

**PEEL DISTRICT EDUCATION OFFICE**

*Grievance*

**MR D.A. TEMPLEMAN (Mandurah)** [9.10 am]: I am very pleased to make my grievance this morning to the Minister for Education, and I thank the minister for agreeing to hear me. The issue I am raising is one I know she is well aware of because I raised it in the budget estimates process only a couple of weeks ago. I am raising the issue of the future of, in my case, the Peel district education office at 24 Sutton Street, Mandurah. In a more general sense, I am referring to the overall future of district education offices and the role they play in the provision of quality education in Western Australia. I am here to not only grieve to the minister but also actually plead with her. She knows how passionate I am about education in my area because I have raised this personally with her. As I have said to her privately, the last thing I want to do is degrade education in my area, because it is far too important an issue to try to score political points on. I am not going to do that today, but I want to underline my comments about my ongoing concern of the status of secondary education, particularly in the Peel region. The minister is aware of a number of concerns I have mentioned to her, and that is in no way a reflection of the quality of teachers, particularly the principals, in the high schools in my region. They are excellent principals and staff who are doing a very difficult job.

I want to paint a very brief picture of education in the Peel region. As the minister is well aware, a number of schools in Peel, both primary and secondary, have special needs. Many of our schools in Peel, particularly those in Mandurah, including some in the Shire of Murray, are in catchments in which there are children living in low socioeconomic circumstances. With that comes a range of challenges and concerns about attendance, particularly in the secondary system, and the capacity to engage in quality learning programs. For the past 12 years Peel has been part of an experiment with the introduction, by the previous education minister on this minister's side of politics, the now Premier, of the secondary middle schooling system. We saw the opening of the senior college in 2000 and the establishment of three middle schools—years 8 to 10—at Halls Head, Mandurah High School and Coodanup Community College. Since then I have had an ongoing battle with ministers of both political persuasions and, indeed, the district directors who have had responsibility for Peel. Each time I have raised questions about whether the middle schooling model was working. During that time there has been a change to the district office structure. At one stage in the early 2000s we had the silly situation of four district directors having responsibility for clusters of schools. That situation was a nightmare to work with because of the real problem of getting continuity. However, in the mid-2000s we were finally able to once again secure one district director for the Peel district office. I worked closely with all the district directors, but since then, when we have had one district director, it has been a much more positive experience working with one person who understands the problems for schools in my region and the difficulties that some of the schools are facing.

We also have seen a trend in Peel of a massive bleed of students from the state primary schools, particularly in the later years, to the private sector. I am a very strong supporter of the private school sector in Mandurah; there are some excellent private schools, which I strongly support. I believe the choice for the people who cannot afford to send their kids to private schools, and, indeed, those who cannot get in because the waiting lists are in their hundreds and there are no places, must be of quality education. Parents come to me all the time and tell me their kids are in state primary schools and they are happy with their schools. However, they are having great difficulty with what choice they believe they have for their kids in the state secondary system. That is the picture.

The minister has yet to confirm to me that she will close the Peel district education office. In my view, the Peel district office remains a critical element of support for our local schools. In this place only last week the minister reassured one member of this place, the member for Kalgoorlie, that his district office would not close. However, she has not assured me that my district office will not close, nor has she assured any other member in this place who represents a regional area that their school will not close. Although I am concerned mainly about Peel, I am also concerned for other members who represent regional areas because this is a major concern. If we see these offices close, I believe the closure in Peel, and the problems I have raised with her about schools in my area, will have an enduring negative impact on education in my area. I want to know whether the minister has made a decision now. She made a decision about Kalgoorlie, but she told me during the estimates hearings that she had not made a decision about the others. Will she close the Peel district office in Mandurah; and, if so, why will she close it? Why is it on the chopping block along with other offices? If that is the intention, what is the basis for the decision in terms of quality education? I cannot see any quality outcomes if that decision is made; I see only detrimental impacts in my region where quality of education is now critical to the economic, social and environmental infrastructure.

I am pleading with the minister: do not close the Peel district education office.

**DR E. CONSTABLE (Churchlands — Minister for Education)** [9.18 am]: I thank the member for Mandurah for his comments this morning. In fact, he has covered just about every possible subject he could on schools in

his area. That just proves how passionate he is about schools, as I know he is. I have spent time with him there; in fact, since I have spent time with him looking at his schools, I have also spent a lot of time considering what needs to be done in those schools. If he had raised this matter in a week's time, I could have given him more answers than I can give him this morning. I have had a lot of conversations with the department about schools and the issues he raised about the high schools, and we are very close to concluding our deliberations on that. I think he will be very happy with the result. It has not been easy, as he will know. If it were easy, we would have had answers before this. I can reassure the member for Mandurah that in the next week or so I will be able to talk to him about the high school situation. In looking at that, obviously, we must look at not only the current situation, but also the future and try to project what will happen with population changes and so on.

To get back to the main issue of the member for Mandurah's grievance this morning, I want to reassure him that I understand the depth and breadth of the issues that he has raised. He is looking for good support for his schools; I think that underlies what he has said—that he wants to hang onto this district office because he wants the best support possible for the schools in his electorate. We want that for all schools, but I remind the member that a decision was made by the Liberal Party to review the way in which schools are supported through the current district structure. It was part of an election commitment to review that, and the policy looks at two things. One is giving more autonomy to schools through fewer districts. The district structure we have goes back 30 years and now is a good time to review it. In 1980 there were 13 districts; in 1987 it went to 23; in 1998 there were 29 districts; and in 2003, the Fremantle and Peel districts amalgamated.

**Mr D.A. Templeman:** What date was that?

**Dr E. CONSTABLE:** They amalgamated in 2003, but an office was retained in the Peel district.

There are many ways we could do this, but the thing that is most apparent is the layer upon layer of bureaucracy that has developed in the Department of Education through the district system over the past 30 years. The policy of empowering school communities will bring services and decision making closer to schools. The first step was the independent public schools initiative, which, by all accounts, is working well. The next group of those schools will be announced in July. So far 134 schools have put their hands up for that initiative, so there is great demand for greater flexibility and a recognition that one size does not fit all and that we have to get rid of some of that bureaucracy. Getting rid of those layers of bureaucracy and bringing decision making closer to schools is not about trying to save money. There are more than 600 positions in district offices, and all those resources will remain available to schools, but they will be closer to the schools.

I will give the member an example; it is the obvious example of school psychologists. I think they should be based in schools, doing their work in schools, not placed in a district office, with a district office deciding what is going on. Schools should be much more involved and school psychologists should be part of a school's pastoral care team, rather than being placed separately in a district office. There are many positions based in district offices that would be better based in schools, in my view.

**Mr D.A. Templeman:** Agreed; but very quickly, the district director plays a critical role in this, and I am concerned that if you amalgamate our district with Perth, which is what I think you are going to do, we won't have a designated district officer who has a hierarchical level of influence in the bureaucracy. One of the things that is happening down our way is that the local government and all the other agencies that are interested in education are working closely together, but if they do not have that key person, the district director—who is at the table with the council and the other planning people and who has authority—because he or she has been sucked away to some other place and comes down only intermittently, we will lose a critical link. That's what I'm really concerned about.

**Dr E. CONSTABLE:** The member has made up his mind about how this structure might work; there are a number of ways it might work. The member is pinpointing the need for leadership.

**Mr D.A. Templeman:** Absolutely.

**Dr E. CONSTABLE:** He is assuming that leadership somehow can be only at the district level—if there are fewer districts, there are fewer leaders. I am not going to tell the member what the final configuration will be because this is something that I am still working through. Because it was an election commitment, it will go to cabinet for sign-off. I cannot give answers to all the questions the member has asked because it will be a cabinet decision, but the key to the final decision about the reconfiguration of districts is that leadership is central to any reorganisation. If we were to say that because we have 14 school districts now and the policy was to bring that number down to six—I am looking at a number of possibilities in that regard—there will be only six leaders, that would not necessarily follow at all; that is the member's assumption. The member will see in this reconfiguration a widening of leadership and more opportunities for leadership than exist now, and I think he will be satisfied with that, from what he has said. The key issue for the member is leadership in his area, and there will be plenty of leadership.

**Mr D.A. Templeman:** Minister, will you be able to table the document you have been quoting from?

**Dr E. CONSTABLE:** This is Liberal Party policy.

**Mr D.A. Templeman:** The other one you mentioned.

**Dr E. CONSTABLE:** Yes, I am happy to table that.

**The SPEAKER:** Minister and member for Mandurah, might I suggest you do this outside this chamber?

[See paper 2245.]