

## CHILD DEVELOPMENT

### *Motion*

**HON DONNA FARAGHER (East Metropolitan)** [1.07 pm]: I move —

That this house —

- (a) recognises that the early years are identified as a critical period in a child's life marked by rapid and significant changes in their physical, cognitive, social and emotional development; and
- (b) calls on the McGowan government to significantly increase its investment in this critical area.

A few weeks ago, I spoke on a motion in this place that was primarily an economics motion, but during my contribution I stressed the fact that I felt it was incumbent on all of us to speak up more for a section of our community that does not have a voice in this Parliament but for whom decisions are made every day by their parents, carers, educators and ministers and their departments and agencies. Of course, I am talking about children. Children and young people make up around 23 per cent of Western Australia's population, with over 417 000 aged between zero and 11 years of age. In 2020, 32 677 babies were born. By any measure, children form a significant part of our community and they need our support, they need priority and they need our attention. I have said many times in this place and outside of it that the early years of a child's life are the most critical. We know that a positive beginning helps set children up for future success. In many ways, early childhood development sets the scene for a child's future health and wellbeing in terms of their physical, emotional, social and behavioural outcomes.

It is for this very reason that access to critical, supportive and quality childhood development services, and family services, early in a child's life is paramount. It is not just me saying that; it is parents, educators, health professionals, researchers and economists. Each and every one of them are saying the same thing; that is, the more time, effort and resources that can be put into children in those early years, the more the dividends that are paid when they grow older. That is not just for the children; it is also for their family and the community as a whole.

Indeed, if we look purely at the economics, a report from the Centre for Policy Development titled *Starting better*, which was released last year, said —

Children who access quality early childhood services are

- More likely to be healthy and happy in early childhood, reducing the need to invest in intensive and remedial support, and preparing them to succeed at later stages of life.
- More likely to succeed in their learning, attaining higher levels of literacy, getting higher grades at school, staying in school longer, and attaining higher post-school qualifications that lead to better careers.

The report states also that recent Australian analysis found that early intervention can save up to \$15.2 billion annually otherwise spent on late intervention.

For me, and I am sure for everyone in this house, although the economics obviously supports early childhood development and the importance of early intervention, what is most important is achieving better outcomes for children and their families. I presume it will be the Leader of the House who will respond to this motion. I am sure she will outline the various initiatives that this government has underway. I have no issue with that. Of course all governments of all political persuasions provide support for the early years. However, what is most important is the priority and the commitment that is given to that, and the ability to think outside the box about new initiatives that would make children's lives better. In that regard, I believe that this government could give greater attention to some areas that would be positive and well received by parents and the community at large.

Because my time today is limited, the first area that I want to focus on is wait times for children seeking to access critical allied health and paediatric services through the government health system. I have raised this before and I will continue to raise it. I am now being contacted almost daily by parents who are literally at their wits' end because of the significant delays that they are experiencing to have their children access vital supports. Over a period of time—a couple of years at least—I have been monitoring the wait times. I raised a couple of those in my contribution a few weeks ago, and I will raise them again because I now have some more information.

I will start with the median wait times for primary school children to access the metropolitan Child Development Service. For speech pathology, in 2019–20, the wait time was 4.8 months. In 2020–21, between January and March, the wait time was 7.9 months. In 2020–21, between April and June, the wait time was 8.7 months. Now, in 2022, it is 8.7 months. For occupational therapy, in 2019–20, the wait time was 3.3 months. In 2020–21, between January and March, the wait time was 6.7 months. In 2020–21, between April and June, the wait time was 7.8 months. Now, in 2022, there has been a slight dip to 7.3 months, but it is still too high. For physiotherapy, in 2019–20, the wait time was 0.9 months. In 2020–21, between January and March, the wait time was 6.5 months. In 2020–21,

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between April and June, the wait time was nine months. It is now 9.2 months. For paediatricians, in 2020–21, between April and June, the wait time was 16.1 months. It is now 16.4 months. For clinical psychology, in 2020–21, the wait time was 10 months. It is now 12 months—an entire year.

The median wait time for children in regional areas is actually not much better. For example, primary school children in the Pilbara region are required to wait up to 11 months before they are able to access a clinical psychologist. I ask members: is that good enough? Is it good enough that a child needs to wait 16.4 months to see a paediatrician in the public health system? Is it good enough that a child, whether they are in the Pilbara region or in metropolitan WA, has to wait nearly 12 months to access a clinical psychologist? It is not good enough. It is not just me who is saying this. When I raise these figures with parents, they do not believe them. They are telling me that that might be the median wait time, but they are waiting far longer. Two years or three years are the figures that are being repeatedly told to me. I appreciate that a range of reasons may be contributing to these delays. I accept that. In no way am I critical of the allied health professionals and paediatric staff working in country and metro WA. They are doing the very best they can. I accept that all governments can experience challenges in these areas. But it is how they respond that matters. When our government experienced some of these challenges, what did we do? We said it was not good enough. We put in significant funds—nearly \$50 million—to increase the number of staff and child health professionals in these services, and what did we see? The wait lists went down. We also increased funding for child health nurses, as well as introducing child and parent centres, which I will mention in a moment.

What do we know now about the government's actions in this area? We know that the metropolitan Child Development Service sought funding through a business case well before the last budget. We prised out of the government how much it was asking for. It was asking for \$2.5 million. It was not asking for \$25 million—that would have been good. It was asking for \$2.5 million. I consistently asked the government, both in questions without notice and during the estimates hearings, whether that funding has been approved. It was like a Ferris wheel, going around and around in a circle. No-one could provide me with an answer. All they could say was that it was subject to budget deliberations. This was well after the budget had been introduced and tabled. I think the government actually did not know where that business case was at.

I can tell members what I know. The wait times are continuing to increase. During the time I have been asking these questions, between the 2020–21 and 2021–22 financial years, the actual increase in funding to the metropolitan Child Development Service was \$1.4 million. That was it. That was the only increase. That is well short of the \$2.5 million requested by the government's own department, and well short of what is required. While this is going on, children are missing out.

I want to now focus on one particular area. The Leader of the House will probably know where I am going with this. It is speech pathology. Research has consistently shown that there is a strong relationship between literacy development and oral language skills, particularly in the early years of learning. On average, around seven per cent of kids will have some form of language impairment. That is effectively one to two kids in every classroom. Research also shows that if left unaddressed, speech and language difficulties can have a significant and long-lasting impact on a child's health and wellbeing. It can also impact on their educational outcomes and result in poorer literacy and numeracy skills, early school leaving and reduced employment opportunities. Despite this, we know from the answers that have been provided to me that kids have to wait nearly nine months to access even their first appointment for a speech pathologist. Yes, there are private services, but the reality is that they are out of reach for many families; they just are. Because of that, timely access to government services is critical. I appreciate that the number of referrals for speech pathology is very high. In 2021, according to an answer provided to me, the metropolitan Child Development Service received 9 241 referrals. That is a high number. I understand that.

Are there ways, however, in which we can help reduce the load for that service, as well as increase its funding? I and others believe that there is a way to do that. The Minister for Education and Training will know that for some time I have been calling in a positive way for a trial of speech pathology face-to-face services to be delivered directly into schools. I know that the minister will say that there is an issue of workforce shortages. I say to the minister, most sincerely: has she properly considered that proposal? It is not just my proposal; others have put it. Has the minister determined what might be possible? I accept that the government might think that this is a bit out of the box, but I have to tell members that this is not a novel proposal. This is not something that came out of Donna Faragher's head when she could not get to sleep at night and was thinking of a brand new idea. South Australia, Victoria, Queensland and Tasmania have all for some time provided direct access to speech pathology services in their primary schools through their respective departments of education. The ACT and Northern Territory also have a form of direct access. Although the way in which it is delivered might vary across jurisdictions, each of them have a system in place, so why can we not at least try it here?

The Department of Education has five language development centres, and they are excellent. President, you and I have been out to visit one of them in my electorate, which I will mention in a moment. Those centres provide early intervention services for students with very severe language difficulties. Equally, they provide outreach

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services that are also fantastic, but they are limited, because they provide support only to the teacher, not to the child. Notwithstanding that, demand for those outreach services is high. In 2020 the number of schools that accessed it was 333; in 2021 it was, according to the minister's answer yesterday, 436 schools. The demand is there.

Although the government has not initiated a trial, the North East Metropolitan Language Development Centre has taken up the initiative and is piloting a three-year trial program of speech pathology services directly into schools. Last year, nine schools in the centre's catchment area participated in the program and this year, according to the minister's answer yesterday, 22 schools are participating. The demand is there, so I ask the government and the minister to please be bold and to please just give it a go. At the very least, a trial would be a step in the right direction and the government would have my absolute support and the support of many other people.

In the short time remaining to me, I want to talk about another area that I mentioned briefly earlier: child and parent centres. These are locally coordinated, targeted and connected services that are responsive to children and their families, and they actually work. Some call them integrated whole-of-family services; I call them fantastic one-stop shops. The previous government looked at the research supporting these types of centres. We looked at overseas examples and a particular school in Armadale—Challis Community Primary School—that had also developed a hybrid model. What did we do? We funded and established 16 child and parent centres across WA, and also took responsibility for a further five commonwealth family centres that were operating in similar ways, bringing the total to 21.

Many members will know about these centres. They were established in areas in which there is a high level of developmental vulnerability, based on the Australian Early Development Census and other published reports. These centres are focused on vulnerable families and children from birth to eight years of age, but primarily focused on the zero to four years age range. They are designed to close the gap in the development, health and wellbeing of young children who may be at risk of developmental delay. They are operated by non-government organisations and they provide a range of quality, early childhood development programs, including maternal and child health services; paediatric services; speech therapy support; early literacy and numeracy programs; playgroups; and parenting and family support programs—and the list goes on.

According to the Department of Education's most recent annual report, the 22 centres currently in operation provided 590 programs and services, with approximately 74 000 child attendances and 72 000 adult attendances. That is a massive number. Back in 2017 the department commissioned an independent evaluation of these centres, and it found that they were a model of excellence. I refer to a couple of things said in that evaluation. It states —

The centres are bringing services to local communities where they are more easily accessed by those requiring them. In addition, they are linking the early learning, early childhood education and the community services sectors which have previously been largely independent of each other.

The evaluation also reflects on one of the common themes of how the centre had improved access to services. It quotes a coordinator —

*"There has been an increase in attendance of families who do not traditionally access playgroups or children activity sessions due to financial restraints. The integrated services offered to families has increased access but also provided a more co-ordinated and holistic response for families."*

One coordinator ended by saying that we just need more of them. It is not only the coordinators who are saying this. The former Commissioner for Children and Young People, Colin Pettit, in a report and follow-up reports, also called on the government to increase the number of child and parent centres. Despite this, since 2017, only one new child and parent centre has actually been established, in the electorate of Swan Hills. I think that was an election commitment. That is very good; we are very happy with that, but I would like to see more of them.

Last year in the budget estimates hearings, I asked the Minister for Education and Training whether there was a plan to increase the number of child and parent centres. The minister's response was —

There is not a plan to.

She went on to say —

No, there is not a plan for them in this budget. I mean, they do good work—there is no question about that—but no; the answer to that is that there is no plan.

I asked the minister about it again in annual report hearings last week, and I quote her reply from the uncorrected copy —

... there is not a kind of statewide plan, if that is what you were looking for.

I have to say that that is what I am looking for. Given their effectiveness, why is there no strategy? They are effective and the Department of Education's own independent evaluation shows that. The former Commissioner for Children and Young People agrees, as do many other people, so please put some investment into these centres.

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Unfortunately, my time is coming to a close for this motion. I say to the government: it is not only me who is asking the government to make children in their early years a priority. I know the government absolutely does put funding into the early years. As I said at the beginning of my contribution, all governments do. Do I think there are areas to which we could give greater attention, such as the wait times right now? Yes, I do. It is an absolute priority, and now is the time, as we head towards the budget, for the government to be ambitious, and it has the capacity to do it. It just needs the will and commitment to do so.

I will leave members with a quote from the *Starting better* report I referred to earlier —

Raising children is the most important thing we do—not just as families, but as a society. It is an act of love and faith in the future. Whether or not we are parents, we share a duty of care for children. We must do all we can to help them grow and flourish.

I could not say it better myself, and I ask members to support the motion.

**HON SUE ELLERY (South Metropolitan — Minister for Education and Training)** [1.28 pm]: I thank the honourable member for bringing this motion to the house today, and I want to commend her for the work she has done in her portfolio area. She is well regarded in the sector for her commitment to that work. Certainly, the theme of this motion is one that everyone in this house would share, I am sure. It is certainly the case that this government recognises the increased demand for child development services, and we have made significant investments accordingly. I flag, at the outset, that I intend to move an amendment to part (b) of the motion, and I will move that in a moment.

The government has injected some \$3.2 billion into Western Australia's health and mental health system, including in the area of child health.

I will note in passing the announcement made today by federal Labor leader Anthony Albanese in which he promised that an Albanese government will deliver \$38.4 million for newborn screening. I think that is a great investment and it certainly shows that whether it is on childcare, aged care or Medicare, there is a stark difference facing Australians at this election. Federal Labor cares and I think that that will be rewarded at the ballot box. Nevertheless, I will come back to the motion in front of us today.

We certainly recognise the need to invest in early childhood education, especially in significant initiatives like the investment of \$49.3 million in the early years. We reduced the cost of training for early childhood educators and invested in various school-based initiatives. It is the case, though, that there are significant workforce issues. It is not just about money for programs; we actually need to address the workforce issue. This is not only an issue in Western Australia, but also a national and, indeed, a global issue.

Wait times for child development services are certainly lengthier than anyone wants them to be. A range of factors impact on that, not the least of which is—whether it is because of better understanding in the community about the need for early intervention, whether it is because people are talking about it more, I do not know—that over the last five years there has been a 41 per cent increase in referrals across all Child Development Service disciplines. That is a very significant increase.

It is also the case that the training of some professionals engaged in this area—for example, some of the highly specialised clinicians such as developmental paediatricians—can take up to 15 years. It is not about a lack of investment or a failure to commit to funding; we also have a workforce issue that we need to tackle. But that is not to say that we have not provided additional funding. We certainly have. From November 2021, for example, there will be an additional \$2.5 million a year for the delivery of child development services. That will include additional FTE in the following roles: paediatric registrars, paediatric consultants, clinical nurse specialists, senior speech pathologists, clinical psychologists and case coordinators. There has been a reduction in wait times as a result. There has been significant investment in diagnostic assessments for autism spectrum disorders. Since early 2021, a further 14 speech pathologists have been trained in ASD diagnosis and six clinical psychs have also completed training to broaden their diagnostic assessment skills.

In respect of speech pathology services, I am aware of the proposition that was put by the honourable member. But it is also the case that through our five language development centres, which provide full-time early intervention programs for the early years for students with a diagnosed language disorder, as at the last census in February this year, some 1 327 students were enrolled in language development centres. Schools can also choose to purchase private speech pathology services, and many of them do. That is one of the purposes of the one-line budget that was put in place by my predecessor, which gives schools the option to choose the services that meet the needs of their particular demographic.

In 2021, some 436 schools accessed outreach services provided by language development centres. I note the point the honourable member made about them being able to train staff. It is no small feat that we have also significantly increased the school psychology service and the chaplaincy service. We made a commitment to increase the

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number of school psychologists in schools to 100 by 2024 and have increased funding of chaplaincy services by \$20 million so that those schools that want a chaplain but have not been able previously to get one can get one. We are on track to increase the school psych FTE by 47 by the end of this year, which includes additional supervising and lead school psychologists. In respect of chaplaincy, as of a couple of weeks ago, in March 2022, a total of 556 schools had secured a chaplain for this year and that program is continuing to grow.

CaLDEYLink, which is like KindiLink but is for supported playgroups for culturally and linguistically diverse families, is also being funded. We are doing that at two school sites now, one in Maylands and one in Bentley. I think that program will continue to grow. It is a really important way of getting parents who might not be familiar with the school system to attend with their children to a school site and to participate in playgroup activities.

I mentioned the Early Years Initiative, which is a \$49.3 million 10-year partnership between the state government and the Minderoo Foundation. The initiative covers four partner communities across the metropolitan, regional, remote and very remote areas of WA in the central great southern, Armadale, Bidyadanga and Derby. It listens and is bespoke to a particular community. It is focused on place-based solutions. One example in the central great southern is about ear, nose and throat infections, which is one of the top four health issues impacting children in the regions. Families had reported that the specialist services for ear, nose and throat infections were inaccessible. Work was done to simplify the system for families to make referral pathways and better client follow-ups easier by combining audiologist and ENT clinics to make them more accessible. A huge amount of work has been done in that area and it continues.

One critical issue about how we address quality delivery of services in the early years is around the skills that we provide for early years educators, in particular in childcare settings. There is a stark difference between what this government has done in this space and what the previous government did. Our Lower Fees, Local Skills initiative reduced TAFE fees for early childhood education and care courses by up to 72 per cent, and that will continue until 2025. The cost of completing a Diploma of Early Childhood Education and Care rose to as much as \$10 000 a student—that was the cost for somebody who wanted to work in the lowest paid area of our workforce but with one of the greatest areas of responsibility; that is, the care and education of our youngest children. Under the previous Liberal–National government, fees for that course were over \$10 000. Under our Lower Fees, Local Skills initiative, the fees have been reduced by 72 per cent, down to \$2 400 or \$800 for a person with a concession card. That particular classification was a classic example of how the previous government put TAFE beyond the reach of ordinary families. Ordinary young people—primarily young girls—who thought that they wanted to go and work in childcare just could not afford it. We have made a real difference. Investing in the industry with initiatives like these not only helps working parents, but also provides important upskilling opportunities for educators. Since the rollout of that reduced fee program, there have been 2 380 enrolments in the certificate III of early childhood education and 1 280 enrolments in the Diploma of Early Childhood Education and Care.

I also want to touch on universal kindy access and the preschool reform agreement that was recently signed between the state and federal governments. Since the 1990s, WA has funded universal kindy provision. The state government funded 11 hours of kindy in public schools and about 75 per cent of those 11 hours were provided in non-government schools. A new agreement was signed just over a month ago. All states, whatever their political persuasion, had tried for years to get the commonwealth to commit to long-term funding—to a four or five-year agreement—because it was a constant one-year rollover, which meant there was no certainty for anyone. We have secured funding for that kindy program for 2022 to 2025. Under this agreement, funding will ensure the provision of 15 hours of kindergarten a week for all age-eligible children in Western Australia and will fund program quality, equity, participation and kindy-prep programs. This will also allow the commonwealth's funding to flow to the state's early education and care sector from 2023 for the small proportion of Western Australian four-year-olds who exclusively get their early years' education in an early childhood setting. These arrangements will be co-designed with the sector so they can be properly implemented when that kicks in.

The government has committed some \$5.1 million into a range of initiatives to improve early childhood education and care for regional families in particular. That commitment includes \$4.1 million to support the viability of regional childcare by working with regional providers to make childcare more accessible and affordable for local families and \$1 million in grants towards retaining childcare workers in regional WA through the establishment of a capped grant fund to local government authorities in regional areas to support them to attract and retain childcare workers. They may use those funds to subsidise accommodation, relocation costs, training and professional development, workshops and seminars et cetera. I am advised that the first round of those grants closed on 8 March and attracted strong interest and applications. The assessments for those are now underway.

One of the other investments is the Regional Early Education and Development program in the wheatbelt, which was the recipient of \$1.4 million. It was initially formed after a study was done by the Shire of Brookton on governance and management models that could be applicable to childcare services, particularly in the wheatbelt. This was locally driven by the people of the wheatbelt in more than 20 communities across the wheatbelt. REED

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is a not-for-profit association and provides overarching governance, therefore picking up the responsibility, if you like, for all the back-of-house provisions that are necessary when running a childcare centre. It provides access to the government structures it needs to secure the sustainability of its services. There are now more than 20 approved providers as part of that. That is proof of what can happen when the community and the early childhood education and care sector come together. The government wants to continue to support regional and remote communities in ensuring that children have access to high-quality early childhood education services.

*Amendment to Motion*

**Hon SUE ELLERY:** I flagged that I intended to move an amendment to the motion. Therefore, I move —

In paragraph (b) — To delete “calls on the McGowan government to significantly increase its” and insert —  
recognises the importance of

The amendment will be circulated in due course. If it is successful, the amended motion will read —

That this house —

- (a) recognises that the early years are identified as a critical period in a child’s life marked by rapid and significant changes in their physical, cognitive, social and emotional development; and
- (b) recognises the importance of investment in this critical area.

This gives effect to the point that I know the honourable member needs to, should, and wants to make, but is also something that the government is comfortable to live with. I commend the amendment.

**HON DONNA FARAGHER (East Metropolitan)** [1.43 pm]: I would prefer the motion to remain as it stands. Obviously, my preference would be for this house to agree to the importance of early childhood development services and the early years. With that, I will not oppose the amendment.

Amendment put and passed.

*Motion, as Amended*

**HON PETER COLLIER (North Metropolitan)** [1.44 pm]: I stand to support the motion. Even though I would have preferred the original version, I am quite comfortable to sit with the amended motion. It is probably good in a motion like this that we collectively agree on this fundamentally significant issue—that is, early intervention for children. From an educational perspective, a social perspective and a philosophical perspective, one cannot argue against early intervention. It is absolutely vital that we, not just as a state, but as a nation and as an entire global community, understand the merits of early intervention in a child’s life.

I have said this before on numerous occasions and I will say it again: for generations upon generations, we had a misdirected bent on outcomes with education. Everything was focused on the outcome of a child’s education. Everything was focused on graduating. Everything was focused on university entrance. Quite frankly, for generations our universities lead our school system by the nose because it insisted on a four-digit fine grain assessment for university entrance. What happened then of course was that everything was generated towards those final two years of education. We were throwing the baby out with the bathwater because we were missing the point. If we get the entrance component right, the outcome will take care of itself, like anything in life, and that is the case in education more profoundly than ever.

We live in an increasingly complex society and children are going to school with a vast array of social issues—substance abuse, the breakdown of the traditional family and the breakdown of the family structure across the globe. When children are going to school on a daily basis with a raft of issues, it is little wonder that more and more children are falling between the cracks. At last, we as a community are looking towards an education system that focuses primarily on early intervention. Everything will then take care of itself for the exit. As we prepare students for employment and adulthood, it is good that we are starting to look at the early entrance.

I had 23 magnificent years in the classroom. I loved every single day as a chalkie. It was the best job on earth, apart from being education minister. The job of a chalkie when I first went in in 1981 was significantly different from what it was when I left at the end of 2004. The pressures that are bestowed upon teachers at the moment are extreme. Let us try to do some things with our education system to make sure we can overcome those problems. I spoke to the department and said that my emphasis had to be on certain areas and that I would like some support from the department with the independent public schools system, early entrance, integrity behind our graduation, Aboriginal education and integrity behind our funding. The department was magnificent with that. There was a massive era of reform over that period, particularly in 2015, but none more notable than in early entrance. To show that it was not just rhetoric, we did an enormous amount to ensure that we best prepared our education system

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to enhance the opportunities of every single child—not just those who wanted to move into the golden triangle and go to university. Believe it or not, two-thirds of our students do not go to university, so let us make sure that we look after them as well. Let us make sure that we look after some of the most marginalised and disadvantaged students in society. That is why I felt that early intervention was absolutely vital.

Going way back to the Richard Court government in the 1990s, that Liberal government introduced 11 hours of kindergarten for students in Western Australia. The previous Liberal government did that. We extended it to 15 hours and used the universal access funding. As the Leader of the House mentioned, a number of ministers over the last 10 years have had numerous arguments with successive federal governments that are focused only on the short-term element, particularly over universal access. I know as a minister I had to deal with Liberal and Labor federal ministers to try to get some sort of certainty behind this funding. The funding is only every two years, so it is fine to fund those extra four hours to bring it up to 15 hours for kindergarten, but it makes it so difficult for kindergartens to have any certainty about staffing and resources if they know their funding will be for only two more years. It is a nonsense and it is one of the real problems with our federal system at the moment. Regardless, we were able to increase the funding to 15 hours for kindergarten students throughout Western Australia. I did that as the Minister for Education.

When I came in, I was told by numerous people within the sector that kindergartens needed some sort of direction. There was nothing—fundamentally nothing, no direction whatsoever. I introduced a curriculum framework for kindergarten students. It came with the unanimous—I will say unanimous—support of the kindergarten and early childhood sector. The framework was not prescriptive. There was not too much prescription in what the student had to learn, but kindergarten teachers just wanted to have a framework. I will draw from the media statement at the time I introduced it on 24 August 2014. It says, in part —

The guidelines focus on promoting five areas of learning and development:

- Identity—children have a strong sense of identity
- Connecting and contributing—children are connected with and contribute to their world
- Wellbeing—children have a strong sense of wellbeing
- Learning and thinking—children are confident and involved learners
- Communicating—children are effective communicators.

The curriculum guidelines were framed around those five formulae or themes. They were very well received and provided some direction for kindergarten teachers. In addition to that, we introduced as a government on-entry testing. It was introduced in 2010. I extended and expanded it in 2012. The on-entry testing was intended to provide a framework of understanding for teachers about students when they came to school so teachers had some understanding of the child's capacity. It was to assist the child so they did not get lost in a quagmire of so many other things, in a crowded curriculum, in those early years. The teacher would have some understanding of the learning capacity and capabilities of the individual child. I extended it to include oral language, vocabulary, comprehension, writing, counting, spatial awareness and measurement comparisons. Again, it was very well received and it was done completely with the consent and support of the teaching fraternity and the union. We were trying very hard to assist those most in need.

I am going to touch on the child and parent centres because they are a wonderful initiative. Hon Donna Faragher has already mentioned them but I will go into a little bit more detail. The child and parent centres were initiated early in our term of government and I was fortunate enough to open all 16 of them. I opened the first one on 1 July 2014 up in South Hedland. Minister Dawson was up there on that day as a fresh, new incomer and it was a wonderful occasion. The child and parent centres are a great extension for school environments. They provide a centre for all students in a particular area, not just the schools upon which they are centred, but for a cluster of schools. They are usually in lower socio-economic areas—areas of social need. They provide an avenue for anything up to 10 schools. They provide early intervention literacy and numeracy, speech therapy, psychology services, health, mental health services, parenting support and parenting workshops. If any members have not been to one of the child and parent centres, I strongly recommend that they go and have a look at them. They are magnificent; they really are. As Hon Donna Faragher said, they go to tens of thousands of students. For example, in 2016, our last year in office, 95 000 children and 71 000 adults accessed the child and parent centres and they provided over 614 programs. I would like to think those child and parent centres will be expanded further because they intimately impact on tens of thousands of students, but there are still so many more students out there who are suffering in silence as a direct result of the fact that they do not have adequate support at school and, unfortunately, they do not have adequate support at home. The child and parent centres supplement that.

The child and parent centres are located at East Maddington Primary School, East Waikiki Primary School, Gosnells Primary School, Mount Lockyer Primary School in Albany, Rangeway Primary School in Geraldton,

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Wilson Park Primary School in Collie, Challis Early Childhood Education Centre in Armadale, Neerabup Primary School in Banksia Grove, Roseworth Primary School in Girrawheen, Westminster Junior Primary School, Dudley Park Primary School in Mandurah, Carey Park Primary School in Australind, South Hedland Primary School, Brookman Primary School in Langford, Calista Primary School in Rockingham and Warriapendi Primary School in Balga. On top of that, we had another failing from the federal government. It was my mob at that stage. Back in 2015, it had child and family centres at Halls Creek, Fitzroy Crossing, Kununurra, Roebourne and Swan. They provided some wraparound services. They did not provide the intimate services that the child and parent centres provide in terms of speech therapy and parental support, but they were very worthwhile facilities. The federal government, in its wisdom, decided it would no longer fund them. It was just going to up and leave those five centres, making them redundant. We found some money in the bottom of the cupboard and we were able to add them to the child and parent centres throughout Western Australia, which increased the number of child and parent centres to 21 throughout Western Australia. We went to the previous election in 2017 to increase that number of child and parent centres throughout Western Australia. Unfortunately, things did not go our way, so they did not get built. I know that the current minister is supportive of child and parent centres. I know that the department is supportive of child and parent centres. I know that the community is supportive of child and parent centres. I like to think that in this round of the budget, when the government is flush with funds, it will increase the number of child and parent centres because they are doing an enormous amount of good out in the community, supporting those children and parents who are least able to support themselves.

Another area that I am absolutely delighted to tip my hat to is the KindiLink program. That falls in line with a number of initiatives we had with Aboriginal education in our term of government. I was very mindful of the fact that, although the child and parent centres were supportive of a number of Aboriginal families, I felt that we could do even more for Aboriginal students. They are one of the most marginalised groups in our community, one of the groups with the lowest attendance rates at schools throughout our community, and one of the sectors of our community that has the lowest literacy and numeracy rates. It is not good enough for First Nations people to have appalling educational standards in the twenty-first century. We have to do as much as we possibly can to assist that cohort of our community. The First Nations people deserve our respect, they deserve our money, they deserve our attention and they deserve our support in ensuring that they have the best possible education they can. We introduced the KindiLink program in 2015. It was 37 kindergartens throughout the length and breadth of Western Australia. They provide three lots of two hours of kindergarten for Aboriginal three-year-olds and their parents, with enhanced literacy and numeracy support, parenting workshops, speech therapy—support mechanisms. We spread them right throughout the state. There are eight in the Kimberley, four in the Pilbara, three in the midwest, five in the goldfields, three in the North Metropolitan Region, eight in the South Metropolitan Region, four in the wheatbelt and two in the south west.

I was delighted to hear at a hearing of the Standing Committee on Estimates and Financial Operations that that has been increased to 55, so hats off to the minister and the government. I hope we can further increase and enhance the number of KindiLinks throughout Western Australia, because they are doing a wonderful job. I will add an anecdote, which come up every now and again when you are in government. After the last election, in 2021—we had just got pipped at the post!—I was down at Woolworths. I live in Subiaco, and I was walking through Woolies one day when this Aboriginal woman came up to me. She was working; she had a Woolworths' uniform on. She said, "You're Mr Collier?" I said yes. She said, "Your mob lost." I said that, yes, we did not quite get there. I talk to her regularly now. I will not mention her name, because I do not have her authority, but I am sure members will find her if they go down to Woolworths in Subiaco. I will get her authority to use her name and I will mention her. She told me that her granddaughter had gone to a KindiLink program several years before and that had helped her, and she had done really well at school and now she was in high school. She was so grateful. I am not saying that as a vanity. I am just saying that the program works. We have to do more for Aboriginal students throughout our community. The KindiLink program definitely enhances educational opportunities for Aboriginal students throughout Western Australia.

The final point I mention is funding. One of the biggest things I inherited as education minister was an enormous amount of money going into education, but the funding had no integrity behind it; in fact, it was all top-heavy. The secondary education system received a vastly more significant amount of money than primary education. That is to be expected as it costs a lot more to educate a secondary school child than it does a primary school child. But the disparity in Western Australia was much higher than anywhere in the nation. The former Liberal–National government introduced the student-centred funding model, which meant that the funding followed the child. It would cost a certain amount of money for a child in kindergarten, pre-primary to year 3, year 4 to year 6, year 7 to year 10, and then years 11 and 12. I created that extra year 11 and year 12 variable because of the significant changes to the curriculum in years 11 and 12 at that time. We were then able to provide a much more equitable level of funding, at the same time as providing significant extra money for those in special need: those from lower socio-economic areas; those who live in the regions; those with a disability; those who have English as a second



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language; and Aboriginal students. The money followed the child. We do not have sweetheart deals with schools. We now have significantly more money in the early years of education than ever before. That model was very well received. The current government has retained the student-centred funding model because it works; it does work. I introduced that in 2014. At the start of 2015, after everything was washed up, we found we had another \$46 million waiting to be spent. The director general at the time, Sharon O’Neil, suggested how we could disburse it. I said, “No, let’s go into the early years again, because this cohort had largely missed out.” That \$46 million went into those early years of study. Now there is integrity behind the funding of our education system. We no longer have the situation that two schools, with virtually the same number and cohort of students, receive wildly different levels of funding. I am sorry, members, but that is what our education system was like before 2015. The student-centred funding model has definitely improved the quality of funding in our schools. The Liberal–National government increased funding in education by 73 per cent over its term in government. This made our schools the highest resourced in the nation and our teachers the highest paid in the nation by far.

As I said, I asked the department to focus on five areas during my tenure as education minister but, without a doubt, the most wholesome, the most comprehensive range of reforms occurred in those early years. I make no apology for it, because I am absolutely convinced that in the years ahead we will reap the benefits from making such significant changes to the early years of literally hundreds of thousands of students in primary school.

**HON TJORN SIBMA (North Metropolitan)** [2.05 pm]: Let me begin by paying a compliment to my friend and colleague Hon Donna Faragher for making this matter an issue that this house focuses on this Wednesday afternoon. I also compliment the Leader of the House, who moved to some degree an expected but, nevertheless, reasonable, amendment, which Hon Donna Faragher accepted in good grace. She has once again illustrated that discretion is the better part of valour.

The issues of child development do not necessarily consume a significant proportion of this house’s deliberations. We focus very much on issues of not only great impact, emotion and political difference but also on important but more mundane issues, or that is a conceptualisation that we bring to the house. In the course of debate on the Treasurer’s Advance Authorisation Bill 2022, in anticipation of a budget to be handed down in the middle of May, we were scrutinising spending decisions and spending priorities of government. Honestly, and very frequently, governments of both persuasions categorise their expenditure in terms of investment rather than just the outlay of cash. We measure the wisdom of making investments in railways or roads on the basis of benefit–cost ratios and the like. I take this opportunity to illustrate a very basic point, which probably would find unanimous support in the house; that is, the best investment we can make as a society is in the future of our children—in their health, welfare and development. It is important that this house on occasion takes the opportunity to step back, evaluate where it is getting things right and be brave enough to admit perhaps where it is getting things wrong. We are building on foundations laid by previous governments and the decisions of previous ministers, both Labor and Liberal. I think it has been fairly categorised that there has been an upward trajectory in the importance that we place on the issues of child development across the range of parameters, illustrated and described by Hon Donna Faragher. My interest in speaking to this topic is motivated not only by the wisdom of the motion itself and as a parent of young children but also in getting a more holistic view of how we are going in Western Australia.

My attention was piqued by an article by Kate Emery of *The West Australian* last week. It is an article worth reflecting upon. As often happens nowadays, journalists are almost compelled to tweet out the article to drive interest and what have you. It attracted some unfortunate and unfair commentary, which was motivated more by the artwork that went along with the story. There was a picture of Greta Thunberg, which probably drew people to make some incorrect assumptions about the purpose of the article. The article draws us back to the *Speaking out survey 2021* conducted by the Commissioner for Children and Young People. I want to reflect on a couple of the findings. This is certainly not a comprehensive analysis, but I think it is worthwhile reflecting upon. For Hansard’s benefit, I am quoting from page 23 of the *Speaking out survey* from November 2021. This compares the perspectives of children in this survey with those in the last survey conducted in 2019. One of the points is —

- Mental health is a critical issue for many children and young people and the proportion of students experiencing emotional distress continues to rise.

Another point is —

- Perceptions of safety continue to be a critical issue in 2021 particularly for female students. Evidence from students is that the perpetrators of physical violence against them are often adults.

Another is —

- Students’ ratings of their overall physical health in 2021 are less favourable when compared to the data for 2019.

This one I found particularly concerning, but it should not come as any surprise —

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- The proportion of students reporting having been sent unwanted sexual material like pornographic pictures, videos or words has increased among male and female respondents.

The impact of these assessments is that they come from the children themselves. They are good barometers of their own welfare in an age-appropriate way. The introductory remarks given by Hon Donna Faragher were absolutely perfect in their expression. She said children are spoken to, spoken of, governed for, but very rarely are they listened to in an appropriate manner. I use that as an introduction to another report published more recently by the Commissioner for Children and Young People, the *Profile of children and young people in Western Australia: 2021*, which is the most recent report. But before I talk about that, I want to reflect, because as a parent of young children, these decisions are new to me, so I am learning as we go, which is good. If there is hope for me to learn again and develop, there is hope for the rest of us.

The Australian Early Development Census may have been appropriated from a Canadian model; it was introduced by the federal government in 2009 as the barometer or the test for how our children are progressing across a range of domains. I think it is a useful baseline model for us to reflect upon how well we are delivering our obligations to our children in this jurisdiction. The Australian Early Development Census—AEDC—measures performance across a range of five developmental domains: physical health and wellbeing; social competence; emotional maturity; language and cognitive skills; and communication skills and general knowledge. Those who are interested can delve into the finer definitions of those domains. When these measurements are undertaken, a score is, effectively, arrived at and then we can determine or plot the results in any particular jurisdiction, regionally and like, but definitions also come out of that. If a child falls below the tenth percentile in performance, they are categorised as being developmentally vulnerable, and children who lie between the tenth and the twenty-fifth percentile are categorised as being developmentally at risk.

With that longwinded, but I think necessary, introduction, I refer to page 26 of the *Profile of children and young people in Western Australia* survey produced by the commissioner very recently. It establishes the developmental scores across the state to determine where we may have a problem and where we are doing well, potentially. A graphic of the state of Western Australia on page 26 demarcates Western Australia into its regional areas and illustrates where our children are landing on that AEDC score. Parts of this state have fewer than 20 per cent but more than 10 per cent of children categorised as being developmentally vulnerable, and not only in one domain but in two, which suggests, in a sense, a developmental comorbidity. For example, the wheatbelt, the Gascoyne, Goldfields, Gascoyne, midwest, West Pilbara and East Pilbara returned indices that are cause for alarm, because between 10 and 17 per cent of children living in those regions in Western Australia are presently showing signs of being delayed in their development in two of the five domains I listed earlier.

The story in the Kimberley—I do not think it will come as a surprise to members in this chamber who take an interest in these matters—is grimmer. The adjustment or comparison between years taken is possibly marginal, but between 26.5 and 28.3 per cent of children in the Kimberley are demonstrating a delay in two of those fundamental domains. This is in twenty-first century Western Australia. I do not think that that is acceptable to any of us here, frankly. Those desultory outcomes could be explained away by lots of possible arguments, but if we have proceeded on the basis this afternoon of, effectively, taking the politics out of the debate with the amendment to the motion that we have all agreed to, I think that that is encouragement to us all to tackle more seriously the clear and present failure that is occurring, particularly in regional areas of Western Australia. It relates to the welfare of children in not only their capacity or incapacity to have specialist paediatric appointments, but also their schooling and education; most alarmingly, their mental health; their sense of safety; their protection; and their own personal dignity, because you have dignity from the moment you are born.

Those figures do us no credit as a chamber. They do us no credit as a community. I would like to assume, because I think I can assume, that there are enough people of goodwill and capacity within this Parliament and within the community more broadly to put these issues front and centre. By good fortune and a degree of good management—I will pay compliments to the government when they are due—the government has an unparalleled opportunity to do something about it. That was demonstrated to me yesterday when \$97 million to \$100 million in the Treasurer's advance was still yet to be allocated and when on 12 May we are likely to see an operating surplus north of \$5 billion.

I am not from the input school of policymaking, which is the more money we devote to something, the better the outcomes will be, but I see it as a necessary but inefficient element in securing some success. I really hope to see something meaningful to tackle the problem of adult neglect of our children and young people, which has gone unaddressed and untackled for far too long. I am deliberately attempting to not make a partisan point, because I think that would actually undermine our efforts; it would bog them down in ideology, ego and inconvenient truths. But as a community, I think we need to tackle those truths head on.

I will round out my modest contribution to this debate today by going back to where some of this started. Again, I am a father of young children. Young children present parents with all manner of unexpected joys but also unexpected challenges, and, particularly, health challenges in young children under five. Dealing with a child who

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is in health distress and who cannot communicate clearly with you on an adult basis is a very traumatising experience to go through. I do not think my experience is any different from those of any parent in this chamber, who will remember those occasions. Riding in an ambulance with a three-year-old is no joy. Presenting to an emergency department for the fifth or sixth time in a row is no joy. Having a child with persistent health troubles whose cause cannot be determined is absolutely no joy. We all know that. But can we do better, as a polity, to alleviate some of those anxieties, knowing that there will never be such a thing as a perfect, personalised service for every single contingency? I certainly think we can.

I hope that as we transition into what I will describe as a “management” phase of COVID, some of the obvious restrictions and barriers to the attraction and retention of specialists across a range of medical domains will be alleviated. I take the broader point that the Leader of the House made earlier that we are actually dealing with a workforce issue as much as anything else. Providing some measure of reassurance that the borders are open and will not be closed for an extended period will go some way towards addressing those concerns. However, I expect it will take a very long time before we have anything like a workforce profile in Western Australia that is equal to the task of meeting the demand. The Leader of the House made a very interesting point when she said that over the course of the last five years or so, there has been a 40 to 41 per cent increase in demand for these services. It is interesting to hear those facts exchanged in the course of a debate, because I think they actually invite further questions. This might not be the occasion to do it, but I am absolutely certain that our capacity and, indeed, this government’s capacity to meet the very reasonable expectations of parents will be assisted once it grapples with the actual drivers of that demand. Unfortunately, in so far as I am concerned, I can provide absolutely no insight into that.

With that said, I want to again use this opportunity to commend Hon Donna Faragher for bringing to the attention of the house a matter that should be one of continual focus. We should absolutely be rigorous in our assessment of the budget in May. As a community and a Parliament, we should have higher expectations for the delivery to children of the childhoods that they deserve and we will need them to have as we amble on into our dotage.

**HON LORNA HARPER (East Metropolitan) [2.24 pm]:** I, too, rise today to speak on behalf of the motion moved by Hon Donna Faragher, and I thank her so much for raising it. As somebody who is an advocate for and believes strongly in early childhood education, this is a very important motion. When I listened to members speak today, it was interesting to hear about the different lenses through which we see early childhood education. In talking about early childhood, Hon Donna Faragher, Hon Peter Collier and the Leader of the House focused a lot on school-aged children. When I talk up about early childhood, I think about the first five years of a child’s life, because it is in those first five years that 95 per cent of a child’s brain is developed. The first three years are when a child’s social and emotional needs are developed. Development in those areas is fundamental to how someone will move through life.

We have talked about schools. Hon Tjorn Sibma drew a very long bow when he spoke about some aspects of early childhood. I have also read the Australian Early Development Census report. It is very interesting, but I recommend that people dig a bit deeper than just the top report to see what is happening. It will come as no surprise or shock-horror to anybody—I am glad members are all seated—that I will focus on early childhood education today. Obviously, nobody will be surprised by that. My opinion is that the early childhood education and care sector is in crisis in this country. It is in crisis because we are unable to attract and retain the quality staff that is required. One reason is the poor wages paid to staff. I sometimes think that whenever I say that, people do not quite understand what I am talking about in terms of what educators do. I will also say that it has been 10 years since I worked in the sector, so I go back and talk to people in the sector and read up on it to make sure that I am getting a lot of the language correct. Just as I was leaving the sector, the early years learning framework was coming in. It had been around for several years, because I was part of the group that discussed how to bring it in.

“Belonging, being and becoming” is a lovely catchy phrase when talking about children, but it actually reflects what we want our children to do. We want our children, as individuals, to be able to grow and develop with their individual personalities, traits, skills and challenges that they may have. We want all of that to happen. In the early years learning framework, there are five areas that educators look at. They are that children have a strong sense of identity—yes, of course; children are connected with and contribute to their world; children have a strong sense of wellbeing; children are confident and involved learners; and children are effective communicators. That goes for all children, from babies up. Babies actually fall in amongst this because babies communicate. Anybody who has spent a lot of time with babies will say that they have learnt the nonverbal cues as to what they want. Is that a cry because they are hungry, they need their nappy changed, they want to be talked to, they want to be given a hug or they want to be with you? You learn. As children learn to babble, you start to pick up, from the intonation of their voice, what they are babbling about. They are trying to copy us. Everything a child does, they learn from adults. I agree with Hon Tjorn Sibma that I think we have let children down a little, because some of the attitudes and behaviours of adults are not what we want our children to learn.

I am also going to reference a report that was in *The Sunday Times* on 3 April by Kate Emery. It was called “Child Care Inc”. Somebody needs to show me where Greta Thunberg was mentioned in that report, because I did

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not see it. It has nothing to do with Greta; she is a wonderful young woman, but this is not about her. I read the report as well. The report is about the childcare sector and the funding. When I said that the childcare sector is in crisis, I meant through the funding. Currently, it is a \$14 billion industry that is funded mostly by the taxpayer. That means us. She asked, “Are families getting bang for their buck?” I would say no. The federal government is spending \$10 billion annually on child care, mostly in the form of subsidies to make it more affordable. Let us be honest. I am 100 per cent behind making sure that early childhood education is affordable for all families. What I am not behind and what I do not support, and what we as a community should not support, is the \$46 million net profit that this country’s biggest for-profit childcare group made last year. That one group made a \$46 million profit. If that group is getting all these subsidies, where is this profit going? Um! The average wage for childcare workers under the Children’s Services Award is \$22 an hour. We have a company that is making a profit of \$46 million, and we have educators who are making \$22 an hour, and then we worry about accessibility and quality.

There are far too many for profits. When I say for profit, I mean investment companies that are running childcare centres for profit across Australia. This has been exacerbated by the current federal funding model. That model does not look at where those funds are going. I read a report recently that stated that approximately 80 per cent of the fees and funds received by not-for-profit centres goes towards wages. I can tell members from experience, as a director of a not-for-profit centre, that that is what we did. Almost 85 per cent of our income went towards wages. We still managed to pay our bills, and we still had to pay a fee for corporate services, but all our money went into investing in the staff, for the sake of the children. The report said that in some, but not all, for-profit services, 54 per cent of the income went on wages. I thought that was quite generous. From my experience, the aim was that 45 per cent of the earnings was spent on wages.

Last night I spoke about how the most important asset of an early childhood centre is its qualified, experienced and trained staff who stay for a long time. We find that generally in the not-for-profit sector and in the community-based centres and the centres run by associations like Mission Australia, Child Australia and things like that, and also the ones that are run by councils, such as Midvale. I will jump quickly to that. Hon Donna Faragher talked about hubs. She will know about Midvale Early Learning and the hub at Midvale. I suggest that all members look at that if they want to know how to provide these services. That is an absolutely beautiful service that looks at the whole community and how we can benefit children from birth onwards. It is said that it takes a village to raise a child. Let us be quite frank: it actually takes a lot of money to raise a child. We should invest more and more money into early childhood. However, I do not think the federal government should continue with the current funding model. For a company to make billions of dollars out of early childhood for people who hold shares makes me feel sick to the stomach, to be quite honest.

This newspaper report refers to a number of centres run by G8 Education. Here in Western Australia, G8 Education owns Buggles Childcare, Great Beginnings, Learning Sanctuary, and Jellybeans Child Care. Each of these was a separate service that was individually owned, and they have all been bought by G8 in the last few years. That is the same company that reported a net profit of \$46 million from operating cash flows of \$84.3 million. It has just this year resumed paying dividends to its shareholders and announced a 3¢ per share payment, having frozen dividends at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. Those services were eligible for JobKeeper during COVID. Not only were these centres subsidised for the fees for families, but their wages were also subsidised. This opportunity was not provided to services that are run by the City of Perth, the Town of Bassendean and things like that.

For-profit childcare operators account for an estimated 70 per cent of the sector. That 70 per cent of where our children are going are making huge profits. Again, I have to say that I do not object to people running a business and making a profit. That is fine. That is how the economy goes. That is how the world runs. Some of the reports that are coming through, particularly the one that I referenced last night from Metro Institute, talked about the oases and deserts of where these services are provided. One of the things the report said is that while we have this current funding model, childcare operators do not find it worth their while to move to regional areas because they cannot make the profits that they need. That is to the detriment of the regions, because they do not have the services that they require. This is where it comes to needing a village to raise a child. We need to start looking at models of collaboration between councils and businesses, such as with BHP and Rio Tinto in the Pilbara, and private operators—not Serco—to run centres for those communities. What about the big businesses sponsoring the wages of educators to attract them to live in those areas? What about the councils that are getting money from all the people who are living there and all the infrastructure that is going in using that money to invest in early childhood? That is one way of supporting our children going forward.

The member is right. We do not talk about this in this place enough. We talk about everything. We talk about inconsequential things at some points. We do not listen to each other—sometimes we do and sometimes we do not. We do not agree on things, which is perfectly fine—on some things we do, but then we do not listen. Sorry. I am going off topic here. It is just that I was looking around the room. My colleague understands my frustration.

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The first five years are the most essential part of a child's life. We need to sit and pay attention and listen to what people are saying and crying out for. They are saying to us that we have an issue in this country. We have a sector that is in crisis. We have a sector that is being run for profit. We have a sector in which children are being used as dividends for shareholders. We have a current federal government that is not doing anything about it. If a centre has raised fees by 41 per cent since that federal government came to power, there is a problem. Hon Tjorn Sibma said that we should not point fingers, and we should be bipartisan. I am sorry. I cannot be bipartisan when I stand back and watch what the federal Liberal government has done. We are all joined together in the fact that we want to do the best for our children, but we cannot stand back and ignore what is happening.

Yes, I am going to mention the federal Labor policy on child care, because although when people say the words "child care" I jump up and down and have a fit because it is early childhood education, "child care" just sounds easier to people. It would be absolutely amazing if one of the things that the federal Labor Party is talking about doing did happen. It has said that if it is elected, it will improve transparency. It will also establish a price regulation mechanism. I might stop parroting on about how childcare providers are making a profit if we could just see where that profit is going. How much is being spent on food for children? A recent report talked about how ridiculous it was and how many cents a day was budgeted for the meals for children. How much is going towards the development of staff? How much is going towards upkeep of the building? How much is going towards corporate services? How much is going to the dividends of shareholders? That is something that I would be fully behind 100 per cent. I do not have young children anymore, but would people who have young children and are paying the fees—\$150 or so a day—not want to know where their money was going? Would they not want to know who is getting a dividend?

I have to mention this article again because it made me laugh my head off. It starts off by talking about how Vijay and Phyllis sold their 14 centres for millions of dollars. Good on them! I used to visit these centres, and that is why I laughed. Funny story: when I worked at the United Workers Union, formally United Voice, Vijay called my team leader at the time, when I was in the early childhood team, and said "Lorna can never visit any of our centres ever again because she told the staff how much they needed to get paid." I know; how terrible! I went from centre to centre and discovered that very few of them were getting paid even the minimum award. I went from centre to centre, and there were issues from centre to centre. I met Vijay and Phyllis, and I would use my lawful right of entry to enter those centres, because they did not want me going in and talking to their staff. They sold their centres for millions of dollars. Well, that is how business works, but it should not work at the expense of the quality given to our children, and it should not work at the expense of families who are paying extortionate amounts to put their children there, only for that money to end up in shareholders' pockets.

So, yes, I do recommend having a conversation about early childhood education. In fact, I think we should do it more often. I personally think we should link it to just about everything we do, because I wholeheartedly agree that every dollar we spend on early childhood is \$20 we will get back when they are older. Every child that we can put through school so that they come out being a self-sufficient, happy member of society, the better we will all be. Again, I thank Hon Donna Faragher for her motion today, and I wholeheartedly support it.

**HON COLIN de GRUSSA (Agricultural — Deputy Leader of the Opposition)** [2.42 pm]: Noting the time, I might truncate my remarks a bit to give others the opportunity to speak, if they wish, and, of course, Hon Donna Faragher to reply. Firstly, I thank Hon Donna Faragher for bringing this motion to the house in its original form. Although it has now been amended, it still recognises the significance of the early years of our young children, and the importance of making investments in that area.

One of the interesting comments in a survey I read in the course of coming to an understanding of some of the issues around early childhood education and development was a summary in a report from the *Canadian Medical Association Journal*. It states —

Regardless of the industrialized country studied, all data to date reveal that most children at every socio-economic level are remarkably similar at birth. However, inequalities in development emerge early in childhood, usually before school entry. Children who are already behind their peers when they begin school will likely fall further behind.

I think that is really telling. As most parents would know, our kids are like blank pieces of paper when they arrive, and what we do and how we raise them, and the opportunities they have from a very young age, goes into shaping who they will be and the opportunities they will or will not have. That really tells me how important it is that we invest in making sure our education and health systems have services available for our young kids.

Hon Lorna Harper touched on the early development of children. It is, of course, a fact that the pace at which our brains develop up to the age of about five is never repeated throughout our lives. It is incredibly important that early intervention occurs for some of the challenges that kids face at those young ages. That is where we need to make sure that we properly invest in all sorts of services. It is not just about education; it is also medical services,

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psychological services and so on, to ensure that our kids do not miss out on whatever opportunities can be made available to them through not being able to participate.

Some surveys were done in a report that appeared in *BMJ Open*, which is an open access medical journal. It talks about some of the characteristics of developmentally vulnerable kids in our country and makes the point that children living in the ACT and Western Australia have significantly higher chances of being vulnerable. It also points out that the smallest levels of inequality and developmental vulnerability were found in New South Wales and Tasmania, whereas the highest levels were found in Western Australia and Queensland. I think it is important that we understand that the chances of vulnerability are increased in Western Australia, certainly according to the results of that survey. That aligns with what we see with what the Commissioner for Children and Young People said in the report referred to by Hon Tjorn Sibma, *Profile of children and young people in WA 2021*. That clearly shows some of the areas of Western Australia where we need to do a lot of work in improving opportunities for our young people to access the services they need.

I am a parent, as many members are. Hon Tjorn Sibma made the good point that we all face challenges as parents; some of those challenges are easier to deal with than others, but the important thing is that we have the opportunity to access the appropriate services to deal with those issues. I have five children, a couple down in Esperance and a few up in Perth. In comparing access to services between the two, in my experience although the services provided in regional areas are different, the access is actually easier. That is via telehealth, not in-person access, so it is maybe not quite as good, but it is still very good. One of my kids needed assistance down in Esperance, and the services available via our telehealth and other services were not bad; they took a long time to get into, but from there the actual paediatric services needed are not available in regional areas, so she had to come up to Perth for those. It took some time, and it is still an ongoing thing, but it is a very good service once you are in the system; it is just that early access. To me, that is very telling of a fundamental issue with resourcing. I am not pinning that on this government; I think it is something that all governments need to invest in, and in the spirit of this motion, it is really an issue on which we can all come together and agree—the importance of investment in this area.

Services in Perth have very different issues, but again, they are even harder to get into—particularly for issues requiring psychological and neurological services. They are incredibly hard to get into. In fact, I would say that they are impossible to get into unless you either have a lot of money or can become an inpatient at Perth Children's Hospital, in which case you can get to the service for the time you are in the hospital, or at least an initial consultation. Some of those services could be offered out of hospital so that money can be invested in providing those services differently from how they are currently being provided. That would improve outcomes for young people and allow them to better access the services that they need.

Earlier I referred to a report titled “Making early childhood count” in the *Canadian Medical Association Journal*, which points out—I want to reflect on this because I think that it is useful—that Western Australia has a very well-developed approach to collecting data called the “linked data approach”. Essentially, data is collected through administrative processes through the health system or the education system and linked to children so that predictions can be done on developmental trajectories and so on. We have a very well-developed system in Western Australia, one of the best in the world in that respect. That is incredibly important because it offers us a real opportunity to understand what we need and what the trends will be. The article says that this particular system is good because it also allows data to be collected from highly transient populations and populations that otherwise might not be responsive to surveys and so on.

Acknowledging that there is an opportunity to collect that data and to further analyse that data will give us an opportunity as a society here in Western Australia to invest heavily in the services and the basic needs of our young people, particularly for those kids before they enter school—the zero to five-year-old age group—whereby we will have an opportunity to make a huge difference to their outcomes not just in a health sense, but also educationally. Of course, the benefit is that we end up with kids who are able to make good contributions later on in their lives, to go on further and gain education themselves, and to improve their outcomes. At the end of the day that will obviously add up to reduced costs for government, so the net benefit will flow on.

I am going to leave my contribution there because I know there are others who want to contribute to this important motion, and Hon Donna Faragher will want to reply.

**HON SANDRA CARR (Agricultural) [2.52 pm]:** I would like to begin by thanking Hon Donna Faragher for bringing the motion to the house today. It is an important motion. I wholeheartedly support the idea of expanding and always endeavouring to do better in delivering childhood education and care. There is no arguing, and I concur with everyone else who has spoken, with the fact that early childhood education is crucial to the development of our young people. It is crucial to the outcomes of their lives as we look forward to what they can achieve. We get better health outcomes. We get better earning potential for those people and we get better contributions to the

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community—a whole range of things that tell us unequivocally that what we are doing for our young people in terms of their early education is vital.

I also concur with Hon Lorna Harper's comments that some practices in early childhood care are almost commodifying our young people because we open that up without scrutinising how we enable people to deliver childcare. It is always a worry when we see people as commodities rather than as human beings first and foremost and what we can offer them and how we can support each other. It is the responsibility of the whole community to look after our young people. We cannot be all things to all people, so we need experts and trained people, and people who have vested interests in advocating for the more vulnerable and for those who advocate for the different ranges of young people in our society. I am not talking about only a generic group of people but people with a range of abilities and from different cultural, social, ethnic and religious backgrounds. They all need us all to think about how we are going to contribute to their education in a fair and equitable way to ensure that a level playing field exists for everybody and that all our young people have the full range of opportunities opened up for them.

One way in which I think the McGowan government has done this is through the announcement of the \$1.8 billion for the women's and babies' hospital so that we start right from the very beginning of their lives. I think that it was an incredibly important announcement in terms of providing safe and high quality care right at the moment of birth, even through prenatal care by preparing parents and families for the arrival of a baby.

There have been other contributions at a federal level. The announcement made by the Albanese government for a newborn screening program —

**Hon Colin de Grussa:** That's a bit presumptuous!

**Hon SANDRA CARR:** I am always incredibly optimistic, honourable member!

Anthony Albanese's commitment to a newborn screening program is a vital initiative. It will ensure the early detection of any issues from the outset and give young people the very best opportunities right at the beginning of life.

I would like to talk about some of the contributions that the McGowan government has made to the regions. The Leader of the House, Hon Sue Ellery, spoke about the Regional Early Education and Development Inc program. REED is incredibly important and I am really proud that the McGowan government delivered it. As I move about the Agricultural Region—my electorate—people in those communities tell me that there is an unmet labour need. There are people in the community who want to go out and work but demand outstrips supply in terms of what can be provided in early childhood care and education. REED is helping to facilitate that. It is a growing model and is proving to be very successful. It started in the wheatbelt and its tentacles are expanding throughout the regions at an exponential rate. The model is proving to be very successful and helpful for regional people by building capacity for early childhood education and care.

Most recently, the Shire of Mingenew announced that REED will help in the governance of its childcare centre. Such developments are particularly important in regional areas because they allow people to get out into the workforce. It might sound a little counterintuitive to be saying that there are people out in the workforce when we talk about providing care for children, but it is really important that families are able to contribute to a community and to see their value in terms of contributing to their whole community and the workforce. It allows the families within which those children live to feel positive. It is a good outcome when young people see models of what someone going to work and managing budgets looks like so they can emulate that behaviour as they mature into their own adult life.

It is really important that we have this discussion today, particularly with the federal election coming up. I know that I have already predicted the election outcome—it was accidental but insightful, too. The fact that childcare fees in Australia have increased by 41 per cent is alarming, particularly in the context of high demand for a workforce that we cannot seem to fill. The federal government cannot seem to create the space in which child care is affordable for all people. People cannot enter the workforce because the system is penalising the people we most need to get into the workforce.

In the past 12 months, childcare costs nationally have soared by 6.5 per cent, and it is even worse in Perth, where it has soared by 8.6 per cent. Something is going wrong here and it needs to be addressed and fixed. The cost of living in this nation is already a problem and childcare is one of those areas in which the Liberal–National government is failing the Australian people. Just under 73 000 Australians are not able to enter the workforce due to the cost of childcare. That is pretty much twice the size of my home town who cannot get a job because affordable childcare has not been provided to them. However, on the flip side, an Albanese government would have a particularly helpful plan; it would reduce the cost of child care. It would make it easier for mums and working families with children to get ahead. The federal opposition is looking to create a better future—one in which early childhood education and care sits at the centre, making sure that the average person can secure the employment they need and also have access to high-quality child care that is complemented by high-quality trained carers. One of the ways the McGowan

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government is supporting that initiative is with its Lower Fees, Local Skills program. Fees are down by 72 per cent for early childhood educators and carers to make sure that we can get people into those jobs.

One of the other things the McGowan government has done is inject about \$1 million into regional communities to help them secure and keep early childhood educators in the community. There is an issue with providing staffing in those areas. If we do not provide an easy way for those people to access the training they need and if we do not help out the shires in those regions to secure employees and help them find accommodation in the regions, we will simply perpetuate the same problems of our young people not accessing early education and care and not getting the school readiness they need, and it will set up people in the long term for lower expectations, reduced outcomes and fewer optimistic outlooks into their adult lives.

One of the other things an Albanese government would do that is particularly important is increase the childcare subsidy rates for every family earning less than \$530 000 a year with one child in care. It would keep that higher childcare subsidy rate for the second child and additional children in care. It would extend that subsidy for increased outside-school hours. Ninety-six per cent of Australian families—that is, 1.26 million families—will be better off under Labor’s proposed childcare reforms. The Albanese Labor Party—I keep saying “government”; I am feeling incredibly optimistic today—is also looking to get the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission to design a price regulation mechanism to drive down out-of-pocket costs for good—a permanent drive-down. This is really important. The Productivity Commission will conduct a comprehensive review of the sector with the aim of implementing a universal 90 per cent subsidy for all families. It will also develop and implement a whole-of-government early years’ strategy to create a new integrated approach in the early years and develop a program of action.

**The ACTING PRESIDENT (Hon Dr Sally Talbot):** Member, I am obliged to interrupt you at that point and offer the mover of the motion five minutes in reply.

**HON DONNA FARAGHER (East Metropolitan) [3.03 pm]** — in reply: Thank you, Acting President. I thank all members who made a contribution to debate on this motion—the Leader of the House, Hon Peter Collier, Hon Lorna Harper, Hon Tjorn Sibma, Hon Colin de Grussa and Hon Sandra Carr. I am sorry I had to stop her at that point. I moved this motion for two reasons: first, to recognise the importance of the early years; and, second, to call for greater investment in this area. I think it is fair to say that for all members who have made a contribution today, there is agreement on all sides of the chamber. We now have an amended motion and I am of the view that it will be agreed to at the end of my five minutes, which is a good thing. Hon Sandra Carr said that she was really pleased that this motion was moved in the lead-up to the federal election, perhaps giving her an opportunity to raise a number of initiatives that actually are not particularly relevant to what I was putting forward here right now. I suppose my response to that is that that is fine—Hon Sandra Carr can do that. I am pleased that we are talking about this motion in the lead-up to the upcoming state budget, because that is what is important to this house right now.

I do not resile from the concerns I raised at the beginning of my contribution. I think the motion has been dealt with in a very measured and fair way and I agree that it is good that we are talking about children and have been able to do so for the past two hours without yelling and screaming across both sides of the chamber. We have had a proper conversation on this, and that is good. However, I want to implore members on the other side that in the case of wait times for children accessing allied health services, paediatricians and clinical psychologists, now is the opportunity for them to raise their concerns about the significant delays that children in this state are facing. They are waiting far, far too long to access those services. The minister acknowledged it and I think everyone would acknowledge it. I want to remind members again that currently in this state the median wait times for children accessing these services are as follows: speech pathology, 8.7 months; occupational therapy, 7.3 months; physiotherapy, 9.2 months; paediatrics, 16.4 months; and clinical psychology, 12 months.

The importance of the early years from birth to around eight years of age is the general figure, but I will use zero to five. It is not good enough that we have to tell the parents of a four-year-old who needs support through a speech pathologist or paediatrician that they have to wait that long. They are telling me that it is much longer than that. It is not good enough that a four-year-old child has to wait two years to access a paediatrician. This is not good enough. We can do better than that. The minister has said that funding has increased. Well, according to the advice that has been provided to me, the increase was \$1.4 million over the past financial year. More investment is needed. I accept that there are workforce issues, so what is the government doing to incentivise people actually going into the workforce? What is it doing? I will continue to advocate for speech pathologists in schools. That is one avenue that we can take to help address these problems. I thank the government for supporting this motion, albeit slightly amended. I ask the government in a month’s time, when the budget is handed down, to put greater investment into this area and it will be applauded for it.

Motion, as amended, put and passed.