

EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION — SCHOOL-BASED CHILD AND PARENT CENTRES

87. Mrs L.M. HARVEY to the Minister for Education:

As a mother and grandmother—I am still getting used to saying it, but, yes, I am a grandmother—I was very pleased to hear the state government’s major announcement today about the delivery of childhood services to families and children. I understand this initiative has already been warmly received by experts in the field, and I request the minister, please, to update the house on this important government initiative.

Dr E. CONSTABLE replied:

I thank the member for Scarborough for her question on this very important issue and on the very important initiative that was announced today by this government. It is fair to say that Liberal–National governments have a very proud history in the area of early childhood education. It was the Premier who, as Minister for Education in the 1990s, introduced universal access to kindergarten and preprimary education for children in Western Australia. It is also fair to say that as a state we lead the rest of the country in the provision of kindergarten to school-aged children, particularly as Tasmania is the only other jurisdiction that provides kindergarten. We provide it to all our children, so we are way ahead of other jurisdictions. Today, the government took another step further and announced the establishment of 10 child and parent centres at 10 of our school sites. These centres will aim to provide services for parents of children from zero to four years of age and also services to children in those age groups to make sure that they are ready for school in the way we would want them to be. These 10 centres will be established in areas of disadvantage. There is comprehensive evidence, not only through our own results from the Australian Early Development Index, but also on-entry assessment of children at school, that many children who come to us in kindergarten and preprimary are simply not ready for school, and, often, not ready in more than one area of development. We want to make sure that every child has the best opportunity for the best start in life and the best opportunities when they get to school.

One of the keys to this announcement is that the 10 centres will bring together a range of services. It is all about coordinating services and integrating them in one place so that parents can access those services very easily. We often hear the phrase “one-stop shop”; indeed, these centres will be one-stop shops for parents where they can access child health services, parenting programs, assessment of their children and allied health services such as speech therapy all in one place, and they do not have to go searching for it, which people often find very difficult. Many of these services now exist but they are often siloed so that parents have to go from one place to another to access those services, and coordinating them on one site will make it very easy for parents to access them and to become part of those centres. When a parent walks into one of our child and parent centres, they will feel welcome. They will have someone there to help them, who will guide them and give them advice—just to be there—to learn about parenting. These days, people find that they are very isolated in our communities. Often single parents feel very isolated; they are often away from their families without support. These centres will provide that support in no small measure to many of our parents with young children. Over four years, \$28.8 million will be spent; and \$11 million will be spent on capital works in the schools.

The key to these centres is the appointment of coordinators. Those coordinators will be employed in the second half of this year so that we can get on with providing these services. We have learnt from the independent public school experience that each one of these centres will have its own character and will be developed through the community —

Several members interjected.

The SPEAKER: I imagine some other people in this place might want to ask questions. They are not going about it the right way at the moment.

Dr E. CONSTABLE: We will be bringing some existing services onto these sites and making sure that they are well integrated, not only so that parents can access them, but also so that the professionals working in them will work together far more than they have in the past. This government recognises the great importance of the early years to make sure that every child in our community has the best possible opportunity and so that every parent has the best opportunity. We know that parents want the best for their children, and we intend to help them do that.