

MARGARET RIVER PRIMARY SCHOOL, EDUCATION RESOURCES AND SUPPORT

Grievance

MR P.D. OMODEI (Warren-Blackwood) [9.17 am]: My grievance is directed to the Minister for Education and Training and relates to resources and teaching support in schools, particularly for children with disabilities. It is interesting that my grievance immediately follows the minister's ministerial statement about the needs of people with disabilities. It comes about after the meeting I had a couple of months ago in Busselton with the State School Teachers Union of WA about a number of issues. The issue I raise today relates to the Margaret River Primary School.

In my time as a member of Parliament, the Margaret River Primary School has doubled in size and now has more than 700 students. The ongoing policy of inclusivity means that disabled children are able to take part in class activities throughout the day. Having children with varying degrees of disabilities in the classroom often poses a challenge for teachers. Margaret River Primary School has employed contract teachers to assist in the classroom. The school has a number of children with disabilities, including Down syndrome and autism. I understand that a local solutions report has been proposed. Perhaps the minister can tell me more about it. Occupational therapists and speech therapists are fundamental in schools today. The Margaret River Primary School Principal, Paul Bradstreet, is supported by two deputy principals. The situation is such that Mr Bradstreet traded one of his deputy principal positions - that is, he took the equivalent value of one deputy principal - to employ teachers to assist in the classroom. That has put more pressure on the administration because a principal and one deputy are now doing the work of a principal and two deputies. It is a poor situation when a school principal - this is only one example - has to trade a deputy principal to get more resources. That is fundamentally what I want to address in my grievance. When I visited the school, Mr Bradstreet outlined what had been available at the school in the past and what was available now. In days gone by the school had an education support unit that allowed disabled children to be taught in the school environment. They were taught in a small room that was fully equipped with computers and separate programs. That gave the school flexibility. When complex subjects were taught to students in the classroom, disabled children could have time-out in the education support unit. I understand that the education support unit is no longer used because of a lack of resources. That unit seemed to add an element of commonsense and flexibility to the school and its principal and teachers. Of course, other schools have special education centres that have a range of classes from preprimary right through to year 12 so that disabled children can be educated in the school environment. One such school in Manjimup has a separate principal and a separate structure while allowing for inclusivity at the senior level. Obviously it is a real challenge for those schools to make ends meet and provide the necessary teachers, particularly those with special skills. It is fundamental that occupational and speech therapy be made available to all disabled people either within the school or on a freely accessible basis outside the school.

The issue involves the lack of resources available to schools. I strongly suspect that this is occurring throughout the State. I know from talking to people at the Margaret River Senior High School that young disabled children attend that school. My adoptee under the adopt-a-politician scheme run by the Developmental Disability Council of WA is Courtney Edwards, a 15-year-old girl with severe disabilities, cared for by her mother and father and grandparents. She attends Margaret River Senior High School. They receive outstanding support from the teachers and students at that school. I pay tribute to them for their patience and kindness to Courtney over a long period. Courtney's development over that period has been obvious. However, this issue relates mainly to the Margaret River Primary School. I would like the minister to address the issue. I will refer back to the union, given that the union first raised the matter with me. It was appropriate that I approach the school principal, who outlined the present situation. It seems that more flexibility is needed. I am sure that the issue amounts to the need for funds and the capacity to use the education support unit, which should be run by properly funded permanent staff, if necessary, rather than by part-time staff. The principal should not have to trade his deputy principal's salary to provide proper support for his school.

MR A.J. CARPENTER (Willagee - Minister for Education and Training) [9.22 am]: I thank the member for Warren-Blackwood for bringing this matter to my attention. At the outset I will commit to following up this individual case. I received some general information from the department in anticipation of addressing the grievance. I agree with the member very much on the basic thrust of his grievance; that is, we need to resource schools wherever they are so that we can provide quality education for children with disabilities. That is very difficult, as the member will know from his long experience as the Minister for Disability Services, at the same time as I was shadow Minister for Disability Services. The member for Warren-Blackwood was a very good minister and one of the better ministers in the previous Government. All things are relative - he was not as good as the present Minister for Disability Services; nonetheless, he was very good in his own right and did a lot of good work. He was very committed to that area and still is. I mean that sincerely. The time I spent as opposition spokesman for disability services was a great learning experience, as I am sure the member for Warren-Blackwood found when he was the minister.

What stares us in the face at the end of the day, and what we cannot get away from, is the excess of demand over supply and resources. I used the benefit of my experience as the shadow Minister for Disability Services in policy formulation for education when I was the shadow Minister for Education and tried to find ways and means of not only increasing resources but also improving outcomes for children with disabilities in the education system. In the last election campaign, the Labor Party committed an extra \$4 million for children with disabilities and \$3 million above that for children with special learning needs - a total of \$7 million. When I became Minister for Education I pursued the policy through the department and initiated a review of education for children with disabilities in the departments. That has resulted in an ongoing process, which I am very happy about. It did not just produce a report that gathered dust. It has become an ongoing process that is continually trying to find ways of improving outcomes for children with disabilities. As part of that process and as a result of the information that came to light in the early stages of that review, rather than provide an extra \$7 million for children with disabilities and special learning needs, the Government is providing an additional \$10 million over four years. I am sure the member will accept my assurance that we have not diminished resources across the board. We have increased them significantly. As he knows from following this issue during the budget Estimates Committee hearings, in the last budget the present minister provided an extra \$8 million for people with disabilities.

Mr P.D. Omodei: Was that \$2 million a year?

Mr A.J. CARPENTER: I am not sure; it was a big increase. I think it was \$8 million annually. It was designed to provide services for an additional 600 people. As the member for Warren-Blackwood knows, the level of services varies from intense support to fairly minimal support for people who are largely self-sufficient. He touched on another process in the education system of which he is acutely aware; namely, the inclusivity process. That has resulted from, I think, quite a long period - it predates this Government - of development of educational ideas related to students with disabilities and the requirements of and demands on their parents. Parents of many students with disabilities want their children included in mainstream education. That is an expensive exercise. They need individual support as opposed to what could be provided at the previously more common education support centres, which are separate schools for children with disabilities. It becomes far more complicated and more expensive to teach children with disabilities in mainstream classrooms. That is the issue with this case in Margaret River: one student with a disability is in the class. Quite rightly, that student requires extra support and the student's parents want it. Why should they not want that? All parents know that if children do not get a sufficient start in education, they find it difficult to catch up. The problem becomes even more complex for children with disabilities.

There are 1 632 full-time equivalents employed in regular schools as education assistants for students with special needs. Margaret River Primary School, a rapidly growing primary school in a wonderful part of the State, has good educational facilities. Margaret River Senior High School has a very good reputation. With the development of the centre for excellence in wine and so on there is now a university presence in Margaret River. A half-time aide is provided to assist the child referred to in this case, who is a year 4 student with an intellectual disability. The parents want more aide time, which I understand.

The local solutions project for 2004 for inclusive schooling, of which I was unaware until I received the briefing notes - I do not know whether it can be accessed locally in that area or whether it is more broad based - could be a way of addressing the needs of this family. Subsequent to this grievance, I will follow-up that project to see whether it can be applied for the benefit of the child at Margaret River Primary School.

Mr P.D. Omodei: Can I get access to that report?

Mr A.J. CARPENTER: Yes. If there is a report, I am happy to provide the member with a copy.

The school has bought the additional educational assistance time of a 0.9 FTE to cater for all students with disabilities at the school. I do not know how many students with disabilities attend that school. In a school of 700 students, there are probably several. I do not know whether that 0.9 FTE has resulted from the trade-in of the deputy principal's position. I will find out about that also. The principal has obviously made a decision about the way in which his resources can be best utilised. He has the capacity to seek additional resources over and above what he has been allocated through his school grant and other assistance programs. It may well be that the principal believes that the school does not require a second deputy principal, although that could be a misleading suggestion. I will verify that information also.

The parent has formed a support group with an Edith Cowan University lecturer to address issues related to the provision of resources for students with disabilities. The parent has recently attended an inclusiveness conference in Bunbury called "Building Schools for All" with Loretta Giocelli. The teacher for this student has also sought advice from the State School Teachers Union of WA, and a union organiser recently visited the school for this purpose.

I give a commitment to the member for Warren-Blackwood to pursue this issue on behalf of his constituent and her child. I concur with the member's sentiment that we need more resources in our schools for children with disabilities. This will always be a problem that confronts us.