

SCHOOL HEALTH NURSES

845. MR N.W. MORTON to the Minister for Health:

Before I ask my question, I acknowledge the student leaders, parent representatives and staff from Matthew Gibney Catholic Primary School in my electorate, who are present in the public gallery.

I refer to the government's commitment to employ an additional 155 school health nurses. Is the government on track to meet that commitment in its current term of office?

Dr K.D. HAMES replied:

Before answering, on behalf of the member for Ocean Reef, I would like to recognise in the public gallery the students from Ocean Reef Primary School—welcome, guys.

Some members may recall the origin of this commitment that was made by the government at the last election. When we were in opposition, I was a member of the Education and Health Standing Committee, which carried out an inquiry into the previous government's provision of services for children throughout the state, particularly the issue of school health nurses, paediatricians and speech therapists across the system. We found enormous deficiencies. At the 2008 election, we made a commitment to significantly upgrade the number of positions in all three of those areas. Subsequently, over the following years, we made a commitment of \$150 million in total, allocating \$40 million to \$50 million on each of the three packages. The last package was for school health nurses, and we committed in this term of government to provide 155 school health nurses.

Ms M.M. Quirk interjected.

Dr K.D. HAMES: I am sorry if I am interrupting the member.

The SPEAKER: Member for Girrawheen, I call you to order for the second time. Yesterday afternoon I had to get everybody to keep quiet because you could not concentrate. The minister is talking now.

Dr K.D. HAMES: We committed to 155.5 full-time equivalents. Following that, we had discussions with speech therapists, who were very strongly of the view that we needed to divert some of those FTEs into speech therapists to have them spread throughout the schools to deal very early with children with speech disabilities. We agreed to do that and allocated 145.5 FTE school nurses and 10 FTE speech pathologists. I want to inform the house that we are well on track to achieve that target. Next year is the final year, but we are well down the path of recruiting all those staff. By the time we finish, there will be a total of 314.4 FTEs, which is a 98 per cent increase in the numbers of those staff. Those staff are spread throughout Western Australia, with a significant number in country areas—110 FTEs in the metropolitan area and 44.9 in regional Western Australia. All of those are well on track, and we are significantly addressing the shortfalls we saw under the previous government.