spoken to a number of schools and canteens, and although I absolutely applaud the underpinning principle of tackling childhood obesity—I am probably a pretty good example—I am very concerned that little thought seems to have been given to the impact of this imposition, as opposed to introducing a long-term educational and cultural education process, particularly in low socioeconomic areas and in state high schools.

The canteen system has always relied on broad voluntary support, access to bulk purchasing, and balancing the provision of cheap, nutritious food at low cost with access to cool aerated drinks and so-called treats or less nutritional food such as packaged snacks. These latter foods are, unfortunately, the ones that allow a canteen to make a profit. Indeed, the Sutherland Dianella school canteen had to change only one item on its menu, but it has suffered greatly from the restrictions placed on so-called amber foods. I am also told that the capacity to purchase amber foods at competitive prices has been severely restricted. I have a copy of the guide and I am happy to give it to the minister, but no doubt he already has a copy. This guide restricts the choice of canteens. An example is this container of noodles that I am holding up for members to see. Canteens are allowed to put only half the flavour sachet in this container of noodles before serving it to children. Under the regulations, canteens are allowed to use only half the sachet and the other half must be thrown away. It seems that we are getting a little silly. The same principle applies to snack foods. If the salt content is not clearly stated on the packets, canteens are not allowed to sell them. These are the kinds of items that allow a canteen to make a profit. I am also advised that Mirrabooka Senior High School lost in excess of \$10 000 last year and is running at a deficit again this year. The City of Stirling now has grave concerns about the physical condition of the kitchens and canteens at Sutherland Dianella Primary School. There is an intention to condemn it, so it will have to be closed anyway.

I cannot go through all of the items in the program now, but I will pick a couple of key items. I want to use one example from Mirrabooka Senior High School. A difficulty at that school is that students are not buying their food from the canteen; they are going to the local shopping centres and buying junk and fast food, particularly aerated waters. As one kid said to me, “Under your new government policy we’re now staying here until we’re 18. I can vote your government out of office but I can’t buy a can of Coke! The worst part is you’ve turned our principal into a food Nazi.” Any opportunity to influence their food choice appears to have been lost.

I have a copy of a letter from the Western Australian School Canteens Association, which I am happy to supply. It is doing an enormous amount of work to try to make this work. I have laid out a set of issues that I wish the Minister for Education and Training would look at. The minister needs to survey the schools and seek independent advice on how this process is working; consider an operating subsidy to those problem schools, particularly in low socioeconomic areas; and rebuild flexibility by basing food choice on the demographics and the capacity of that school to cope. I suggest that all other members check schools in their local areas to see what is happening in the canteens. Many of them are now starting to close. I applaud and strongly support the healthy foods program, but we are pushing more and more social engineering into the school system, and those schools need support, either financial or otherwise. I present my grievance to the minister.

**MR M. McGOWAN (Rockingham — Minister for Education and Training)** [10.01 am]: In response to that grievance, last year we launched a number of new policies in state schools, the first of which was compulsory sport so that all students up to year 10 had to engage in two hours of compulsory physical activity a week. The second policy was a requirement in the senior years of public schooling to undertake 20 hours of community service so that students were imbued with the idea that they are part of the community and are required to do things as part of that community. The third policy was the healthy foods initiative, through which we have attempted to make sure that if students in public schools purchase a meal at school, it will be healthy.

I disagree with the member for Yokine. I support this initiative not only in principle; I also support it in practice. I do not regard it as social engineering and I do not regard the people who enforce it as “food Nazis”. Making sure that young people have one meal a day that is healthy is a good, sensible initiative that we should all wholeheartedly support.

The initiative that was put in place was well thought out and sensible. We came up with the traffic-light system, whereby the foods categorised as red are not permitted to be provided in school canteens, and then there are green and amber foods. Green foods are available at all times, while amber foods are available less frequently. The green foods include sandwiches; fresh and frozen fruit; Star Choice hamburgers, which contain healthy patties; vegetables; and wholegrain foods. I have been to school canteens where the menu is delightful, delicious and healthy. There is nothing about healthy food that should make people, especially young people, not want to eat it.

I find offensive the concept of having two standards whereby schools in lower socioeconomic areas, as the member put it, have less healthy food than do schools in higher socioeconomic areas.

**Mr R.C. Kucera:** The minister is missing my point.

**Mr M. McGOWAN:** I did not interject on the member. I find that proposition offensive. That is exactly what the member said—rich kids have healthy foods and poor kids have less healthy foods.

**Mr R.C. Kucera:** The minister is missing my point totally. If the minister wants to impose a policy, he should assist schools to do it.

**Mr M. McGOWAN:** The provision of healthy foods is a sensible system. I find it surprising that members suggest those sorts of things. The policy was well thought out, \$1 million was put into it, and schools around the state are implementing it. I know that there needs to be a paradigm shift in schools’ thinking to move away from providing less healthy foods to providing healthy foods. I know that some people will not like that. Personally, I think that these sorts of changes are good. Making sure that young people are fitter and healthier is a good thing when the rates of childhood obesity are above what they should be—despite the recent analysis done in that regard.

I hate to sound as though I am stuck in the past, but young people today do many things that do not involve going out and playing sport and running around playgrounds, particularly those things that are based around information technology. These days students get enormous amounts of activity and enjoyment from simply sitting in the lounge room playing on the computer or Nintendo Wii, or whatever the case may be. I would like to see young people engage in the same amount of physical activity as used to occur. That is why we brought the physical activity and healthy food initiatives into their lives. Kids particularly from the lower end of the socioeconomic spectrum generally need a healthy meal each day. That is why this initiative should be directed especially towards schools in some areas more than others.

I am supportive of the initiative. I do not intend to change it. Principals should be out there making sure that the government policy in providing students with healthy foods is complied with. It is a good policy. We are dealing with this very important issue of making sure children have enough healthy food to prevent childhood obesity. That is our position on it. I will not be changing the way that it operates because it has been very well thought through. The policy is not about saying that kids cannot have what they want to eat. In fact, two meals of the day—as well as whatever snacks are eaten outside the six and a half to seven hours that a child is at school—are determined by the parents and they, in effect, can feed their children what they want. We are saying that whilst children are in the care of the government school system, they will eat healthy foods.