

**EDUCATION AND HEALTH STANDING COMMITTEE**

*First Report — Annual report 2020–21 — Tabling*

**MR C.J. TALLENTIRE (Thornlie)** [9.33 am]: I present for tabling the first report of the Education and Health Standing Committee titled *Annual report 2020–21*.

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**Mr C.J. TALLENTIRE:** Since the formation of the committee on 12 May this year, we have established our working principles. The portfolio areas of the committee include two of the largest areas of state government expenditure, namely health and education, and, as such, we recognise the responsibilities that have been given to our committee. Indeed, for a Labor government, those two areas of expenditure, which involve keeping our citizens healthy, and ensuring that they receive the best possible educational opportunities to enable them to flourish, are major priorities, because they provide for the betterment of Western Australians and our state. We will seek to use the procedures, the scrutiny and the lawmaking functions, and our ability to hold complex inquiries, when looking into these sometimes difficult issues.

The report that has just been tabled highlights the work that was principally done by the Education and Health Standing Committee that was in formation during the final year of the fortieth Parliament. At this point, I want to acknowledge the work done by that committee, and especially by the former chair of the committee, Ms Janine Freeman, whose chairing went over several terms of parliamentary duty, and the outstanding work that she was able to lead.

The committee's reporting period covers the time of the COVID-19 pandemic. I want to acknowledge the work that has been done by the Department of Health over this period. I think it is fair to say that both the previous committee and our current committee are mindful of the draw that we could impose on that agency at a time when it is managing a health crisis—in fact, managing it extremely well. Therefore, we will seek the advice of the Department of Health when necessary, but we will not seek to impose an unnecessary burden on its time.

It is interesting to look at some of the issues that arose in our initial agency briefings. One of the highlights for me from our briefing with the Department of Health officers was the expenditure of this state government on COVID-19 testing and contact tracing. Information was provided that the cost to July 2021 of COVID-19 testing was \$43.5 million, and the cost of contact tracing was \$17.3 million. That is a total of \$60.8 million. That is a good investment in keeping Western Australians safe. I contrast that with another jurisdiction, the United Kingdom. The work of the Public Accounts Committee in the United Kingdom Parliament has revealed that the expenditure on what the UK calls the test, track and trace system was \$70 billion. That \$70 billion can be contrasted with the \$60.8 million in this state. On a per person basis, we have kept Western Australians safe for \$21 per person, whereas the UK has expended \$1 028 per person. That is a huge disparity. I believe that the UK Public Accounts Committee is looking into the cronyism and problems with the privatisation and contract-letting that have caused that huge cost. It has to be said also that even with that massive expenditure of \$70 billion, the UK has faced a COVID death rate of 130 000 people, one of the highest rates in the world on a per capita basis, higher than the COVID death rate in the United States, and that the number of positive COVID-19 cases is still averaging 30 000 a day. That is testament to the quality of our expenditure and the quality of the work that has been done in this state to keep Western Australians safe. We have been able to do that incredibly efficiently and have delivered great results for this state. May we continue to achieve such a high success rate.

During the reporting period, we had a briefing with the Department of Education. We discussed many issues and were able to get a good sense of all the good work the department is doing for our school system. The one issue that I particularly want to focus on is tertiary education. There is no doubt that our university sector is facing many challenges. I was provided with supplementary information to the agency briefing held on 23 June, which states —

State legislation establishing universities and the Commonwealth's *Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency Act 2011* ... serve different functions and are best seen as complementary. Whereas State legislation mainly refers to governance of universities, the Act focuses on quality, standards and regulation of the higher education sector nationally.

That is interesting information because it establishes that we as a state Parliament have responsibility for the governance of the university sector. We know that our university sector is facing many challenges. We have absolutely magnificent campuses. They are beautiful places with fabulous learning facilities, but there are some challenges, especially with the trend towards more and more online learning as well as the challenges that have come about with the COVID-19 pandemic and how the university sector has adapted to that. They are some of the challenges the university sector is facing, and we need to look at how we can adapt to them.

We had the Chief Scientist, Professor Peter Klinken, in for a hearing. Professor Klinken was very candid in his comments to us about how he sees the future of our university sector in Western Australia, especially relating to

the governance of the sector. The points that he raised with us on the actual structure and the number of universities in Western Australia were most interesting. I will quote some of Professor Klinken's evidence to us. He said —

There are four public universities. They are all established under state acts of Parliament. I think there should be a single university of Western Australia or a university of Perth that brings all four universities into one. Each one of them has a burning financial platform right now. Australia has 43 universities for a country of 25 million people. That is extraordinary and not viable. We will see, in the not too distant future, some of these universities closing.

In further evidence, Professor Klinken mentioned to us —

Preliminary analyses that I have seen suggest that if you combine them all into one university, it would go into the top 40 or 50 in the world and that would then provide you with great marketing tool: "Come to WA. We're a top 40 or top 50 university in the world." It would take us close to being the highest ranked university in the country and it would provide serious scale.

Bear in mind that Professor Klinken comes from a medical research background and is very keen to attract people to Western Australia and continue to see WA be an absolute leader in medical research. This capability that could be achieved is not liked by people in the vice-chancelleries at the various universities, but the very hardworking academics who do the teaching and all the research can see that this would be a real golden opportunity.

Professor Klinken also said —

We are at a point where, I think, we have to look seriously at amalgamating our universities, bringing them together, presenting a cohesive view of WA and saying, "You know what? We should be seen as University City."

We asked Professor Klinken about previous amalgamation attempts. He went on to say —

Yes, the first one, Murdoch and UWA, my recollection of the time is it failed by a single vote in the upper house.

That is a matter of parliamentary record. I believe that was in December 1989. There was also a second merger attempt. Professor Klinken said —

The second merger really came down to personalities and the vice chancellors and who was going to run the combined university, so that did not go ahead. I think now is the time for a much more mature conversation. I think the universities here in Perth have been so focused on internecine warfare that they feel the competition is local, not global.

That was in specific reference to the proposed merger between Murdoch University and Curtin University in October 2005. This is all very well documented in the book *Murdoch voices: the first 40 years at Murdoch University*. Professor Klinken's evidence represents a very interesting case for us.

I am really honoured to be the Chair of the Education and Health Standing Committee, building on the work and traditions of the committee in the past. I am honoured to have with me on the committee my deputy chair, the member for Maylands; the member for Dawesville, who brings her paramedical training and psychologist background to the committee; I am very pleased to have the member for Hillarys, who, as a professional educator, adds her background to the committee's expertise; and the member for Pilbara, who has a deep-rooted connection with regional Western Australia and brings that to the committee's deliberations. We have a really exciting task ahead of us looking at all kinds of issues in the education and health sector. Thanks to the wonderful support staff. We began with principal research officer Renee Gould and we now have Mrs Catie Parsons as our principal research officer, research officer Rachel Wells and Ms Franchesca Walker, who may be rejoining us. It is a very exciting time to be working in this area in the forty-first Parliament and I commend this annual report to the house.

**MS C.M. COLLINS (Hillarys)** [9.46 am]: I, too, would like to make a contribution to the consideration of the Education and Health Standing Committee's *Annual report 2020–21*. It is a privilege to be on the committee. Prior to being elected to this place, just over a year ago, I was teaching year 11 politics and law and was telling students how integral committees are to our Westminster system and our democracy. I will take very seriously this opportunity to analyse and investigate current and topical issues as well as make recommendations alongside my colleagues. I am very passionate about health and education. As the member for Thornlie mentioned, they are the two most important sectors in our state government activity and are often given priority in the budget.

As leaders, we all have a responsibility to understand the challenges and opportunities within government departments and maintain a constant awareness of what our health workers and teachers are doing in the schools and in the workplace. Our committee has already held a number of public hearings and it has had an incredible opportunity to hear from specialists, experts in their fields and academics about their key areas. It is not a surprise that COVID came up again and again in various hearings. We know that the mental health needs of our community need to be addressed by both the education and health departments.

We asked representatives from the Department of Education to outline some of the specific impacts that the COVID-19 pandemic has had on the wellbeing of children and their participation in school. It was certainly noted that here in Western Australia we have been very fortunate to not have the large number of school closures that other states have had to face. It was recognised that a number of issues have arisen around online and remote learning. Particular mention was made of resistance by some families who had been used to having their children learn with hardcopy-style texts to suddenly switch to online learning. It was a confronting situation to be told that everything was now online, but people managed really well. There was also a struggle to get students back to schools, particularly in rural and regional areas.

We got the opportunity to hear from the Mental Health Commissioner, who talked about how telehealth had led safer service delivery during the COVID-19 lockdowns. She also mentioned issues that arose during the lockdown periods from the ease of alcohol delivery, alcohol advertising and problem drinking, and the services that were needed to attend to those situations. It was announced that \$129 million has been allocated in the state budget to youth mental health services. The committee got the opportunity to learn how the commission was able to offer a child, adolescent and youth forensic outreach service. Of particular concern when we were discussing the rise of anxiety as a symptom of the COVID-19 pandemic was talk of an increase in racism reported by young people in schools, and particularly young people with Asian backgrounds. This was noted as making quite a large contribution to the increase in anxiety levels.

The public servants who spoke to us told us a lot about the Western Australian health system and how we do not rely upon the commonwealth for assistance. We learnt how the department's leadership had heeded the lesson from overseas that going hard and going early is the most effective method to deal with this virus, and how department staff had planned for the worst-case scenarios had a vaccine been difficult to make. We discussed how quickly, fortunately, vaccines were produced across the world. The leadership of the department mentioned their frustrations with the anti-vax movement. They are thinking ahead now to how Australian hospitals will look in 2022 and how we can ensure that they are prepared. We also spoke about the contribution of the state's health system to the international research community during the first few months of COVID-19, particularly around the application of the drug dexamethasone.

As the member for Thornlie mentioned in his speech, Chief Scientist Peter Klinken came in for a hearing. He was a whirlwind of positive and interesting ideas for this state. He discussed how to empower schools with the ability to transfer twenty-first century learning skills, given that we are moving to a time of increased automation in industries. We discussed how sometimes the statistics that are used to measure schools are not conducive to creating schools that do exciting work behind closed doors and prepare students for the workplace today and tomorrow. We discussed the idea that schools can have excellent pastoral care, wellbeing programs and extracurricular programs, but there is always a focus on a ladder of statistics. He shared his concerns about the growing dissociation between the haves and have-nots in the Western Australian education system. He also talked about the challenge that is exacerbating this, which is the changes to workplaces and industries through automation. Students who do not have access to 3D printers, robotic machines and other sorts of tech at school will slowly fall behind those who do have access to those things. Professor Klinken also identified the risks of an exam-focused education system and talked about the need to create intelligent and creative workers who really understand design, code, navigation and creation.

I will briefly mention another key person whom we had the opportunity to speak to. I was not present for the public hearing with Dr Weeramanthri, but he came and spoke to the committee about his climate health WA inquiry. He said that the WA health sector, like any sector, is a contributor to emissions. His report outlined the desire to bring this industry to a place where it will be able to mitigate some of these issues.

In finishing, I want to thank all the members of the committee—the members for Thornlie, Maylands, Dawesville and Pilbara—as well as the wonderful research officers, Catie Parsons and Rachel Wells. I have enjoyed every minute of the committee so far and am looking forward to what we will find out next.

**MRS L.A. MUNDAY (Dawesville)** [9.55 am]: I also rise in support of the first report of the Education and Health Standing Committee, *Annual report 2020–21*. Our committee has been formed for only four months as part of the forty-first Parliament, so I will spend a couple of minutes talking about who makes up the standing committee and where our focus lies. The member for Thornlie is very passionate about education and training. He has an agricultural business degree. Before being elected to Parliament, he was a chair and director of the Conservation Council of Western Australia, where he led the council's environmental campaigning, policy development and community engagement. He is the perfect person to chair the Education and Health Standing Committee. Our deputy chair is the member for Maylands, Lisa Baker, who is an avid supporter of our LGBTIQ+ contingency and is really big on social justice. Our deputy chair is a very rich and dynamic member. The member for Pilbara has lived in that region for nearly 20 years and has a great understanding of the needs of regional areas. When it comes to the health issues and educational needs of our regional people, he is passionate about speaking up for the social, emotional and financial needs of regional constituents. He speaks from experience. On the subject of experience, both the member

for Pilbara and I can offer the special insights that can come only from those who live in the regions. My fellow 2021 colleague and newbie of the forty-first Parliament is the member for Hillarys, who has an extensive background in teaching. Her areas of study included history, politics and international relations. She has taught internationally, through India, Colombia and Vietnam, and completed a parliamentary internship, so she will provide some exceptional insight into the needs of students, teachers and lecturers in our education system. Finally, I bring to the team valuable experience in the pre-hospital and hospital systems and emergency services. After a nearly 20-year career as an ambulance paramedic, I also offer the opportunity for me to speak on the reports as we go. Together, we form a very passionate team that is focused on working towards a better WA for every person in the community, with particular regard to education and health. We all brought our subject-matter expertise to the committee, and we have lots of ideas on where we could focus our work.

The Department of Education and the Department of Health gave us incredible accounts about their work and where they are taking us across all demographics and regions in Western Australia, which I found extremely insightful for someone who is new to politics. However, I think the hearing with Dr Tarun Weeramanthri, who spoke about his final report from the climate health WA inquiry, which was published in November last year, had a profound impact not just on me personally but also all of us. It became very obvious that before we tackle individual speciality areas, we need to highlight an area that is impacting everyone not just in WA but also globally. I will outline in a minute some of the sobering statistics that Dr Weeramanthri explained to us about our effect on the world and what it means for us, as well as the attributions of climate change. His inquiry arose from a recommendation from the WA sustainable health review initiated by the Minister for Health and commissioned by the Chief Health Officer. I urge everyone to take the opportunity to read this report as it highlights the challenges we now face, which will only amp up here in WA. There is overwhelming evidence from climate science and climate health links that our health sector really needs to increase its efforts for change. To offer a bit of world context, the Paris Agreement, which has been ratified by 187 countries, has selected a collective goal of limiting the global temperature rise to below two degrees and to pursue efforts to limit it to a 1.5-degree increase. The report concludes that unless some hard work is done in these areas, all average and extreme temperatures will continue to increase.

It is predicted that the hottest days in mid-latitude regions will be up to three degrees hotter at a global warming of 1.5 degrees, and about four degrees hotter at two degrees of global warming. At an increase of 1.5 degrees, eight per cent of all plants will lose half their habitable area, while at an increase of two degrees, 16 per cent of plants will lose half their habitable area. At an increase of 1.5 degrees, six per cent of insects will lose half their habitable area, while at two degrees, the figure is 18 per cent. A 1.5-degree increase will also result in a 70 to 90 per cent decline in coral reefs, while a two-degree increase will see a 99 per cent decline.

In better news, in December 2018 the Western Australian government announced the development of a state climate policy to help guide the state's transition to a low-carbon future, and in 2019 we stated our commitment to achieve net zero emissions for Western Australia by 2050. Before we met with Dr Weeramanthri, I thought, "That's awesome—zero emissions by 2050", but Dr Weeramanthri said that unless we start making some big changes now, before the end of the term of the forty-first Parliament, we will still be sadly lacking.

Specific to health and our vulnerable community, more people have died because of extreme heat events in Australia than from all other naturally occurring hazards combined, including floods, cyclones and bushfires. It is expected that climate change will lead to a doubling of heat-related deaths over the next 40 years because of an increase in the frequency, duration and intensity of heatwaves.

Although we have an ageing population, and heat has a lot of consequences for the elderly, our first report will look at our young people and how we can help them. The Commissioner for Children and Young People told the inquiry that children place a high value on their physical environment, and a report prepared for the commissioner outlined a clear relationship between exposure to nature and green spaces, and improved mental health in children.

I certainly do not want to stand here and be the voice of doom; I very much agree with Dr Weeramanthri when he states that his report is one of hope, and I want to quote directly from it. It states —

... this Inquiry has been to 'Make hope practical, not despair convincing'. Action dispels pessimism and creates a sense of agency and possibility, but it is well to remember that change is not painless and will require a shift in power and culture within the sector.

So, all things being equal, our committee has accepted this call to action, and I know that the value of hope is an actionable quality. I look forward to being able to table a report for Western Australians that shows the ingenuity, resourcefulness and imagination of our young people in respect of working to combat greenhouse gases, with a view to being able to share our findings with every other school in WA.

Finally, I would like to have it on record that everything this committee does is well supported by our principal research officer, Catie Parsons, and our other research officer, Rachel Wells. This committee is already grateful for their commitment to the task of our first report on climate change. Thank you.

**MR K.J.J. MICHEL (Pilbara)** [10.02 am]: I would like to briefly talk on the Education and Health Standing Committee's *Annual report 2020–21*. As the member for Pilbara, it is an honour and privilege to join my committee colleagues Mr Chris Tallentire, chair and member for Thornlie; Ms Lisa Baker, deputy chair and member for Maylands; Mrs Lisa Munday, member for Dawesville; and Ms Caitlin Collins, member for Hillarys. I also thank them for their contributions and speeches today. I would also like to acknowledge Ms Catherine Parsons, principal research officer, and Ms Rachel Wells, research officer, who are passionate, energetic and hardworking staff. They provided us with all the knowledge and help we needed to make sure we got the best outcomes in the interests of the committee.

On 5 May 2021, the Speaker tabled a schedule showing portfolio responsibilities for each of the standing committees appointed by the Legislative Assembly at the commencement of the forty-first Parliament. The portfolio responsibilities that fall under the Education and Health Standing Committee include education and training, health, mental health and medical research. The functions of the committee are to review and report to the Assembly on: the outcomes and administration of the departments within the committee's portfolio responsibilities; annual reports of government departments laid on the table of the house; the adequacy of legislation and regulations within its jurisdiction; and any matters referred to it by the Assembly, including bills, motions, petitions, votes on expenditure, other financial matters, reports and papers. These are a few of the points on which we, as a committee, have held hearings.

The WA Department of Health is large and complex. In recognition of these factors, system-wide reforms commenced in 2015 to spread authority and accountability across the system, rather than having it resting exclusively with the director general of the Department of Health. Providing health care in regional and remote WA is very important to my community in the Pilbara, including all Aboriginal communities. The GP shortfalls have been noted as a challenge for supporting and retaining skilled medical and allied health professionals, and this is something that I would like the committee to address, and to look for changes and recommendations, so that we can have sustainable health services in the regions and in remote WA that will help to build better communities in these areas.

Mental health services is another topic that we regional communities struggle to deal with, when we take into consideration the harsh conditions we must work and live in, and being away from family and friends. There is a lack of good quality clothing shops for the community to shop at; the same goes for fast-food outlets. People in Perth take these things for granted, while we must deal with issues and struggles that impact on our mental health. I know that the government is moving in the right direction with step-up, step-down centres allocated to be built soon in Karratha and Port Hedland, and other outreach services, including drug and alcohol services and youth mental health services. I am also aware that there are more effective and efficient systems in place in the fields of prevention, community support and community accommodation.

Education and training is another topic that is close to my heart, because we regional communities struggle to get good quality teachers and retain them. We also need the delivery of education strategies to encourage children in regional WA, and to attract kids from poor socio-economic groups to come to school and find it fun and easy to learn how to read and write.

As can be seen in our annual report, as per Legislative Assembly standing order 264, the committee has the power to send for persons, papers and records. From 12 May 2021 to 30 June 2021, the committee conducted four deliberative meetings, a formal evidence hearing and heard evidence from nine witnesses. Based on this, the committee has decided to start our first inquiry into the response of Western Australian schools to climate change. The committee will consider various questions within its terms of reference, including the co-benefits of climate action in schools; climate change mitigation and adaptation actions currently being undertaken in schools; the benefits they are achieving; and the barriers that schools encounter in undertaking climate action, and how these can be addressed.

The last question I would like to ask is: what more can be done to support schools to respond to climate change? I want to thank my committee colleagues and staff for their hard work, and I look forward to the submissions.