

**JOINT STANDING COMMITTEE ON THE
COMMISSIONER FOR CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE**

Seventh Report — Annual report 2022–23 — Tabling

MRS R.M.J. CLARKE (Murray–Wellington) [10.21 pm]: I present for tabling the seventh report of the Joint Standing Committee on the Commissioner for Children and Young People titled *Annual report 2022–23*.

[See paper [2528](#).]

Mrs R.M.J. CLARKE: I am pleased to present the committee's third annual report for tabling. The highlight of 2022–23 was our report *Hungry for change: Addressing food insecurity for children and young people affected by poverty*. This was a combination of approximately 18 months of work for the committee on our inquiry into the most effective ways for Western Australia to address food insecurity in children and young people affected by poverty. This inquiry commenced in April 2022 and set out to find ways to address food insecurity for children living in poverty, while acknowledging that every child has a right to significant good food every day. As well as conducting hearings in Perth, committee members travelled to Albany and Katanning and to remote communities in the Pilbara, Gascoyne and goldfields. Witnesses made it very clear that the physical problems of under-nutrition and malnutrition can turn into mental health problems and social problems. The ability of students to complete their education in order to pursue training opportunities that could lead to employment is compromised, and they remain stuck in the cycle of poverty.

The inquiry found that it is time to find a way to break this cycle, but with an ongoing solution, not just quick fixes. We investigated how food relief and food literacy can assist children experiencing food insecurity. Children need to eat to learn but they also need to learn to eat. Food relief does not always reach children in need, and its nutritional value is not guaranteed, but without access to good food, lessons on how to prepare good food seem irrelevant.

One of the few ways for children to access good food and potentially to learn about it at the same time is through a school lunch program. We discovered that a surprising number of our schools already provide meals and snacks to children from school funds because they see it as a matter of necessity. As one principal told us, it is a no-brainer; hungry kids cannot learn effectively.

The *Hungry for change* report recommended that WA build on these programs and extend school lunches in an equitable way to mitigate the impact of food insecurity on our next generation. We gathered ideas on how this could be done on a recent visit to Tasmania in February and March 2023, where a school lunch program initiated by the Tasmanian School Canteen Association is currently being piloted. We visited some schools in low socio-economic suburbs of Hobart and saw how much the students appreciated a free hot, hearty lunch. Teachers and principals at these schools told us how it was making a difference to attendance, and how it had impacted positively on concentration and behaviour. It was extremely valuable to see the school lunch pilot program in action, and it assisted us in making some of the recommendations in our report.

We also heard how Tasmania had implemented a child and youth wellbeing strategy, which is something we would like to see prioritised in WA. Tasmania has also created a dedicated minister and Department for Education, Children and Young People, making it clear where responsibility for child wellbeing lies. Such investment in our children and young people now will pay dividends in years to come.

We received 494 submissions for this inquiry. Around 450 of these were from students who attend Catholic schools across WA, including in some of the most remote areas where the Catholic schools are the only schools.

In addition to our travels around the state, we reached out to members of the multicultural community via two forums held in Mirrabooka, which provided essential insights into the experiences of newly arrived migrant and refugee families. We thank all those who contributed their insights and experiences, especially those children and young people who made themselves heard. Their voices are important, and we have included some of their frank and heartfelt comments in the report. The *Hungry for change* report was tabled on 22 June 2023 and the government response was tabled on 10 October 2023.

In addition to the committee's inquiry work, we continue with our oversight role of the Commissioner for Children and Young People. The committee met with the commissioner twice during the financial year and published a review report of some of the commissioner's activities in March 2023.

I take this opportunity to thank my fellow committee members for their contributions over the past year: deputy chair Hon Neil Thomson, MLC; Rebecca Stephens, MLA; and Hon Ayor Makur Chuot, MLC. I also thank to our research staff for their support during the 2022–23 year: principal research officer, Sarah Palmer; and research officers Carmen Cummings and Lucy Roberts. Dr Palmer and Carmen Cummings have both now moved on from the committee, and we welcome Naomi Sherrington is a new principal research officer.