

HALLS CREEK - NON-ATTENDANCE AT SCHOOL

1. Mr P.D. OMODEI to the Premier:

The laws of Western Australia require children between the ages of five and 16 to attend school.

- (1) Why is there a clearly identified group of approximately 50 children in this age bracket in Halls Creek who do not attend school?
- (2) Is the lack of the Carpenter government's action to get these children to attend school another example of the Premier's disregard for the welfare and development of Aboriginal children?
- (3) Will he concede that his decision to withdraw resources from this community, and his failure to match rhetoric with action, has exacerbated problems such as those at Halls Creek and other communities?

Mr A.J. CARPENTER replied:

- (1)-(3) The answers to questions (2) and (3) are obviously no. I provided some information yesterday, as did various other ministers, about the application of additional resources, rather than the withdrawal of resources, to Halls Creek. Approximately 16 or more extra teachers are in the Kimberley area, some of whom are in Halls Creek. An additional, I think, four or five police officers are also in Halls Creek.

Mr P.D. Omodei: Explain why 50 kids aren't going to school.

Mr A.J. CARPENTER: I think the Leader of the Opposition is confused by the question asked last week about the closure of the Department of Indigenous Affairs office in Halls Creek. The single-person office was closed.

Mr J.H.D. Day: You are not answering the question.

Mr A.J. CARPENTER: I am answering the question. The Leader of the Opposition asked me about the withdrawal of resources. Rather than the closure of the indigenous affairs office resulting in reduced resources in Halls Creek, it has seen human resources in Halls Creek increased.

In relation to the number of students who do not attend school, it may come as a surprise to the Leader of the Opposition - it should not because he is sitting next to a former education minister - there are significant issues with Aboriginal non-attendance at schools all over Western Australia. In fact, if we extrapolate those 50 from the school-age population at Halls Creek, we will probably find that it is one of the better results.

Mr P.D. Omodei: Is it a good result to have 50 children not at school?

Mr A.J. CARPENTER: I did not say that. If the Leader of the Opposition wants me to provide him with comprehension lessons as I walk through the answer, I will do so. He must not jump to the extreme position every time he hears a comment. I am saying that if he looks at a number of regional communities and, indeed, those in metropolitan areas -

Mr P.D. Omodei interjected.

The SPEAKER: Order, Leader of the Opposition.

Mr A.J. CARPENTER: I know. He will find that this government, as was his government, has long been grappling with the non-attendance of Aboriginal students in school. Cultural issues come into play, such as funerals continually occurring throughout the Pilbara and the Kimberley, drawing families away from regional centres and towns and taking students with them. Everybody in the education system knows that.

Mr P.D. Omodei: Tell me there are legal and technical difficulties and Sir Humphrey will walk through the door!

Mr A.J. CARPENTER: If I thought the member was genuinely ignorant about this issue, I would be saddened. His question was cynical. He knows there are real difficulties getting Aboriginal children to go to school in almost every community in Western Australia. Halls Creek is no different. The Department of Education and Training, community services, the local shire, the local police and the sports program people work very assiduously with people in the local community to make sure that, as far as is possible, every Aboriginal student goes to school. They provide breakfast and lunch and sports programs. However, from time to time, at various levels, there are very high rates of absence. It is not acceptable but it is a reality in Western Australia that governments have been trying to deal with for a long time. As I recall, the Leader of the Opposition's government tried to implement some good tracking initiatives and so on. This government has implemented a plethora of programs to make sure that as many Aboriginal kids as possible go to school every day.

That work goes on, and it will probably still be going on in five years. There are areas in which it is highly successful. Sometimes it is highly successful for a period and then it drops away again, depending on what might happen in the community. That is the reality of the life that we face. If the Leader of the Opposition is

leading to the point that there are laws that can penalise parents for the non-attendance of their children at school, I know that as well. However, there are real practical, social and all sorts of complex reasons for the application of that law, and the Leader of the Opposition knows that as well.