

EDUCATION AND HEALTH STANDING COMMITTEE

Third Report — Annual report 2021–22 — Tabling

MR C.J. TALLENTIRE (Thornlie) [10.34 am]: I present for tabling the third report of the Education and Health Standing Committee entitled *Annual report 2021–22*.

[See paper [1600](#).]

Mr C.J. TALLENTIRE: The work of the Education and Health Standing Committee builds on the traditions of this Parliament around the work and functions of parliamentary committees. It is worth talking about a bit of the history that has enabled the Western Australian Parliament to have such a strong committee process. It is especially thanks to Premier Geoff Gallop, who was in office from 2001, with Deputy Premier Eric Ripper, that we established this tradition. There was a time prior to the advent of the Court government when a portfolio-based system of committees was in existence. When the Court government came in, it did not like the idea that committees could use their own areas of expertise and interests to pursue areas of investigation. Since 2001, we have had in place this portfolio system that enables committees to investigate issues of particular interest that are within the realms of expertise of the committee members. That is an important point, which is delved into in great detail in the work by Professor Harry Phillips. Professor Phillips has already presented one volume of work, *Parliamentary committees in the Western Australian Parliament: An overview of their evolution, functions and features*. Volume 1 covers 1870 to 2000. We await, next month I believe, the presentation of the second volume, which is from 2017 till the present day.

The work of parliamentary committees is especially important when the reality is that we do not have a strong opposition. Parliamentary committees provide an avenue—this is something the Education and Health Standing Committee was able to experience—for people with great expertise in various fields to bring forward that expertise and discuss it. We can go into great detail through the hearings process and talk about various ideas. I am going to talk about the various people we had the opportunity to meet and hear from during the course of our 12-month reporting period, including the great contributions made by submitters who went to the trouble of writing submissions, preparing for hearings and coming forward to participate in the hearing process. The contributions made by participants, including their time and effort, and willingness to present their expertise, make a great contribution to the state of Western Australia, and I am very thankful for that.

I will turn now to some of the detail of the past 12 months. It was particularly dominated by our report *Making hope practical: Report of the inquiry into the response of Western Australian schools to climate change*. The report was able to look at many aspects of the whole education portfolio, bearing in mind that education is the second-biggest part of our state budget after health. It is a massive asset that includes schools, our education system, and teaching and non-teaching staff for all those young people who are going through our school system. The opportunity for us to ensure that we are taking the right actions to deal with climate change is many faceted. Immediately, one can look at the improvements that can be made to school infrastructure, making sure that schools are as energy efficient as possible and making sure that the design features include the best and most advanced and sophisticated working buildings that could be generically described as a form of public building. That is going to help us reduce energy demands.

The report went into using schools as community hubs. All of us in this chamber are well aware that schools play a vital role as community hubs, bringing people together and acting in so many ways as community centres. Interestingly, they are also very useful infrastructure nodes with the technical ability of a well-located school to provide the centre for community battery storage, and power generation from solar panels and perhaps from localised wind turbine systems as well. That is a really tremendous feature, and as we move forward into this era of people wanting to not only produce electricity from their rooftop solar systems, but also store electricity, then the whole idea of community batteries will gain more popularity. The question will then arise: where do we place those community batteries? There will be many cases whereby the community might agree to the community battery being at a small corner of a local park, but there will be other places where the ideal location could be the local primary school. There is a great synergy there, bearing in mind that schools often have a rooftop area that would enable them to be very strong producers of photovoltaic electricity. So we continue our journey towards a state that can really benefit on being reliant on renewable energy systems.

It is very much the case that the Education and Health Standing Committee has respected and honoured what is noted in the WA Parliament's *A guide for ministerial and departmental staff*, which states —

Committees are a tool to assist the Houses of Parliament in their functions to legislate; monitor and review legislation; review public administration and expenditure; gather information; and publicise issues.

I have already touched on, and I will go a little further into, this issue of gathering information because our committee was particularly strong at that. When I look at the number of formal evidence hearings, I see that there were 18. The number of witnesses appearing in public hearings was 51. There were five briefings. There were 29 report findings and 24 report recommendations tabled. The number of witnesses appearing in public hearings in the

12-month reporting period is particularly strong. When I think back on some of the contributions that we benefited from, right at the outset, we had a hearing with Dr Tarun Weeramanthri, who led the inquiry into climate health. He looked at the health system and our health services and their response to climate change. Dr Weeramanthri looked at how everything from infrastructure, waste management and the design of hospitals—all those various areas—right through to the risk profile that we face as we see temperature and rainfall changes and how disease profiles and the susceptibility of citizens to various diseases could change as the climate changes. Dr Weeramanthri gave us that presentation, which then made it patently obvious to us as a committee that there was such a need for us to do a similar type of inquiry into the education system. That was an extremely valuable hearing.

We also had Professor Peter Klinken, the Chief Scientist. About 12 months ago there was quite a bit of interest in some of his comments around how the university sector could benefit from being restructured to a single Perth university, rather than having the competition that goes on with all the different universities, which compete overseas and locally, trying to bring in students and end up developing courses with duplication issues. That was something that Professor Klinken spoke to us about.

I really want to highlight the contributions made by the people who spoke to us during the development of the *Making hope practical: Report of the inquiry into the response of Western Australian schools to climate change*. We had people like Geoffrey Holt, who is a schoolteacher and a member of the State School Teachers' Union of WA. He highlighted the many positive initiatives that teachers do in schools, helping young people understand the risks and gravity of climate change while promoting great ideas to the children that they can take back to their families and do in their own lives. There are various positive steps that they can take and that was something that Mr Holt provided us with.

A very valuable contribution came from a group known as the Millennium Kids. The chief executive officer, Catrina Luz Aniere, along with the youth board president, Isabella Poll, and a member Amelia Turk, started out letting us know that the government was not doing enough. That is a constant message that comes from young people; they feel that the government is not listening and not doing enough. We were very keen as a committee to show them that we were listening to them and that we respected their right to protest and be a part of the democratic process calling for action on climate change. Similarly, Ms Jasmina Nikolovski, a student associated with the Australian Association for Environmental Education, came along and made a very valuable contribution, which was good. We had a range of other people giving excellent evidence. We were able to take evidence from the Catholic education sector and heard useful contributions there. It was very interesting as well to see government agency contributions, and some agencies stood out for their ability to work across agencies. Indeed, the Department of Transport was a real highlight there. It is working with all the other government agencies, which is very noteworthy and useful.

We then had some volunteer contributors. I think in most cases the people, such as those at Environment House, do not get paid for the great work they do. They alerted us to some issues that became recommendations and findings in the report. We heard of the work of ClimateClever and Dr Vanessa Rauland and the development of an app that schools can use to assess their sustainability steps going forward and the progress that it is making, which was extremely valuable. We heard from Dr Elaine Louis and the contribution she is making in her school. The time that she was able to give us as a committee was particularly inspiring. Some really valuable contributions highlighted how this committee has worked and indeed how I think our Western Australian committee system works so well. That is all extremely valuable.

I want to touch on the financial statement that is contained in the annual report. It is interesting; our total expenditure was \$9 340—very abstemious, members of the Education and Health Standing Committee! But a serious matter is this: of that \$9 340, \$6 843 was spent on advertising in *The West Australian*, and I really think that is something that we need to examine. What is the benefit of parliamentary committees advertising in *The West Australian*? We advertise to let people know about inquiries, and I am not sure whether we have exact stats on this, but I suspect that just about everyone who came to the committee came because they heard about it through some other means, not via *The West Australian*. I know we have to follow procedure and put an advertisement in *The West*, but when we have well over two-thirds of our annual expenditure going on advertising in a newspaper that is not well read by the sorts of people we are trying to reach, it is a question that deserves further interrogation.

We have just received the response from government to the recommendations contained in our report *Making hope practical*, and it is encouraging to see some of the points there. For example, I am pleased to see that the government strongly supported the recommendation that the Department of Education work with the sustainability reference group to develop a plan to promote the benefits of climate action to school managers and corporate services people, and facilitate training around that. We found that in some schools, the word was—when we are on school boards, we can check this point—that they look at the budget items for expenditure on electricity, water and other things, and ask the corporate services manager, “What are we doing to drive that down? It could be good for the school’s single-line budget if we could reduce the spend on utilities and therefore have more to spend on really important things like education assistants or providing better facilities for students, and we would also save energy if we were to reduce that spend.” It is very important that we ensure that corporate services managers are fully conversant with all the steps they can take towards reducing things like energy bills in schools.

There are some areas in which there is more work to be done. We raised the issue of crossings outside schools and the fact that it is very hard to get a new school crossing up at the moment because the case has to be presented that lots of people want to use it. However, the fact that there is no school crossing in place means that people cannot use it. It is a chicken-and-egg situation. I was pleased to see in a letter from the minister that there is scope for that to be reviewed and for further consideration to be given to that matter.

There is enthusiasm within the Department of Education for encouraging more people to take active modes of transport to and from schools. That is something that I know the Department of Transport is really working very well on, as well as people within the Department of Education and, indeed, at individual schools, who understand this issue. One of my primary schools, Bramfield Park Primary School, does a fantastic job of encouraging people to walk, ride or scoot to school, and it is seeing the health benefits for people and reduced levels of congestion. In fact, there is almost no congestion outside the school grounds when the school has a really big push on this. It makes for a very safe and pleasant environment at the school gates when the kids arrive at school under their own steam. They are also developing self-reliance skills. That is part of reversing the current general trend of around 80 per cent of kids getting to school by private vehicle and only 20 per cent under their own steam. We are going to reverse that to how it was when it was the other way around—80 per cent of kids getting to school under their own steam and only 20 per cent by private vehicle.

The committee has tackled some very interesting and exciting work, and we have now well and truly launched into the inquiry into the Esther Foundation and the administrative arrangements around private health institutions. I want to especially thank my deputy chair; the member for Dawesville; the member for Hillarys; the member for Pilbara; and our co-opted member for the Esther Foundation inquiry, Stuart Aubrey, the member for Scarborough. Thank you, colleagues. It is great to have your insights and the very valuable work you are putting forward. Finally, my deepest thanks to our principal research officer, Catie Parsons, and research officers Rachel Wells and now Sylvia Wolf, for doing fantastic work. They are really great thinkers and extremely hardworking and diligent. I think, all in all, we are a great team and I am very proud to have presented the annual report for the reporting period.

MS L.L. BAKER (Maylands) [10.54 am]: I would like to make a contribution as part of the Education and Health Standing Committee for this term of government. It has been an amazing opportunity to meet some of my colleagues and work more closely with them, something I have welcomed. I want to start by recognising those colleagues: the exceptional chairing by the member on my left, the member for Thornlie; Caitlin Collins, the member for Hillarys; Lisa Munday, the member for Dawesville; Kevin Michel, the member for Pilbara; and Stuart Aubrey, the member of Scarborough, co-opted to the committee and now on board. More than that, I would like to publicly recognise our remarkable committee staff. I have worked with quite a few committee staff, and they are all, without exception, pretty amazing individuals to work with: Catie Parsons, Sylvia Wolf and Rachel Wells. It has been an absolute pleasure and I thank them for their incredible professionalism and innovation, and for the way in which they have helped us to manage some of the more difficult, trauma-informed hearings we have been holding, particularly for our recent inquiry that is still on foot, the Esther Foundation inquiry. Thank you for your incredibly good work.

In relation to this annual report, the report that I particularly want to comment on is the one that we did on education and climate change, *Making hope practical*. We just heard my colleague the chair's observations on that piece of research. I would like to raise a couple of other things. Before I do that, I would like to say that the member stirred some lovely memories of walking to school as a child in Darlington. It was about a four-kay walk and my mother would send me off in my little Helena Valley Primary School navy blue skirt and jumper, and I would trudge four kilometres across Darlington and single-handedly keep down the watsonia poisonous weed population by unknowingly picking bunches! I did not know they were poisonous, so I would pick bunches of watsonia and give them to my schoolteacher, who would smile at me and put them in the bin! I found out later they were dangerous vermin. That was in my younger days, and it was lovely to remember walking to school. Indeed, I think we should have far more of that with our kids.

The aspect of climate change action in schools that particularly stood out for me was a bit surprising. I suppose it is in the context of 30 years of discussion around climate change, the enormous and increasing amount of scientific and evidence-based research into climate change, and the evolving discussion around the issues that we should be putting at the forefront as we tackle climate change. In the education system there is an awful lot of emphasis being placed on how we manage things such as utilities and the like, and how the curriculum deals with climate change: How do we educate children? How do we get them involved more in responses, and how do we make them more aware, but not frightened, and thus empower them to take a really positive role in combating climate change? However, I found it interesting in the evidence that we heard that almost without exception, apart from a couple of cases, the schools that we spoke to did not consider food security and food in relation to climate change. I think that is an area in which our education system could help far more than it currently does.

I will cite an example. I was recently lucky enough to do a study tour across some states of the US, looking at food security in a global context and what we need to do to tackle climate change, the link between agricultural production practices and climate change, and how to minimise our greenhouse gas emissions and the like in the future. One group I met with, Social Compassion in Legislation, is headed by Judie Mancuso and Nickolaus Sackett.

Their job is to work with politicians across America to try to escort legislative changes through to address climate change and all other issues that have a social compassion label to them. One issue that they worked on last year was the issue of the diet in schools, particularly in state-funded schools. Social Compassion in Legislation, working with its partners, obtained information on spending in the US public school system. How much money is being spent on lunches in schools across California? Social Compassion in Legislation developed a figure for how much money, through the public purse, was being spent to supply lunches in public schools. It worked out that, in California, it was actually around about half a billion US dollars a year. It then worked out the greenhouse gas emissions that would be associated with that level of spend and the type of food that was being served to children in public schools. Unsurprisingly, it was a very large figure. The greenhouse gas emissions were very closely related to what was being served. It then did a piece of research to ask about the reduction in greenhouse gas emissions if simply one meal a week was made of an alternative protein source—not a meat source but a plant-based alternative. It found that greenhouse gas emissions to the region would be reduced by many thousands of units, which is an impressive figure. That was recently passed into legislation in that legislature. It is now mandated that schools in California serve one plant-based and alternative protein meal a week, which will have a massive impact on reducing greenhouse gases. Once we start to unpick at that level of detail, I think some of the ways that schools can help assist to manage climate change and reduce greenhouse gas emissions are really interesting.

Another thing that I want to mention, on a similar subject, is that a number of organisations in America, particularly in California, are just about to pilot a program that they have put together called the Learning Enrichment After-School Program. The program addresses climate change on one level and replaces, if you like, the units in primary schools and high schools that are about teaching children what used to be called animal husbandry and farm animal practices. At the moment, the kids take a little piglet or a lamb, or something or other, and raise it in a farm situation, but at the end of that time they sell it to an abattoir. This group made up of about five animal rescue groups across America has put together a new curriculum that is about to be rolled out in the public school system, initially in California. It will replace the program under which kids raise an animal to be killed with raising these animals so that the kids understand. They go to the animal rescue property and they spend their school lesson learning how to care for the land and the animals. At the end of the program, instead of selling the animals to an abattoir and pocketing the money, the rescue groups will actually give these children around \$US1 000 to contribute to their ongoing education fund. Instead of selling the animal to be killed, the animal will go back to the rescue and stay there as a rescued farm animal. The child will then receive an extra amount of money for their schooling into the future.

Members might smile at that. It is a nice notion; it is a very compassionate notion. It is one way that people can actually contribute through the education system to making people much more aware of what is involved in the care and nurturing of a farm animal.

Mr P.J. Rundle: I am well aware of what is involved in the care and nurturing of a farm animal.

Ms L.L. BAKER: Then I shall not give you the program, member. I think you might be a little out of the age bracket, as well. We are talking about primary school children but if the member wants to go to America and deliver any parts of this curriculum, I would be more than happy to recommend him, given his very strong commitment to farm animals.