

COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT AND JUSTICE STANDING COMMITTEE

Second Report — “Annual Report 2009” — Tabling

MS A.J.G. MacTIERNAN (Armadale) [10.18 am]: I present for tabling the second report of the Community Development and Justice Standing Committee, titled “Annual Report 2009”.

[See paper 1426.]

Ms A.J.G. MacTIERNAN: During the time covered by the annual report we were engaged on a single report. The committee was very focused on addressing the issue of the adequacy of services to meet the developmental needs of children aged zero to four years. Since the end of the financial year we have completed and tabled that report. It is fair to say that the whole committee was very engaged with the work undertaken during the period covered by the annual report. I want to pay testament to my fellow committee members: Deputy Chairman Albert Jacob, the member for Pilbara, the member for Joondalup and the member for Morley.

Mr T.G. Stephens interjected.

Ms A.J.G. MacTIERNAN: I did mention the member for Ocean Reef, but I mentioned him by name rather than by electorate. I referred to him as the deputy chair, member for Pilbara.

My experience on this committee, as on other committees, demonstrates that while our parliamentary processes are necessarily adversarial, there is a capacity through this committee work to move beyond that and to work in a collaborative fashion. We were very fortunate to have a very strong unitive view emerge from the evidence we received. As a result, that very large report that occupied all of our endeavours during all of this period was a unanimous report. We focused during that period very much on the developmental needs of children, and that was the thrust of our report. It seems that many things can be done that would very dramatically improve outcomes that would ensure that parents had a stronger role and enhanced capacity in the language and social development of their children, so that when they present at the preprimary level at school, they are ready to take on the challenges of school. There are some issues that are intractable, and it is difficult to see how real progress can be made in these areas; however, it is very evident how progress can be made without interventions that are necessarily hugely expensive.

We all know that the long-term consequences for children who have stronger social and cognitive development are that they perform better at school and have far greater potential to be happy, well-integrated individuals in our society. As we have said before, the report refers to an emerging issue in the whole pedagogy by which we have chosen to teach students in Western Australia. We believe the evidence is overwhelming that we should be moving away from whole language to an approach that is far more focused, at least at the initial stages, on the decoding of our language and ensuring that children have a strong phonemic awareness and a strong understanding of the structures of their language. The evidence is likewise overwhelming that the approach that we have adopted has greatly increased disadvantage and compounds disadvantage. Children coming from environments in which they are developmentally vulnerable need more than ever to be exposed to a direct teaching, direct instruction process of phonemic awareness and of language structure.

The Community Development and Justice Standing Committee was very privileged to have extraordinary people come before it to give evidence. There were many people of great passion. The report outlines all the people we saw during this period. By and large, we saw people who were extremely professional and extremely innovative in their approaches and committed to providing solutions and to ensuring that in their disciplines they kept up with research to ensure that the structures in which they delivered their services were going to be capable of delivering positive outcomes. We spend an enormous amount of money on the education system, and we have cause to be alarmed at the outcomes we have with so many children who are not meeting even minimum standards. That is not good enough. We can get a much better outcome without having to commit more money. We just need determination and a commitment to ensure that the academic institutions that are training teachers act in accordance with the best interests of the children and in accordance with the evidence that is overwhelmingly there.

All of these issues have been embraced by our committee. We have been very well served by our committee staff: Dr Brian Gordon, who worked tirelessly to compile the draft reports for us to consider, and also our research officer, Jovita Hogan. We travelled throughout the eastern states, and I am sure there was a fair amount of stress involved in coordinating that tour; that was well done. I think it really is very important for committees of this Parliament to go out there and see what is being done. We need to be informed and we need good staff who enable us to do that—to have the material before us, to be able to meet the people who are going to be able to extend our horizons and to help us come up with practical solutions.

I want to thank all my committee members and say that it has been a very enjoyable experience working with them and learning together how we can provide better outcomes for our community. It has been a pleasure

working with the staff and I thank them for their good grace, commitment and hard work. We look forward to another year of profitable, useful work together as a committee.

MR I.M. BRITZA (Morley) [10.27 am]: I take the opportunity to comment on the 2009 annual report of Community Development and Justice Standing Committee. I am sure that the majority of members who have been involved in committee work have found it to be a rewarding and gratifying experience. Today I join committee members in expressing these same sentiments. The inquiries before us, and those to come, I am sure, have made me realise how vital these committees are, not only to the house and our state, but also to members personally.

Because of my absence from the house for the tabling of the committee's first report, "Inquiry into the Adequacy of Services to Meet the Developmental Needs of Western Australia's Children", to which the member for Armadale referred, I would like to briefly comment on that inquiry, which was of great personal interest to me.

When the committee made the decision to focus on this inquiry, I was a little surprised and did not think that we would find anything out of the ordinary. However, nothing could have prepared me for what we would hear from the various stakeholders: educators, front-line service providers, professors, doctors and teachers who appeared before our committee. The amount of scientific research into childhood development is astounding. To come face to face with the overwhelming evidence that a child's intellectual development, emotional development and social development are profoundly integrated and yet to find that this wonderful and sometimes inspirational information is ignored, dismissed or not seen as valuable was disappointing and sad to see. The men and women who have tirelessly championed their cause to bring to the attention of various government agencies the important role that early child education has in preparation for primary school entry, as well as life in general, simply deserve our respect and honour. For any government to ignore the role and importance of early childhood development verges on the threshold of criminality in failing to protect and encourage those who are the most vulnerable in our community.

I was saddened by the rhetoric and sometimes dismissive tones of some who came before the committee and of those we saw in the field who shared information as parents of a young child. I felt that some people were simply indifferent and lacked the tenderness and professionalism needed towards such a vital area of specific need. As discouraging as this might appear, I hasten to inform the house that there were outstanding examples of care and passion, zeal and dedication by those who have fought the long battle to try to bring this matter to the government's and various academics' attention. These people really deserve special recognition for continuing to care for children and parents who have been consistently ignored by various governments and their agencies.

Because of this inquiry, I have begun to have a greater understanding of the importance that various committees have to the house and to the people of Western Australia. To make inquiries and receive briefings on so many areas vital to our state has been very satisfying, valuable, meaningful and worthwhile. I echo the chair's comments that the relationships within the committee were outstanding. It enabled us to hear all the reports and briefings that we had in unity.

I would like to take this opportunity, first of all, to acknowledge the services of our principal research officer, Dr Brian Gordon, and our research officer, Ms Jovita Hogan. Their support and instruction, their guidance and supervision, especially on our various field trips, were invaluable and beneficial, and extremely constructive to me personally. I would also like to acknowledge the Hansard staff, who continually amaze me. I do not really understand completely how it all works, but I have never taken for granted that wherever we are, they also have to be there.

I have been delighted to serve on this committee with the member for Ocean Reef, the member for Joondalup and the member for Pilbara. I have learnt a great deal from the member for Joondalup and the member for Pilbara. I am genuinely delighted to have worked alongside them and look forward to the new challenges ahead of us.

I leave to last our chair, the member for Armadale. When appointed to the committee, I was delighted to see that the honourable member was in fact our chair. In the light of her possible imminent departure from this house, I feel it appropriate to make a couple of brief but sincere comments about her. It has indeed been an honour and a privilege to serve under her leadership. My respect, admiration and high regard for her have simply increased. She has led with integrity and decency, impartiality and genuine veracity.

Mr T.G. Stephens: The member will get her into trouble if he sings her praises too much!

Mr I.M. BRITZA: I am trusting that the chair will not use these comments in any kind of advertising!

I do not hesitate to say these things, because in fact they are true. Her professionalism and character displayed in our committee room, and before various state and interstate representatives, has given credit and recognition to this chamber. The respect that she showed to all who came before our committee only increased the high regard

in which I now hold her. It has indeed been a pleasure and an honour to work alongside the member for Armadale. I have learnt much.

Madam Acting Speaker, I recommend this annual report to the chamber.