

PUPIL-FREE DAYS

Grievance

MR J.H.D. DAY (Darling Range) [9.07 am]: My grievance is to the Minister for Education and Training and concerns a serious issue in government schools in Western Australia; namely, the decision by the minister to change the arrangements for pupil-free days. This issue arose out of the blue two weeks ago during debate in the estimates committee. The minister obviously had a predetermined plan to make the grand announcement that he would move all pupil-free days, which are currently placed during the school year, to the end of the school year in December. I did not have any prior knowledge about this and, based on the discussions I have had since, neither did anyone else in Western Australia, apart from the minister and one or two people in his office. It is quite clear there has been little, if any, consultation about this change, which is leading to what can only be described as widespread consternation in Western Australian government schools.

During the debate in the estimates committee, I queried the rationale of the change and the way in which it was being put into effect. I queried why pupil-free days will be required to be placed at the end of the academic year when some of them at least could be placed at the beginning of the school year. I also questioned whether sufficient facilitators will be available to provide professional development at the one time. I nevertheless assumed there had been some consultation about making such a far-reaching decision and putting it into effect. However, as I now know, there has been little or no consultation, particularly with the Western Australian Secondary School Executives Association or the Western Australian Primary Principals Association. I understand that even the Director General of the Department of Education and Training was not aware that this change would occur until he was given a copy of the media statement that morning. That is an astounding situation. I was a minister for four years and I know that ministers should not make changes that have far-reaching implications without first seeking professional advice from the head of the relevant department. I know there have been some discussions with the State School Teachers Union of WA during the EBA negotiations about providing an additional number of pupil-free days for professional development. That is a separate issue. The fact that additional pupil-free days will be provided is not the subject of this grievance; it is the way in which it is being put into effect and the implications and problems in moving all the pupil-free days to the end of the year. The decision to move all the pupil-free days to the end of the year means that they will be required to be taken when teachers are tired or exhausted following a full year of teaching and when their minds will not be turned most appropriately to acquiring new knowledge about how to improve teaching practices and to benefit educational outcomes for children. It will also be a time when teachers are required to focus on preparing school reports and reports to parents as well as a range of other activities associated with the end of the school year. The pupil-free days will occur at the time when the transfer of staff generally occurs between schools. If staff are needed for planning for the next school year, they may be at a school at which they will not be teaching in the following school year. They will also occur at a time of the year when new teaching practices cannot be put immediately into practice. I know that the minister said that if teachers undertake professional development in their own time they will be able to have those days off. However, that leads to the major problem of getting all staff together for school development days. The reality is that a lot of the pupil-free days are used for school development, whole school professional development or planning when it is essential to have all staff together. That will be very difficult to achieve, if it can be achieved, in teachers' own time, whether that is during school holidays, on weekends or after school. In many cases, teachers have their own children and responsibilities and commitments. This decision has clearly not been thought through. As one teacher pointed out to me, it is contrary to the curriculum improvement process that is under way in schools as part of the outcomes-based educational framework that we now have. Discussions and professional development need to occur during the year so the changes can be put into place during the school year.

I ask the minister to do three things. One is to advise with whom he has consulted in putting this change into effect. As I said, it appears as if no-one was consulted. We know he has referred to the change as the Anne-Marie Carpenter reform package. It is not unreasonable to talk with one's spouse and to obtain advice, but the minister needs to speak more widely. Secondly, I ask the minister to explain what are the educational benefits of this change because it has been suggested to me that this is not about good educational practice at all. In fact, one secondary school principal described this decision to me a few days ago as the worst decision in the education system in the past five years. What are the educational benefits of the change? Thirdly, I ask the minister to review his decision and put it on hold. He should review it and ensure some genuine consultation occurs with people who are required to put these quite major changes into effect so that decisions can be made that are in the educational interests of children in Western Australia. Schools are not childcare centres; they are there to provide best practice in education for children and in achieving high-standard outcomes in children's education and social development. This decision and the way in which it has been made by the minister is not achieving that.

MR A.J. CARPENTER (Willagee - Minister for Education and Training) [9.13 am]: I thank the member for Darling Range for his grievance. There are some interesting contradictions in the statements he has just made to the House. If he analyses what he said, he will see the contradictions and some of his own questions will be answered. Schools are not babysitters; schools are for children. That is where they should be. How unthinkable it would be for us to empty the hospitals five days a year so there could be professional development days for staff. Schools are for children; we cannot keep developing systems in which the schools do not have children in them because teachers and administrators need more time for professional development and organisation.

There are approximately 12 weeks of the year when students are not at schools. Four of those weeks are designated as holidays for staff; that is, four weeks annual leave. There are between six and eight weeks - 30 to 40 days - in which the schools are available for professional development for staff when students are not there because of vacations. There are also weekends and time after school. In most places in Western Australia schools finish at three o'clock in the afternoon. In the north west of the State they finish at two o'clock. There are hours and hours when the children have gone and schools are available for professional development and staff school planning days.

Mr J.H.D. Day: When?

Mr A.J. CARPENTER: I have just told the member that schools finish at two o'clock in the north west and at three o'clock in the metropolitan area and south west. It is argued that schools are not being used sufficiently yet we have the counter argument that we should empty the damn things more often.

Mr J.H.D. Day: You are doing it anyway!

Mr A.J. CARPENTER: Parents -

Mr J.H.D. Day interjected.

The SPEAKER: Order, members!

Mr A.J. CARPENTER: I did not interrupt the member. He should not interrupt me because it goes against his good nature. The member should listen to my response. By the way, the day I announced this the member walked outside the Chamber and said that he supported it. The member has done what other people do. At the first hint of criticism, he panics. He sees the whites of their eyes, panics, and runs in the other direction as fast as he can. The member is reported in the newspaper as saying he supports it. I will tell the member who else supports it - the teachers union. The member said I did not negotiate with the union but I did negotiate with it. The day before I made the announcement Mike Keely sat in my office with Paul Albert who, the member claims, knew nothing about it until I mentioned it in the Chamber. What a load of rubbish. As if I would act that way. The member should not be ridiculous. Mike Keely sat in my office after having tried to negotiate the very same thing in the EBA discussions. Look at what they have tried to negotiate. He sat in my office and I said, "Listen here, I do not intend to unpin another hand grenade with the teaching community." I said I understood what he wanted but if he was not going to support it he should let me know. Do members know what he said? He said that they supported it. By that afternoon, after a few radical elements of the teaching community rang up, he said it was a bad idea. He did what the member has done. He does not have the strength to stand up and say that he supports it because it is good for children. Is it good for children to be roaming around the metropolitan area during the week with no-one supervising them because they are not allowed to go to school because the teachers do not have them at school on certain days? Is it good for children to roam the streets when they damn well should be at school? Do not be a fool, member for Darling Range! Show a bit of strength! Show a bit of courage! Show a bit of backbone!

Point of Order

Mrs C.L. EDWARDES: The minister referred to the member for Darling Range by an inappropriate comment that breaches the House's code of conduct.

The SPEAKER: I did not hear any inappropriate comment. However, the minister was getting a bit loud.

Mrs C.L. EDWARDES: The minister referred to the member for Darling Range as a fool. Does that breach the code of conduct?

The SPEAKER: I will not take a point of order that disputes my ruling. The member for Kingsley knows that.

Debate Resumed

Mr A.J. CARPENTER: I have a letter from the primary principals association and the secondary principals -

Mr J.H.D. Day: Did you consult with them?

Mr A.J. CARPENTER: No, I did not.

Mr J.H.D. Day: Is that not a gross oversight at best?

Mr A.J. CARPENTER: No. This is a letter to the Department of Education and Training and not to me. It states -

As discussed with you, both WASSEA and WAPPA endorse the introduction of a further two school development days. The days will provide schools with greater opportunity to develop staff expertise in Curriculum initiatives, in particular in the area of moderation and the new courses of study.

We also acknowledge that the flexible mode in which schools will be able to operate as a result of this extra time should have a positive impact.

I have said to these organisations that I will give them the extra days they have sought. They have said that they sought the two extra days, and they wanted them at the end of the year. That is what they negotiated, through their union, in the enterprise bargaining agreement. They wanted the extra days at the end of the year when, according to the member for Darling Range, they are all so tired that they cannot do anything with them, and they are also desperate to go home with their own children. What about everybody else? Everyone else has their own children. I gave them the days at the end of the year. I said we would take the in-term professional development days and put them at the end of the year. They did not have to have them at the end of the year. The principals and staff can organise to have these days during the year, and have those days at the end of the year free. This is what happens in the non-government schools, attended by the children of the member for Darling Range. I do not hear him complaining about those.

Mr J.H.D. Day: There are pupil-free days during the year at non-government schools.

Mr A.J. CARPENTER: Schools now have the option of either having those five days at the end of the year or using them flexibly during the year. Maybe I am wrong, but I do not believe that our schools should be emptied of students on one day of every term. That is where students should be - that is what schools are for; not for anyone else. Our children should be at school. Schools have the flexibility to do staff development and professional development during the two weeks in April, July or October, or on any weekend. I want our children at school. The member for Darling Range will find out, because I will mark it down, that the parents also want this. The member for Darling Range can tell the parents of Western Australia that he will reintroduce pupil-free days and then see what happens.