

SCHOOL LEAVING AGE

535. Mr A.D. McRAE to the Minister for Education and Training:

Will the minister please update the House on the progress of the community consultation process on the proposal to raise the school leaving age to 17 years and refer to the very successful forum that was held in my electorate last Wednesday?

Mr A.J. CARPENTER replied:

I thank the member for Riverton for the question. The school leaving age forum that was held in his electorate last week was very successful. We have essentially completed the process of community forums. Since the process of community forums began in Broome in April, we have held 18 additional forums in Albany, Esperance, Northam, Narrogin, Collie, Bunbury, Kalgoorlie, Geraldton, Carnarvon, Karratha, Port Hedland, Kununurra, Mandurah and Margaret River, and four in the metropolitan area. We also met with the staff from the Ngaanyatjarra Lands School at Uluru two weeks ago and held a conference with them. To raise the school leaving age to 17 years and engage young people in education and training is one of the most important initiatives that this or any Government can undertake. That has been reflected in the response to the forums. Between 2 500 and 3 000 people attended the public forums and meetings with community leaders in that four or five-month period.

The proposal to raise the school leaving age, or the age to which we require young people to be engaged in education and/or training and/or employment, to 17 years has received extremely strong support. In fact, I think it would be fair to say that there is almost universal support for this program across all political divides. This is something that everybody supports, although I did hear the member for Avon say today that he saw no public benefit - that is how he described it - for this policy initiative. That sincerely disappoints me, but in a sense it probably should not surprise us. The member for Wagin, on the other hand, attended one of our forums, and I think he would agree that it was very useful. The fact of the matter is that in the modern economy, 15 is too young to leave school and too young to leave training. Given the critical skills shortages that face us as a booming economy, to do nothing is no longer an option. To allow young people to drift out of education and training at age 15 and to do nothing is no longer an option for young people, and it is particularly no longer an option for government. That is what marked the previous regime. It did nothing. It paid no attention to this area whatsoever. It left thousands of young people to drift out of school and into the unemployment market. When we came to office 12 500 young people in Western Australia were unemployed. We have reduced that number to approximately 5 400, as reflected in the latest figures. The Government has increased the school retention age and there has been a huge surge in the number of young people entering apprenticeships and traineeships. There is a very big public benefit in this policy agenda.

The process of the community forums is being augmented by the Government's web site. People are asked to contact the web site and provide information, ideas and initiatives. The web site has received approximately 20 000 contacts from people around Western Australia. It is another very positive sign.

The finale to the school leaving age forums is the youth forum, which will be held this Friday, 17 September. It will be opened by the Premier. It is an invitation event; up to 150 young people, including apprentices, trainees and students from across all education sectors, will attend. Young people from Karratha, Geraldton, Kalgoorlie and Albany will be able to participate through a video link. It is a very good initiative. It is in the long-term interests of the State to do this. It marks a contrast in approach between this Government, which is sincerely dedicated to trying to provide people with opportunity, and the previous Government, which effectively had the chance.

Mr C.J. Barnett: Make up your mind.

Mr A.J. CARPENTER: The member for Cottesloe tells me to make up my mind. He was the education minister of this State for five years and passed up the opportunity to tackle this issue. He passed it up because it was too difficult; it required work and a bit of guts, which is something he does not have. It also required a bit of commitment, which is also something he does not have. It required a bit of foresight, which is something he does not have. It required the ability to get out and communicate with people, which is something he does not have.

Several members interjected.

Withdrawal of Remarks

Mr A.D. MARSHALL: I do not believe the language used by the minister is in accordance with the rules of this House. I have read about the language used by the minister in the newspaper. I do not think it is fair for members on this side to be abused and pointed at by someone who thinks he has a bit of power.

Mr Tony McRae; Mr Alan Carpenter; Mr Arthur Marshall; Speaker; Dr Geoff Gallop; Mrs Cheryl Edwardes

The SPEAKER: That style of language has been used on a number of occasions by members on both sides of the House. It is descriptive but unfortunate. However, I do not consider it unparliamentary.

Dr G.I. GALLOP: I distinctly heard the Leader of the Opposition reflect upon the Chair by saying there were two rules in this House. Mr Speaker should ask the member to withdraw that remark.

Mrs C.L. EDWARDES: I do not think the comments were a reflection on Mr Speaker. The Leader of the Opposition was referring to the minister.

The SPEAKER: I did not hear the comments and I am sure that all members are aware that any reflection on the Chair is highly disorderly. I will deal with such comments when I hear them.