EDUCATION AND HEALTH STANDING COMMITTEE

Sixth Report — A different kind of brilliance: Report of the inquiry into support for autistic children and young people in schools — Tabling

MR C.J. TALLENTIRE (Thornlie) [10.28 am]: I rise to present for tabling the sixth report of the Education and Health Standing Committee titled *A different kind of brilliance: Report of the inquiry into support for autistic children and young people in schools*. I also table a copy of the public submissions received by the committee.

[See papers 2722 and 2723.]

Mr C.J. TALLENTIRE: The committee's terms of reference covered three broad areas. We looked into the prevalence of autism in Western Australia, the support that is available in the school system and the strategies in place in other jurisdictions. The overwhelming view that came through was the need to change the cultural attitudes towards people who have some form of neurodiversity—some form of autism. The Telethon Kids Institute estimates that one in 39 students—typically, one in each classroom—will have some form of autism. We need to think about this in terms of neurodiversity being as important to our culture and society as biodiversity, and we need to do better.

I will begin by highlighting the sorts of feelings and experiences that youngsters who made submissions to our inquiry have gone through. In quoting from our report, one young autistic student said —

> Before I started getting the help I needed, I felt like my school wanted me to work infinitely hard on everything. For example, I was having lots of trouble understanding something and doing it right, and they would just tell me to try harder, when I was already trying really hard and didn't understand … this made me feel scared and like I could never get things right, and that I just wasn't right. Like there was something wrong with me.

That sort of sentiment was shared by a number of submitters, young students and their families, but we can look at the other side when things do go right. Committee members had the opportunity to visit the specialist learning programs at Alkimos College and Alkimos Primary School and hear some of the observations of parents there. Parents reported that their children made significant progress once they joined the specialist learning program and told us of various positive experiences. One parent noted —

> At school, he was nervous, cried and was upset—he was being bullied. The SLP was a safe place for him.

Another comment was —

> At primary school he didn't really have any friends. Now he has a massive group of friends in and outside of school—a lot of his friends are part of the SLP … He is more confident, funny and outgoing since starting the program. He has now exited back to mainstream and is a lot more independent.

Another comment was —

> He was previously tagged as a 'naughty kid' but has been in the SLP for two years and is now in mainstream 85 per cent of the time. He loves school now.

A further comment was —

> My experience with the SLP has been life-changing, it's not just the SLP—it's across the school, including the culture among mainstream students.

This indicates that a national conversation is going on, triggered by the recent disability royal commission, around the idea of inclusion versus the idea of having specialist learning centres. How do we ensure that all students are included in our school system, while, at the same time, there is a structure that caters for their particular needs? There are ways that this can be done, and I think that is a very worthy subject of the national conversation that I know will take place over the next few years.

Some of the observations that committee members made during the inquiry included the need to offer flexibility in policies, such as staggering start times and lunchtimes and providing sensory breaks. Something that I became aware of during the inquiry was that for some autistic students, the worst and most frightening part of the day can be the lunchbreak, when there is no structure and they are left to their own devices. For well-socialised kids, that means forming groups and having chats and playing games with friends, but for someone who needs more structured activity and perhaps has not quite developed their social interaction skills, that time can be particularly frightening. We can restructure the education system so that schools provide for kids who need more organised and, perhaps, supervised lunchtime activity. We also need to create appropriately supervised quiet spaces for many students. The school environment is noisy and chaotic and is constantly changing, and they feel overstimulated and overwhelmed. Students can benefit from being allowed to wear headphones, to have stimming or sensory products or to perhaps work in pairs rather than in large groups, which can often make them feel overwhelmed. Flexibility could be offered

around attendance and dropping non-core subjects and that sort of thing. I know from my own electorate how successful the Big Picture learning program is at Yule Brook College and Thornlie Senior High School. Students in a Big Picture classroom work away, perhaps in a corner of the room, and are very focused on a project that they are particularly passionate about. It might be space or horses or any given topic that has been crafted with and refined by an advisory teacher such that it becomes the core subject for their learning in maths, science and other areas of study. Their presentational ability and their ability to write essays all hangs off that core subject, and it then has great meaning for them and works particularly well. There are ways we can restructure our system. It is not all about providing extra money, but, indeed, we have a number of recommendations for extra funding.

Something else we observed was the need for teachers to be given training to enable them to first and foremost identify students who might be on the spectrum, but also to know what the best teaching approach might be. We gathered information that suggests that, at the moment, university courses for teachers do not include this very important component. One of our recommendations goes to the Minister for Education taking up this issue with the universities and saying that they need to lift their game in designing the courses for our future teachers. That issue was echoed by a comment from the South West Autism Network, which said —

> What we do see is that when accommodations are made in the classroom, they are benefiting the entire classroom. Teachers frequently tell us that when they start using visual schedules and they start writing the instructions on the whiteboard, the entire class benefits. We see that when they put in sensory spaces and when they make adjustments to reduce noise, the entire class benefits.

We know that, with some guidance, our teachers can make the accommodations. Understandably, some parents might be fearful that the accommodations will mean a loss of time for and input into their particular child. I think that we can provide some balance and deliver on the outcomes.

Another issue that we delved into was the level of diagnosis. Part of that is due to increased awareness, but there is a reality that our systems appear to be driving families to diagnosis, especially the National Disability Insurance Scheme and the school system, whereby additional funding becomes available when children are diagnosed. There is another discussion about the need for this all-important diagnosis, when, really, it is important that we treat the need and not necessarily wait for the diagnosis. It was really heartening to realise that in Australia, through La Trobe University's Olga Tennison Autism Research Centre, a very effective early detection system has been developed. It is essentially an app that enables parents and carers who may have an inkling—indeed, that is a play on the name of the program—to have some sort of initial assessment made. It is acknowledged that if that assessment can be made when a child is around two years of age, early interventions can often be beneficial and can go far in helping a student to be ready and better able to cope with a mainstream classroom from their first day at primary school. Professor Andrew Whitehouse was one of our guiding lights throughout the inquiry. He made the comment —

> … the education system is seeing more kids with autism diagnoses and perhaps a certain proportion of those kids actually do not meet criteria for autism. They still require support; they just do not meet criteria for autism.

We need to respond to these increasing needs.

I touched on the important issue of socialisation and developing social skills. I guess it is a justification for our current education system that is structured so much around a one-size-fits-all approach. When a child is thrust into a classroom with a bunch of other children just because they all happen to share the same age and were born within a year of one another, it can result in some curious mixes, but that is where they learn these essential socialisation skills. For children who are neurodiverse, this can be a real challenge. Professor Sonya Girdler from the Curtin Autism Research Group and her researchers have developed programs that are evidence-based and really get onto developing these vital socialisation skills.

I have touched on some of the areas that need additional funding. Recommendation 8 goes straight to the need for funding for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff to undertake dedicated, culturally safe professional learning in relation to supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander autistic students, particularly in regional areas. We know that much work needs to be done in that area. It also highlights the point that, so often, an autism diagnosis is made in conjunction with a number of other conditions. It is incredibly important that we have the capacity to make the diagnosis.

Another area in which we felt that funding would be especially welcome is for teachers. We have asked the Minister for Education to look at making funding available for teachers to undertake postgraduate study in autism and inclusive education, to build workforce capability and to increase access to expertise in supporting autistic students. That would greatly help many students.

We learnt about the challenge faced by these students as they transition into the workforce at the end of their schooling, their TAFE education or their workplace placements. We know of many well-qualified graduates who have gone through the university system as well, and, in too many cases, years after completing their studies, are still stacking shelves at Coles and Woolies. There is a need for our employers to appreciate the skills, or, as our report

says, "a different kind of brilliance", that people with autism can provide. Some sectors are already well ahead of the game. We heard that in the Australian Bureau of Statistics, cybersecurity and other areas of information technology, and in the general science, technology, engineering and mathematics world, there is a recognition that people who are autistic bring a particular skill set, capability and sharp focus to their work that can be especially beneficial and highly advantageous for their employer.

The report was assembled with great diligence by our committee. Our principal research officer, Catie Parsons; our research officer, Sylvia Wolf; and Maddison Evans as well, did absolutely outstanding work that enabled us to cover a lot of ground and put together a report that is highly readable, with some very pertinent recommendations. I thank Catie and Sylvia for their outstanding work. I especially want to thank my fellow committee members: the deputy chair, member for Maylands; the member for Hillarys; the member for Pilbara; and especially the member for Dawesville, who brought her professional expertise to the inquiry and also shared with us much of her family's experience in this area. The report is greatly enriched by her contribution, so I thank her for that. I am very proud to table this report and commend it to the house.

MS L.L. BAKER (Maylands) [10.45 am]: At the start of this inquiry, I was not clear that I might have any lived experience to contribute to *A different kind of brilliance: Report of the inquiry into support for autistic children and young people in school*. By the end of this inquiry, I can tell members that not just me, but probably everyone in this room has lived experience in dealing with friends, relatives or family members who have some type of neurodiversity. People may not identify it as that, indeed many do not, but I now know so much more, and for that alone I am incredibly grateful because it means that I can continue as a much stronger advocate in this field.

At the start of my presentation, I want to put on the record that the member for Dawesville's lived experience was specifically helpful in getting all of us through what was quite a traumatic journey in many respects. I also was not aware that so many people would pass through my electorate office door, wanting to comment about this inquiry that we were undertaking, and begging me to have half an hour to sit down and tell me about their personal experience with their child in school, or, indeed, out of school, as the case may be on many occasions in this subject matter. I suppose it was not possible to be part of this report without an incredible amount of learning and giving my constituents an opportunity to share their journey as well. Not all of them came to give evidence as witnesses in the hearings, but they certainly came to my office and helped my understanding, and I thank them for that.

An increasing number of autistic students have disengaged from education or from being home schooled because of unsuccessful and harmful experiences in their school. This has a negative financial, social and emotional impact for not only their families, but also the community at large. We know that schools are overwhelmed and struggling to support autistic students. Like many of us in this house, I sit on independent public school boards in my electorate and during the course of this inquiry I spent time with the principals of those schools asking what their experience was in helping to support students with autism, and, indeed, students with all forms of neurodiversity. Resoundingly, they gave me a very clear picture that although they worked extremely hard to provide the correct resources, a number of barriers exist to their delivery. Firstly, that many of the children are not actually diagnosed, so they do not get access to some of the support offered by our education system. The reason for that is complex and multifaceted, but one of the things that this report recommends is that we look into how that can be improved, and I will talk a bit about some of the recommendations shortly.

We all know that zero to three years is a critical developmental stage in every single human life. To have to wait for support until a child is seven, eight or nine years of age misses an enormous corridor of opportunity to help that child to adjust and to provide the right solutions so that they can progress through and stay engaged with their schooling. It is my view that as a government, we have an ultimate responsibility to address the educational inequality and poor outcomes that are currently being experienced by autistic people, and failing to act will come at significant personal, social and economic cost. I did not just make that up because I wanted to be sensational; I read that sentence directly from this report. Once we know that something is wrong and we have seen what is happening, it would be morally bereft not to take action, and it is absolutely essential that we as a government look carefully at what this report says we need to provide.

This is not just for education. In my case, I am very pleased that I was able to take some of my learnings to Vicinity Centres, a company that maybe one day will revitalise the Galleria Shopping Centre, but probably not while I am alive. I spoke to Vicinity about the five-year strategic plan it was just starting and asked what it was doing to make its complexes more inclusive. Of course, Vicinity is a massive company that has major developments all over Australia. The delightful officer who I work with locally in this space said, "Do you know, autism is a fantastic opportunity for us to do something groundbreaking." She was going to take this knowledge about what people who might be neurodiverse experience when they go into a shopping centre and look at how Vicinity could support that experience, whether it be through lighting, music, shopping hours, assistance in general, or whatever it might be. That was something I was very pleased to be able to share right up-front as a result of this inquiry.

I will mention some specific recommendations, particularly recommendation 1, because this is addressed to our Premier. The recommendation is —

> That the Premier provide funding for a comprehensive epidemiological study into the prevalence of autism or autism likelihood in young children in Western Australia.

It is simply ridiculous to think that we can provide adequate resources when we do not know the extent of the problem. It is not our fault that there are not resources in the system right now; as members have heard, this report covers why we are in a stage of revealing the level of neurodiversity in our community that we never did before. Now is the time for the Western Australian government to step forward into this space and perhaps follow in the steps of Victoria, which has a Victorian Autism Education Strategy. It has put in $19 million over four years to deliver an autism education strategy, which was launched in 2020. The strategy aims to address all the issues facing autistic students, and there is plenty of information about that strategy in this report.

Why do we not follow South Australia's example? South Australia has an assistant minister and an Office for Autism. I say that I can think of no better person than the member for Dawesville to champion that cause—just a little plug for her! The South Australian government announced the appointment of Hon Emily Bourke, MLC, to the newly created role of Assistant Minister for Autism. The South Australian government is doing amazing things. We need to step up, step forward and support the children who need this kind of door to be opened for them so that they can make the most of their skills. Members should make no mistake about it: the level of skill is remarkable. We just have to know how to open the door for them. That is what this report is all about—opening the door.

The Minister for Education should not blanch over this; there are quite a few recommendations in here for him! But one thing I can say about Dr Buti, the member for Armadale and the minister, is that he is fully supportive of and recognises the need for a more inclusive school system in Western Australia and is personally very committed to advancing the opportunities for that group in our school system and across the community at large. I look forward to seeing how the Minister for Education will respond to this report. I am very hopeful that he will get behind some of the key recommendations. It is not just about money; it is about an overall strategy at the state level. We heard time and again that federal strategies are fine, but what really counts is what we are doing on the ground at the state level. We have an opportunity here to help the children of our state to achieve amazing things rather than to leave the barriers in place that are currently there, stopping them from achieving and providing disincentives. I think we owe it to the children in this state to put significant resources behind access and support for students of all levels of neurodiversity in our schooling system.

MRS L.A. MUNDAY (Dawesville) [10.55 am]: I rise today with a profound sense of purpose and responsibility to address an issue that strikes close to my heart—the support for autistic children and young people in our schools. As a member of the Education and Health Standing Committee, I have had the privilege of contributing to our inquiry and report titled *A different kind of brilliance: Report of the inquiry into support for autistic children and young people in schools*. I refer to the way we came up with the title. I was talking to a lady at a Curtin Autism Research Group event, and they were showcasing the brilliant artwork of autistic and neurodiverse people. I wish I could remember her name, but I cannot. She said that the thing she likes about autistic people is that they are a different kind of brilliance, and that has always stuck with me. It is wonderful to be able to pay it forward and use it as the name of our inquiry.

I really struggle with the use of the words "disability" and "autistic" in the same sentence. In my opinion, this is part of the issue. Autistic and neurodiverse children, teenagers and adults are not disabled; they just have different strengths and the gift of looking at the world in different ways. We need to harness their strengths and brilliance and create an education system that will help equip our educators with the knowledge and skills necessary to support the diverse needs of autistic students effectively. In my opinion, it is not about changing the education curriculum itself; it is about changing how we teach the curriculum. Being autistic or having an autistic child in your class does not mean that they lack intelligence or IQ. It is more about the interaction, social skills and emotions. It does not start and stop with school but pervades our whole society from birth to death. As people, as a government and as a community, we need to engage with this and start doing more before our schools, hospitals and National Disability Insurance Scheme system become overwhelmed with people who are exceptionally bright—a different kind of brilliant—but are left feeling isolated and worthless, and sit at home taking a disability pension with their immeasurable talents going to waste.

Before I delve into my speech—I am not sure how much I will be able to say in eight minutes—I express my sincere gratitude to our chair, the member for Thornlie, Chris Tallentire, for his exemplary leadership throughout this inquiry, and my appreciation for him agreeing to do the inquiry, because he knew it was not only important to me, but also something he was hearing more about in his electorate. I also extend my appreciation to my fellow colleagues, the member for Maylands and Deputy Chair Lisa Baker, especially for her insight and asking great questions in hearings to get to the heart of matters. I loved how she was very pointed and not scared to take it to them. I thank the member for Hillarys, Caitlin Collins, and the member for Pilbara, Kevin Michel, for their unwavering

dedication to this inquiry. I also recognise the invaluable contributions of our principal research officer, Catie Parsons, along with research officers Sylvia Wolf and Maddison Evans, whose efforts have shaped our inquiry.

When we travelled interstate for this inquiry to Victoria and South Australia to learn more about how their education systems work in engaging autistic students and the autism community as a whole, we asked: Who are the specialists in this field? Who can we talk to and where can we get more resources from? Inevitably, we would get a list, but two names always on that list were Andrew Whitehouse, who is a professor of autism research at the Telethon Kids Institute and the University of Western Australia, and Professor Sonya Girdler, who is director of the Curtin Autism Research Group. They have made it their life's work to help the rest of the world realise that people who are autistic are a different kind of brilliant. With a focus on recognising the signs early, getting early intervention and integrating social skills, supporting them to make friendships and showcasing their strengths, we can set them up better to succeed in life.

As a mother of two autistic sons, now young adults, this inquiry holds personal significance for me. I witnessed firsthand the challenges and triumphs that accompany navigating the school system with neurodiverse children. It is a journey marked by moments of resilience but also instances of frustration and isolation. Through this inquiry, we have heard poignant stories from families illuminating both the successes and the struggles experienced by autistic students in our schools. I am sure my boys are used to me talking about them by now, mainly because I am super proud of them, but today I want to highlight a couple of points. Alex quit school in year 11, not because the work was too hard, but because trying to fit in was too exhausting for him and he was becoming more and more depressed. But, with determination, he did not give up on education; he was far too bright, plus I would not let him! He found a way into university through Murdoch's bridging pathway and went on to complete a double degree in teaching in English and drama. He works part time at Mandurah Primary School with a fantastic principal, Natasha Upcott, who is aware of the challenges that autistic people face and offers Alex a strength-based workplace to go to. He also works part time as a research assistant with the Curtin Autism Research Group—CARG—at Curtin University, writing programs for autistic students.

My younger son, Frazer, has just completed a Masters of Forensic Toxicology and has a degree in biomedical science and laboratory medicine. He has just become an author in a peer-reviewed journal article, but he cannot get any work in the field. I have lost count of the number of interviews he has attended. He would like to work as a laboratory assistant or a research assistant, but he writes in his CV that he is proudly autistic—actually, he uses the word "autastic"—and as I am sure he comes across as awkward and autistic during his interviews, I am sure this is the reason he is not selected. But he will not give up. He is a determined young man to find employment, just like Alex.

Our findings underscore a sobering reality that limited understanding of autism remains a significant barrier to providing adequate support for autistic students in our schools and our workplaces. From failing to recognise autism to ineffective individual education plans and often unintended harmful practices, the repercussions of this lack of understanding are far reaching and very profound. It is imperative that we address this gap comprehensively. We must equip our educators with the knowledge and skills necessary to support the diverse needs of autistic students effectively. This entails not only mandatory professional learning but also targeted support for early career teachers and education assistants.

In the 1990s, the prevalence of autism was approximately one in every 2 000 children; current estimated international prevalence rates are one in 100. As we chart a path forward, we must adopt a holistic approach that encompasses the entire educational ecosystem. We must provide communication, collaboration, public reporting and stakeholder consultation processes to ensure that the views of autistic individuals and their families are properly considered, and that the right people within the department are autism aware.

Professor Whitehouse described the development of the national guideline for the assessment and diagnosis of autism in Australia as a major success and our biggest weapon in getting consistent high-quality practice across Australia. They were developed to ensure that practitioners providing support to autistic children and their families do so in ways that are safe, effective and desirable to children and their families. Professor Whitehouse stated in the committee hearing —

> These guidelines say this is the clear evidence we all agree on; here we are. The key challenge now is to make sure these are implemented across Australia.

It is important for our government to commit to a unified effort in supporting autistic children and young people in our schools. By prioritising evidence-based practices, fostering inclusive school cultures, adequately resourcing our schools and promoting transparency and collaboration, we can ensure that every autistic student receives the support they need to succeed. For example, the Curtin Autism Research Group very recently received from the Stan Perron Charitable Foundation $2.1 million to deliver the KONTAKT program to 18 schools across both primary and high schools over the next three years. KONTAKT is a group-based social skills program for children, teens and young adults on the autism spectrum. It is an evidenced-based program developed by clinical researchers to

target school aged children who are autistic. It has been subject to many random controlled trials across Europe and has exceeded all expectations. Prof Girdler and her team have adapted the program for delivery in Australia.

[Interruption.]

Mrs L.A. MUNDAY: Someone is ringing me; it is probably the media!

I will be talking to the Minister for Education about the KONTAKT program going forward.

One issue that we heard in the inquiry is that different autistic programs have been rolled out in different schools across WA. Some have been found to be good, but others have not hit the mark and, rightly or wrongly, it has come to rest on the heads of principals. School leaders need support in developing a deeper understanding of evidence-based practices in order to lead the way to create an effective implementation within the complex dynamics of the school environment. This is outlined in our recommendations; namely —

> **Recommendation 11**
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> That the Minister for Education ensures that a program of ongoing professional learning in relation to evidence-based practices to support autistic students is available and targeted towards school principals.
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> **Recommendation 12**
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> That the Minister for Education invest in professional learning programs for educators that build both sound theoretical knowledge of evidence-based practices to support autistic children, as well as practical skills in implementing these practices.

Can I just be clear here? Principals have one of the hardest jobs I know in trying to help and support a diverse range of students in their schools. My comments are more about what support systems and education we can put in place to have our school leaders at the forefront of the best evidence-based practices so they can be aware of the resources their teachers need to be effective in the classroom. I note that Victoria, as part of its autism education strategy, established a diverse learner hub, which is a centre of excellence that provides evidence-based advice, resources and coaching, and supports the delivery of all six of the Victorian strategy's areas of focus. The strategy informed part of Victoria's nearly $1.6 billion investment into broader disability inclusion reforms. I know in WA we have great teachers and leaders working in the specialist learning program area, which we heard was a godsend to students who were selected to be part of this program. However, at this time, we found it could only meet some of the demand for autistic students with strong academic capacity but high-level behavioural needs.

With the establishment of the Office for Autism within the South Australian Department of the Premier and Cabinet, I realise that the Assistant Minister for Autism in SA has exemplified that state's commitment to driving positive change for autism, not just in education but across all portfolios.

In closing, I am not one who just sits and points when something needs some work to be done. I am prepared to roll my sleeves up and help. I respectfully and humbly offer my services to the Premier to be considered as WA's first assistant minister for autism and neurodiversity.