

YOUTH CONNECTIONS PROGRAM

Motion

HON DARREN WEST (Agricultural) [10.26 am] — without notice: I move —

That this house calls on the Liberal–National government to support the Youth Connections program across Western Australia and to provide the necessary funding to continue the program, as was the intention of the Council of Australian Governments agreement signed by the Premier.

I note with interest today that when we began proceedings in the Legislative Council, Iona Presentation College students and staff were in the gallery, which was quite a coincidence. My daughter who was here yesterday was a student at Iona Presentation College and we found it to be a magnificent school that provided a great education and life experience for my daughter in that age group to which I will refer heavily today—the 13 to 19-year-old cordon of our society who are picked up by this award-winning program, Youth Connections. I think it segues well into the topic of my motion today. Youth Connections is a very successful program that has some extraordinarily high success rates. Many of the programs have a success rate of over 80 per cent. I will touch on that a bit later. It is with somewhat mixed emotions that I stand before members today to talk about the winding up or the cessation of funding to such an important and valuable program. I would like to think that the Council of Australian Governments agreement signed in 2009 will be honoured and that funding of that program will be picked up by the state of Western Australia, as was always anticipated. The federal government extended funding in 2011 and that saved the state from taking over the program then. It is a nationwide program that works successful in every state, but especially in Western Australia.

At this stage funding is set to end on 31 December 2014. Members may be able to appreciate that there will be a lag time in running the youth engagement program. There is not a lot of point in engaging young people in the months of September, October and November when the funding is to cease on 31 December. Therefore, I think we will see the winding down of this important program much sooner than the end of the year.

In my electorate it has a profound effect. Very few services are available to disengaged youth and to that 13 to 19-year-old age cohort, which is a very, very important part of our society, especially in the agricultural regions and the regional parts of Western Australia, because we have a drain on that demographic. Anything that could keep those young people in our country regions should be explored and funded, and I think the Youth Connections program falls under that category.

Across Australia the Youth Connections program assists approximately 30 000 young people basically in the area of re-engaging with the mainstream world. About 20 per cent of these 30 000 young people are Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Of course, I do not have to tell members some of the issues that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people face. There are a lot of remote communities, and a lot of the youth in Aboriginal communities have, to use a colloquial term, fallen through the cracks, and the same can be said of the non-Aboriginal sector. There are many small country towns in which engaging youth is difficult. There is not a lot for young people to do in small country towns, or even in the larger regional centres such as Northam and Geraldton, so this program is invaluable, and I will detail why. It is not just invaluable in my electorate; I am sure that this program has done wonderful work in the electorate of every member, both metropolitan and regional. The program has been highly successful.

In Western Australia specifically, about 3 000 young people aged between 13 and 19 years access and are assisted by the Youth Connections program. I will provide some detail on the achievements of the two service providers in my area. The Geraldton Regional Community Education Centre, which is an award-winning organisation that works with young people, certainly has some outstanding case studies and stories to tell about how successful the program has been in the Geraldton area and the midwest. The program is also run in the wheatbelt by Regional Development Australia Wheatbelt, which has a wonderful coordinator in Denese Smythe, who does some wonderful work in the York area and across the wider wheatbelt area to engage with young people. The Geraldton Regional Community Education Centre is run by Jenny Allen, who is fantastic operator and does some terrific work with not only young people, but also all sectors of the midwest community. The program has been able to attract some top-quality service providers and some really quality people to carry out this important work. It has runs on the board at all levels and is a very successful program. All those networks are in place and all the staff have been employed and are engaged and have become familiar to the local community; when the local young people feel that they do not fit in or are not part of the group, or they drop out of the mainstream, they know where they can go and whom they can talk to because those links have been established. It would be a silly shame if that were allowed to crumble and then in three or four years someone decided that it would be a great idea for government to re-engage in this space, but they would have to start from scratch all over again. Everything is lined up and in place and working well.

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In the wheatbelt, Youth Connections assists between 145 and 185 young people. The wheatbelt is a very unique place. It has a population of around 70 000, but they are spread over about 100 communities. There are 43 local government areas in the wheatbelt, so the population is scattered and very disparate. It is difficult for people to engage at the best of times, let alone for a young person going through the changes experienced by those in the 13 to 19-year age group. Confidence and self-esteem are very important to them but are not always there. Young people are changing emotionally and physically during that time, and of course they need the support that a program such as Youth Connections can give them when they are not sure whether the road they are travelling or the path they are taking is suitable for them. If they are disengaged from education programs and the broader community, it is a loss for all of us. I argue that that disengagement inevitably costs us more in the long run than a program such as Youth Connections, which costs \$8 million a year to run across Western Australia. I think it is incumbent on us all to prioritise this section of society.

In the midwest region, more than 800 young people have been supported in this year alone, just over 130 are scheduled to take part and there is a waiting list of about 60 to be involved in the Youth Connections program. Not only is it a successful program, but also disengaged youth want to engage with this program. I think the young people of the midwest are voting with their feet on the Youth Connections program. Anyone who has brought up teenagers will know that it is not always easy to engage with that age group. There can be very complex issues between parents and teenage children but, fortunately, we have an education system that will pick up most of those issues. However, there are those who will not engage in education and, fortunately, the Youth Connections program has been a fallback. We have not only a successful program, the right people and a suitable model, but also the willingness of youth to engage in the Youth Connections program.

The program offers intensive case management to address the complex and often multiple barriers that exist in the lives of young people that lead them to disengage and will ultimately preclude many of them from completing their education. This is particularly prevalent in Aboriginal communities. When people disengage at a young age and fall behind the group, so to speak, they inevitably turn to a very different life. Often they are poorly educated and of low socioeconomic standing and do not want to live at home or want to get away from their parents or other family members. We have all seen the consequences of that disengagement. We have all seen how young people can go awry and end up in corrective institutions and lead less than savoury lives. It is very important that we prevent that. For every person we can keep out of a custodial institution, we can pay for this program for several months across the state. At a financial level, it is also sound policy.

Barriers to young people include suspected or diagnosed mental health issues, and we have had many discussions in this house about the effects of mental health issues. I am pleased to see that, as a society, we are starting to work towards getting on top of some of those issues that have been shunned for many years. But we could get in early with a program such as Youth Connections. I think that every medical practitioner would tell us that the earlier we can identify and diagnose a problem and start to deal with it, the fewer hassles there will be later on. Often there are unstable living arrangements in family homes. Often there is homelessness. There are homeless people in Perth, but there are certainly homeless people in my electorate who couch surf or live in disused buildings and areas in the centre of town. Often they are in financial distress, and alcohol and drug misuse inevitably follows, and they have low literacy and numeracy to the point of effectively being functionally illiterate. I have come across people in their 20s who cannot read and write at a basic level of numeracy and literacy. It is very important to strengthen these programs and to engage these people and get them involved. Many young people in the 13 to 19-year age group who are involved in this program are parents and carers. I think that is another very important angle to take. Often, as a fact of life, people become parents at 16, 17, 18 or 19 years of age and they need to be engaged and they need help and support, so we should give it to them. Despite all these barriers and all the issues that confront our youth, the program has worked and has been considered the poster child of community-based programs. It is very well accepted around Australia and across the world as a great engagement program for our communities.

A recent destination study of 835 young people who took part in the program in 2012 and received a final outcome showed that in January 2014, 80.2 per cent of young people—that is over four in five—were still engaged in either education or employment. This program can reach out and appeal to disengaged youth and engage 80 per cent of those in employment or education. That is a phenomenal result. That is an outstanding achievement. I would like to think that that figure could be 100 per cent, but 80.2 per cent is a fantastic result for a program that has been running only since 2010. I would put that up against any other government-run program. The remaining 19.8 per cent of young people either were looking for employment or were carers for children or family members. Considering that 63.7 per cent of the young people surveyed were disengaged from their education for at least one month and up to two years before enrolling in the program, this is an outstanding success rate. This issue has never been as important as it is now, and these rates will rise, as will the numbers in the juvenile justice system, once we lose a number of important federal government programs at the end of this calendar year and if the state government does not step up and continue to deliver programs to re-engage our

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most disengaged and disadvantaged young people. This government will condemn them to be the next generation in the cycle of intergenerational welfare and poverty.

I know this is an issue that is particularly important to the Premier. When surveyed in January 2014, young people from regional and remote areas showed a higher level of success than those in the city, with 82.44 per cent of young people from rural Australia on the program in 2012 recorded as still being in education, training or employment, including a number of young people completing rural apprenticeships and traineeships. According to those figures, this program works better in regional areas than in the city. We need to ensure that our rural young people can access employment in the regional area where they live. The best way we can do this is ensure that they can be assisted to complete their education and undertake training that is relevant to their region. As I have established, the program works extra well in the regions.

More than 1 000 of the young people in Western Australia who have benefited from Youth Connections have been on juvenile justice orders. Involvement in the program has meant that many of those young people have been diverted from a path of negative and destructive behaviour. The benefit to the community when young people are diverted from continuing down the path of juvenile crime goes beyond the cost of juvenile incarceration, which we know is over \$100 000 per year per young person, and goes beyond the reduction in graffiti and crime in the community. It is about the positive wellbeing that is created for the whole community and not just the individual. As a community we can be proud when we re-engage young people and prevent them from leading lives of crime and destruction. We should be proud of this, and we can be.

Despite the success of the program, after being in this space for nearly 20 years of policy making, the federal Liberal government decided that these young people are not their responsibility. They decided these young people are no longer the “problem” of the federal government or of the Australian nation—they are the concern of whatever state they live in.

Hon Peter Collier: That is not true.

Hon DARREN WEST: I look forward to the minister’s contribution that says otherwise. I have a copy of the Council of Australian Governments agreement that was signed in 2009 by Premier Barnett. It was always the intention that this program would be picked up by the states. The federal Labor government continued the program beyond the life of this agreement and it encouraged the states to take it up. The federal government should have continued this program, because it is such a successful program. The federal government provides \$80 million, with \$8 million for Western Australia. In the scheme of a trillion-dollar budget I do not think it is too much to ask for such an important program that deals with such an important sector of our society. It should be pointed out, however, that when this program was designed in 2009 under the National Partnership on Youth Attainment and Transitions, it was agreed by COAG that support for this cohort of young people would eventually transfer to the states. This particular COAG agreement was signed by the current Premier, Colin Barnett.

I can already hear the blame game about who is responsible and that there is no money to support these young people. Ultimately, though, we need to look at the cost to us as a community and as a state if we do not support these young people. I argue that the cost of supporting one young person in a juvenile justice facility for a year is equivalent to the cost of supporting more than 25 young people on this program. The maths is as simple as that. It makes good economic sense to invest in this program.

In the time I have left, which is limited, I will go through a couple of individual stories of young people from Western Australia who have been assisted on this program. I will not use their real names. The first story is about someone I will call Tim. Tim was going from place to place and sleeping rough in regional Australia. He had not been to school for more than three months. With no income, Tim relied on acquaintances for the occasional meal. He had no contact with his parents, who had divorced many years ago, and he was struggling with behavioural, social and mental health problems. Youth Connections worked with Tim to address his problems to get him back into school or find employment. The organisation helped him to find accommodation and secured financial assistance for him from Centrelink. They also reunited him with his former stepfather. Tim enrolled in a certificate II in music at TAFE. Despite having to travel three hours each day on buses, he kept up the course. However, during this time, Tim disclosed that he had been sexually abused when he was younger. Many of the obstacles that Tim was facing in his life could be directly related back to this abuse. Shortly before Tim was to complete his music course, he was required to give evidence of his past abuse at the Supreme Court. He spoke against the perpetrator at court, but finding it a very difficult experience, Tim disappeared soon after the trial and stopped attending TAFE. The Youth Connections worker eventually located Tim and continued to provide support and self-esteem counselling. The worker also helped Tim reconnect with his mother. Following a brief period living with his mother, Tim was admitted to a psychiatric ward where he stayed for a short time. Upon his release, Youth Connections organised accommodation for Tim at a youth refuge and supported him to

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enrol in a job training program. Following the program, Tim found employment as a deckhand on a fishing vessel. That job did not last and Tim found himself lost and homeless once more. Tim turned to Youth Connections once again. The organisation found him accommodation at a youth refuge and provided further personal counselling. Eventually, Tim agreed to accept a referral to headspace, a national youth mental health foundation, for additional support. While hanging out with his Youth Connections worker, Tim visited a local disability agency and found that he interacted well with people with disability. The case worker encouraged Tim to consider this as a meaningful career option. Tim is now studying a certificate III in disability and is employed in a traineeship by a local disability support service. He is working on his mental health problems through ongoing counselling and is learning to cope with his anger. Tim has shown great improvements in his self-esteem and is flourishing in his chosen vocation. The services provided to Tim by Youth Connections included reconnecting Tim with his mother and former stepfather, enrolment at TAFE, psychological and personal counselling, eventual referral to a professional counsellor, job training and employment assistance, and developing his life skills.

We can find the money, if the government has the will to do it. We have money in royalties for regions, so why not use the funding already in that bucket to support young people who are in these regional communities? As I pointed out, the success rate of the Youth Connections program is higher in regional communities. Ultimately it is an investment in those regions and in those communities to provide assistance to ensure that the next generation of working Australians have every possible opportunity and support to succeed, and succeed I believe they will.

I know that the funding to support young people in metropolitan Western Australia can be found among the portfolios of education, the Attorney General, health and families, and it will be a cost saving that will be felt immediately if we continue to ensure this support is provided to 2015. I urge this house to consider this. We need to take up this important program that is already in place and is working. Are 13 to 19-year-old young people who are disengaged from community a priority for the government?

HON PETER COLLIER (North Metropolitan — Leader of the House) [10.46 am]: I say at the outset that there is very little I disagree with in the comments made by Hon Darren West, apart from the political statement about the federal coalition government's endeavours with disengaged youth, which was completely inaccurate. Having said that, I agree almost exclusively with the comments Hon Darren West, and I will make comments on Youth Connections.

The Youth Connections program has been very successful. The figures that I have been presented with suggest that 74 000 students have been supported, as opposed to 30 000, but that is a moot point. The program was introduced in 2009–10 with funding of \$30 million over five years and was paid for exclusively by the commonwealth. It was always a five-year program. I want to make it perfectly clear to members that the program has not been cut short; in fact, it was extended. It was meant to conclude on 30 June 2014 and it has been extended until the end of the year. Youth Connections provides very effective service delivery for disengaged youth. I want to make perfectly clear to honourable members that when we talk about disengaged youth we are not talking exclusively about students from lower socioeconomic areas or those who have a social disadvantage; we are talking about a generic cohort of students, a significant component of which are Aboriginal but, in addition, it encompasses and captures a raft of different students from all over the community. Increasingly, unfortunately due to an increasingly complex society, more and more of these students need assistance above and beyond mainstream schooling. That is where Youth Connections comes into play, and that is where we need to look at Youth Connections and the role that it plays. I am led to believe the Minister for Training and Workforce Development, Dr Kim Hames, will be discussing this issue at the next ministerial council meeting that is coming up in a matter of months. We have to assess whether Youth Connections continues in its current form and whether what we are doing at the state level can embrace and enhance the work already done with Youth Connections.

The Western Australian government has been extraordinarily proactive in assisting students who are disengaged from mainstream schooling. I wish I had an hour to go through all of that, but I will go through a few of the areas to show where we are at the moment. Those considerations must be taken into account when any decision is made about what happens with Youth Connections in its current form.

At the moment the state government has been very supportive of curriculum and re-engagement in education schools. Western Australia has 10 CARE schools. If we are going to get political, the previous federal Labor government reduced funding for those schools. The Liberal–National government increased, and continues to increase, that funding. We have 11 different facilities across Western Australia, including the midwest area, that deal with disengaged students. They are students who are not attuned to mainstream schooling. It does not make them any less significant than any other child on this earth; they have their strengths, energy, expertise and aspirations. The government is picking up the responsibility that is bestowed upon its shoulders to assist those

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students. I can say proudly that the government's support for CARE schools has been second to none. Those CARE schools are out in the community and include Corridors College in Midland, Port Community School in Hamilton Hill, and Alta-1. All of these schools right across the state do pretty much the same as Youth Connections.

Hon Ljiljanna Ravlich: No, they don't!

Hon PETER COLLIER: Hon Ljiljanna Ravlich has no idea; she has just come into the chamber.

The PRESIDENT: Order! Let us keep the debate on the issue.

Hon PETER COLLIER: These CARE schools provide wonderful facilities for disengaged students.

Hon Darren West: They do not engage in the same way. I have been on the board of a CARE school.

Hon PETER COLLIER: What is the distinction?

Hon Darren West: The CARE schools do not have as high a rate of engagement as the Youth Connections program.

Hon PETER COLLIER: Let me finish—that is enough of your interjection; I have 10 minutes. I heard what the member had to say.

Hon Sue Ellery: You said he knows nothing; he has been on the board so he does know something!

Hon PETER COLLIER: I did not say that he knows nothing at all. I am giving an image of where we are at at the moment. CARE schools deal with disengaged students. We also have 10 behaviour centres in our public schools to deal with so-called disengaged students, although a lot of those engagements are to do with punitive issues, as opposed to disengaged students. We spent \$15 million on those behaviour centres for 500 students. If members opposite can say, and I have said this —

Hon Ljiljanna Ravlich interjected.

Hon PETER COLLIER: Just let me finish, for goodness sake. I have said this publicly over the last three months, that if we are spending that amount of money on those schools, I think we can do it better. That is what needs to be considered with Youth Connections. We have to consider, with Youth Connections, whether what we are delivering is as comprehensive as it could be. At the moment I do not think it is; I really do not think it is. So to suggest that we can just go on and say, "Yes, we will blindly continue to fund Youth Connections", I do not think is the right approach. I am sure that is what the Minister for Training and Workforce Development thinks. It is exactly the same issue with CARE schools and behaviour centres. We have to look at them in a much more general sense. In addition to that, as far as Aboriginal students are concerned, we have been extraordinarily proactive. We increased funding there by \$1.8 million to ensure that more Aboriginal students are directly involved in certificate II qualifications. In addition to that, to ensure that we looked after Aboriginal students when they left school—I am talking about very high rates of unacceptable literacy and numeracy rates with Aboriginal students—we needed to have some sort of conduit between school and employment. Thus, we introduced through the "Training together — working together" initiative, five specific Aboriginal workforce development centres. We now have centres in Broome, Geraldton, Kalgoorlie, Bunbury, with the main centre in Murray Street, Perth. They deal specifically with all Aboriginal people, but a large cohort of their business deals with adolescent Aboriginal students. We are working hand in hand with Aboriginal students to ensure that we can assist them in that process; that is, from school into the workplace and to assist them, not just with support and finding a job, but mentoring. Many of these Aboriginal students cannot write a CV, so they can then receive the support they need to write their CVs to find a job; and in addition to that, to receive mentoring through to the selection process that then follows through to the employment process.

Those workforce development centres are working extraordinarily well. The original recommendation from the "Training together — working together" report was that we had nine; we have now got five, and I know that they are looking at the future possibility of one in the Pilbara, one in the wheatbelt, and one potentially in the Peel region, but that is something for the current minister to consider in future budget processes. If one captures all of that and asks, "Are the CARE schools funded as much as they could be? Are they performing the role that they should be?" The answer is yes, they probably are, but they could always deal with more funding. I am in constant dialogue with the Catholic Education Office and with the Association of Independent Schools of Western Australia to ensure that we can roll them out more effectively to capture more students to ensure it is not just with this small cohort of students, but in fact that it captures more students who simply do not find mainstream schooling effective.

It is the same with the behaviour centres. I am very confident, because my department is undertaking this review on this matter at the moment, and it is exactly what this is all about, that within the next few months or by the

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end of this year we will be able to provide something that will enhance the opportunities for those disengaged students; that will not just confine them. In addition to that, what we are doing next year at the senior secondary level of education is extraordinarily exciting. Making changes to the Western Australian Certificate of Education is something that has been nation leading. For far too long, our secondary level of education has been led by the nose by the universities on the naive assumption that every child wants to go to university, and it is simply not the case. It means more and more students are falling by the wayside; more and more students are having the “disengaged” title attached to their foreheads. That is just wrong; it is manifestly inaccurate. We need to acknowledge both as a community and as an educational sector that these students need to be considered as well; that they need to be provided with support, mentoring and counselling so that we then work towards their strengths. To define their strengths for them is exactly what the Youth Connections program involves; it does exactly that. So we are working towards that path, and that is why the changes we are making in WACE are so profoundly significant.

Next year we will ensure there are two very clear and transparent pathways; namely, an Australian Tertiary Admissions Rank pathway and a general pathway. Those students who would ordinarily choose subjects which, quite frankly, are completely irrelevant to, firstly, their interest level, secondly, their capacity and, thirdly, their employment opportunities, will now be provided with a lot more. They will now be provided with an opportunity to select from a plethora of different non-academic pathways. In addition to that, each child in a Western Australian school after 2016 will have a certificate II qualification. That will place a very positive seed in the minds of those students who I was talking about who will be captured with Youth Connections. It is exactly those students who will be captured by such programs.

Hon Darren West: They will not come to you!

Hon PETER COLLIER: They will not come to me.

Hon Darren West interjected.

Hon PETER COLLIER: I will explain it for the honourable member: every child will start in the education system. That education system becomes much more irrelevant to that child at the secondary level, when they have to do their specialist level of education, particularly at the senior secondary level. That is when they become disengaged. At the moment, as I said, our education system has completely ignored those students. We have got a situation of those ridiculous stages—that we still have got at the moment—whereby a vast array of our students are doing subjects completely irrelevant to them. Why on earth—what possible incentive is there for that child to turn up on a day-to-day basis in an authoritarian environment? There is none. That is why, as I just said to the member, I highly recommend he has a look at the changes we are making in WACE. That is one of three that I have mentioned today—one of three! I am not saying it is exclusive because we will still have students within the current authoritarian, dare I say it, or mainstream level of schooling who will not be attuned to that. That is why, when we look at the behaviour centres, the CARE schools and at the work we are doing with Aboriginal students, specifically with such organisations like the Clontarf Aboriginal College and the David Wirrpanda Foundation, and a raft of other programs that we fund as a state government, we have got this tapestry, which is saying that we are, at last, looking after all students in our community. It is not just those who want to go to university; because our education system has primarily been generated towards those students, and, as a result, more and more students are becoming disengaged. If those options are available to those students, there is more incentive for them to become engaged in school. If a student wants to go into design or information and communications technology or whatever it might be, but they are funnelled into an academic pathway, of course they will become disengaged. The support mechanisms that we increasingly have within our school environment will provide those opportunities. The Minister for Training and Workforce Development will go to the next ministerial council for industry and schools in a few months and it will undoubtedly be an issue. However, we cannot just say yes, we will fund it—I certainly cannot give that commitment because I am not the responsible minister—without giving due consideration to what is already provided in Western Australia, which does not say for a minute that we cannot somehow work through this. I am genuinely of the opinion that as we look at this working, living and breathing document in the review of the curriculum and re-engagement schools and behaviour centres, we can probably capture a very similar model to what we have in Youth Connections, and couple it with the CARE schools and the behaviour centres and deal with those so-called disengaged students within our education system. This is one of my top priorities as the Minister for Education, and as we continue to enhance the opportunities for Aboriginal students we will be able to say to every child in Western Australia that they are significant, not just the students who want to go to university. Every student in our schools, regardless of what they want to achieve or where they want to go, will be provided with not just support in the curriculum direction but also pastoral care and mentoring. We must consider this in its entirety because a rich tapestry of success is starting to emerge here and that must be considered when talking about Youth Connections.

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HON ALANNA CLOHESY (East Metropolitan) [11.02 am]: I rise to support the motion that this house call on the Liberal–National government to support the Youth Connections program across Western Australia and to provide the necessary funding to continue the program, as was the intention of the Council of Australian Governments agreement signed by the Premier. I have listened to what the minister has said with great interest and I will address a couple of points he made as I talk about this incredibly important program. This amazing service operates in the Swan region. I have had the opportunity to meet with its staff and to hear about the most incredible outcomes of any youth service I have ever had anything to do with.

Let me start at the beginning by stating a few simple facts. The first fact: the Premier signed the COAG agreement, which gave effect to funding for Youth Connections and other services, in 2009. Fact: that agreement contained arrangements for the transition of funding to state governments. Fact: the Western Australian government has reneged on funding those services. It has not said that it will, but that it will have look at a range of factors.

Hon Peter Collier: It has not finished yet.

Hon ALANNA CLOHESY: The government certainly has not said that. This program was funded by previous federal governments because the states, including Western Australia, would not pick it up because the program was successful. The states were playing coy and not taking up their responsibilities under the agreement or, more importantly, for young people. We are now in what seems to be a standoff position. It is not acceptable. It is crunch time. This program has only six months of funding left. Before I start to talk about how important this program is to the lives of young people, I will talk about how these services will continue to operate. Six months is not enough time for services to allow their staff to plan or, in fact, to keep their staff, who are key to its success. Although the minister said that he is looking at options, whatever they might be—CARE schools, behaviour centres—in the meantime I am worried about what will happen to these services as they run down because no clear decision has been made; all we have is buck passing between the state and federal governments. There is no doubt that these services have a really successful outcome rate. From what the minister described, I suspect that he needs to understand that these services focus on young people who are disengaged not because they are on the wrong education or vocational pathway, but because they have had horrible and shocking things happen in their lives, which means it is very difficult for them to engage in not only education, but also finding a job and to undertaking really basic activities of daily living. It is not that they have been put on the wrong pathway to TAFE or the wrong school, but that they have lived shocking lives. For a lot of these young people with whom Youth Connections services engage, a lot of that culminates in low self-esteem. In fact, that is the highest barrier to engaging in education, employment and other services that young people engaged with Youth Connections experience. They also experience behavioural, drug and alcohol-related problems, inadequate family support and homelessness, and they are survivors of abuse and assault and other lifetime events that have had a major negative impact on their lives. Most often the young people with whom Youth Connections works have been through other services and have not stayed engaged with them. The Youth Connections service that I am in contact with is under the auspices of the Rise network in Middle Swan, which is a fantastic service that has had some great outcomes. When I met with the staff and talked about the program, and I have had some experience in these services, I could not believe the outcome rates that they talked about, to the point that I actually asked them how they were measuring these outcomes, because sometimes the departments who fund the services ask different questions from what the people who run the services value. I could not believe the tremendous outcomes they were achieving. Of the young people with whom Youth Connections had worked, 94.2 per cent were still engaged in education and employment six months after they started to work with the service, and 81.5 per cent were still engaged in employment or education; that is an outstanding result. Interestingly as well, most of those young people were not receiving federal government income support. Six months after, they were supporting themselves financially in some way. I think the government needs to look at how different this model is and the difference it makes to young people's lives. It is different from CARE schools and behaviour centres, and one of the key differences is the way that it contacts and works with young people through its outreach service. That service goes out to meet young people wherever they feel comfortable. It does not expect young people to come looking for help; it does not expect them to go to a centre for assistance. The other feature of this model, which is quite different from those that the minister was talking about, is that it is multidisciplinary. The Youth Connections service works with a young person to identify that young person's needs and to address the barriers to them engaging with employment or education. It is a unique model that has demonstrated positive outcomes, and it changes young people's lives. For those reasons it deserves to be supported by this government.

HON AMBER-JADE SANDERSON (East Metropolitan) [11.12 am]: I rise to support the motion moved by Hon Darren West that seeks to have the state government continue funding the Youth Connections program. I obviously want to echo a lot of the comments made by my colleagues about the program's incredible success. It is a really successful and demonstrated program and when we weigh up the alternatives for these young people

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and the cost of those alternatives, even from purely economic point of view, it makes sense to continue it. I will talk specifically about one Youth Connections program in my electorate of East Metropolitan Region, which is run from the Rise community centre in Middle Swan.

As already stated, the program aims to connect with kids aged 13 to 19 years who are not attending school, thinking of leaving school or generally disengaged from school. It meets and engages with them on their turf, so to speak—it goes to them. Getting young people to come into some sort of office or centre is not necessarily that successful. Youth workers will meet with the kids wherever they are most comfortable. Whether that is at a shopping centre, a coffee shop, their home or a friend's or family member's home, the youth workers will meet with them and provide that one-on-one case management approach and work to a number of their issues. The Youth Connections program has identified a number of areas that need to be addressed for young people to remain engaged in education and complete it, whether it is vocational or academic. Things such as socialisation issues, low self-esteem, bullying, inadequate family support, behaviour problems, emerging mental health issues, critical life events, financial distress, alcohol and drug use, and low literacy and numeracy are all barriers to young people continuing their education and gaining a greater quality of life for themselves in the future. This program is aimed at specifically engaging with those people.

The Middle Swan–Midland program currently works alongside around 185 young people a year, who get one-on-one support from a case manager. The evidence is very, very positive. It is a very successful program that has been running for long enough to be evaluated. Approximately two years after exiting the program, on average around 80 per cent of people were still engaged in employment or education, which is a really high success rate. Since 2010, over 1 000 highly disadvantaged young people in the Swan region have accessed the program. For the last five years, 1 000 kids have had access to the program; therefore, if the 80 per cent success rate is extrapolated, that is 800 kids who have been kept in schools. That is a lot of kids kept in school; that is the size of a big high school. That is a great success and a credit to the governments that funded the program. Fifteen per cent of those kids were Aboriginal. The Swan region has one of the highest concentrations of Aboriginal people, so it makes sense that a high number will go through the program; however, they are more highly represented in this program than they are in the broader population, so that group is being targeted. The program facilitates eight groups of young people in schools at any one time and, as I said, makes contact with those people wherever they are most comfortable, whether it is at Midland Gate shopping centre, headspace, Stratton Edge youth centre or youth festivals such as HyperFest. The program works in a lot of schools across the east metropolitan area, including Lockridge Senior High School, Hampton Senior High School, Morley Senior High School, Mirrabooka Senior High School, Balga Senior High School, Girrawheen Senior High School, Ellenbrook Secondary College, Ballajura Community College, John Forrest Secondary College, Mount Lawley Senior High School, Governor Stirling Senior High School, Swan View Senior High School, Ashdale Secondary College, Corridors College, Caversham Training and Education Centre and Parkerville Children and Youth Care. That is a lot of schools and a lot of kids who are benefiting from this program.

The federal government will not continue the funding for the program beyond December this year. For Rise, the Midland program, that will mean losing \$800 000, or 50 per cent, of funding out of its youth budget. Eight staff members will lose their jobs in December and, critically, there are very few other services to refer these kids to. Very few other services can pick up the slack and make up the difference for these kids, so we are really losing a valuable service in this area. The Youth Affairs Council of Western Australia did an examination of the likely impacts of the loss of services in these communities and I will quote the findings for the Midland area. The examination states —

“Most significantly with the loss of 8 knowledgeable and highly skilled staff members. The youth services division as a whole will be reduced by over 50%, substantially reducing the organisation's capacity to support disadvantaged young people in the Swan region.”

“The 8 staff who work in the program were contracted to December 2014 and are unlikely to have their contract extended due to the discontinuation of the Youth Connections program”

“Obviously there is the financial impact, but it means that our youth services will no longer exist for outreach and reengagement and ongoing support for young people ... Our youth services will basically cease to exist.”

This is a critical community centre in the Swan region. This funding made all of the youth services viable; therefore, they will all disappear because of the loss of this funding.

There are many cases for the state government to make up for what have been brutal decisions by the federal government, and we recently talked about seniors. I would say that another critical group is this group, disengaged youth, whose only other option if they are not working, in school or in some sort of engagement is

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often to turn to crime, drugs, alcohol and a range of other unhealthy pursuits that will exacerbate most of their issues. Given the strong success rate for that program, I call on the state government to step in and look at these services even, if it must, from an economic point of view, including costs to incarcerate kids and provide ongoing support for them. The schools themselves cannot afford to provide that kind of ongoing support and that kind of specialist treatment for every student. They do not have the resources to do that. A number of schools had programs for disengaged kids, but those programs have been cut due to the cuts that were imposed on schools last year and the beginning of this year. So we are already seeing a deficit in the provision of those services in a number of schools.

The cost of getting a person back to education and employment is \$4 700. The cost of incarcerating a person—as I have said, many people who do not have work and do not have training turn to crime—is about \$250 000 a year. Incarceration is very expensive, so we need to look at this from that point of view—as an early intervention and preventative program. Incarceration will cost the state a lot more than it will cost to make sure these kids are fully engaged with school and are on the path to making a better life for themselves.

I support the motion, and I call on the state government to step in and support these programs and give them some continuity of funding so that they can continue their excellent work into the future.

HON COL HOLT (South West — Parliamentary Secretary) [11.21 am]: I welcome the opportunity to make a contribution to this debate. Hon Darren West, Hon Amber-Jade Sanderson and Hon Alanna Clohesy have described very well exactly what Youth Connections does and the role that it plays and the successes that it has had, and even the potential money that it can save the state. So I will not go over that again, except to say that I agree wholeheartedly with the role that Youth Connections and other programs are playing in supporting some of the most marginal and vulnerable people in our community. I do not think there would be any argument from anyone in this chamber about exactly what we need to do to keep young people engaged in education and give them an opportunity to enter the workforce and be a contributing part of our society and our community. We also know how expensive that sort of engagement is in regional Western Australia. Youth Connections, because of its very nature, is a one-on-one service that works intimately with young people to re-engage them into education and/or training. That is a very expensive way of doing things, in anyone's language, because it takes people resources. Hon Alanna Clohesy has talked about the type of people who we need to have working in that space. We need to have people who are at the coalface and are creating trust and empathy and understanding, and are trying to get behind what is causing the issues for these young people. A program of this nature is very expensive to provide in regional Western Australia, particularly when it operates from Albany through to Wyndham and everywhere in between. Those types of services cost a lot of money, and if we want to continue to provide those services, we need to continue to keep investing in them.

It is also important to think about the role that royalties for regions is playing in funding programs such as this. The Minister for Education is right—we are trying to look at a whole package for education, starting with some early intervention funding and techniques to make sure that when kids arrive at our kindergartens, preschools and primary schools they are ready to learn and have been put on best footing. We are investing in teachers as well to give them the ability to maintain and grow these young people as they go through their school years. It is a complete package. I have talked in the past about the changes around the compulsory years 11 and 12 of high school. The federal government talks about “learn or earn”—either go to school or get into the workforce. Youth Connections plays a pivotal role in supporting people to either remain in learning or start earning. At the state level, we are trying to play a role right from the very early years until the point at which young people leave their mandatory time at school and enter the workforce.

Royalties for regions is playing its part in funding these types of programs. One example is the Smart Start program in the great southern. That program is funded through the Great Southern Development Commission, with an investment of \$660 000. When the program was presented to the Great Southern Development Commission, as a leader in the community it saw the value of that program. The commission understands the community and what that program is trying to achieve, and it funded it.

Royalties for regions has also put a lot of money into the Clontarf academy program that is run by the Clontarf Foundation. Clontarf is playing a very important role in encouraging potentially disengaged youth to be engaged in our education system. I am sure all members here have been to a Clontarf academy to see what goes on. Because it has a policy of no school means no football, the young people who turn up at school are there because they love being there. It is a different way of approaching these things. The people who run those academies are mentors and role models, and they are very proud of the work that they do in helping to engage these kids to keep them coming to school. Maybe only one in 500 of those kids actually goes on to play football for the Australian Football League. But it is not about that—it is about getting these kids into the classroom and giving

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them the opportunity to learn other skills that they can take away with them. That is why we are continuing to invest in these sorts of programs.

The funding for Youth Connections will finish in 12 months. I am as disappointed as anybody else that the federal government has pulled away from that funding commitment.

Hon Alanna Clohesy: In six months.

Hon COL HOLT: In six months—what did I say?

Hon Alanna Clohesy: You said in 12 months.

Hon COL HOLT: I meant at the end of December—in six months. That was announced only a month or six weeks ago. We knew that was potentially on the radar, given the time frames for that program. But I am pretty disappointed that the federal government has not seen the value of this program, as we have spoken about in this house today. Everyone has commented on the valuable role that this program plays. I am not sure where the federal government is on this and why it has not got that message. I have to tell Hon Darren West that I would have preferred the motion to say something like, “This house stands united in asking the federal government to continue the funding for this program.” Hon Darren West made the comment that the funding for this program does not amount to much in a state budget of \$30 billion. The federal government has 10 times as much money in its budget. That is why this motion should have said, “This house stands united in the need to continue the funding for the Youth Connections program.”

This state signed a Council of Australian Governments agreement that states that the federal government will finish putting funding into this program, and the state should take it over. The negotiations by the previous federal Labor government with this state have always been pretty poor. It would not surprise me if it was a take-it-or-leave-it scenario: “Here is what we have on the table for you; sign up or you will not get anything.”

Hon Darren West: We did not sign it.

Hon COL HOLT: I know who signed it, mate. But that does not say how the negotiations went. Think about Gonski; the option that was put on the table at the very beginning was \$200 million.

Hon Sue Ellery: Which we did not sign up to.

Hon COL HOLT: I am trying to tell the story. Approximately \$200 million was put on the table in the first negotiations. Perhaps the Minister for Education can tell me.

Hon Peter Collier: It was \$188 million, over six years.

Hon COL HOLT: That is way less than half of one per cent of the state education budget. This state did not sign that, and it then came back as a different offer down the track. It would not surprise me if, during negotiations about Youth Connections, the federal government said, “We are rolling this out to all the states. Here is the offer—take it or leave it.” I think we took the offer in the hope that the federal government would see the value of that program, just as we have seen the value and we have talked about the value. I have lobbied federal members from this state to continue this program, and I have also written to the federal minister about it, and I would hope that every member in this chamber has done the same thing, including the opposition, which brought this motion to the house today.

Hon Sue Ellery: I wrote about this in December last year.

Hon COL HOLT: So did I, because I think we all know the value of this program. What disappoints me is that, again, the federal government is retracting from this program and saying, “You now go and solve the problem.” That is why I would have preferred to see a motion that was based on the agreed position that we have around the value of Youth Connections that said to the federal government, “It is not on any more. Instead of retracting from providing this service to Western Australians, how about continuing the partnership that we have started and keep investing in this program, because we all know how important it is?” We should be asking every federal member from the state of Western Australia to go in and bat on our behalf for the continued funding of this program. There is not a National member in the federal Parliament that I can go and bend the ear of, but there are plenty of Liberals and a few Australian Labor Party members who could probably do that.

Hon Ljiljanna Ravlich: That’s a very poor excuse!

Hon COL HOLT: I would have loved to have seen some National representatives but we do not have any. I am reliant on making statements in this house as much as members of the opposition are, except they have the ability to talk to their counterparts in federal Parliament because they have relationships with federal MPs. They should use those relationships to get the feds back on the table so we can continue this valuable program.

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HON SUE ELLERY (South Metropolitan — Leader of the Opposition) [11.30 am]: I am really pleased to be able to speak on the motion today. I commend my colleague Hon Darren West for bringing it to our attention and for his contribution to the debate. When he raised this issue with me, I reminded him that we had a debate in which Youth Connections featured quite strongly not that long ago. I said that before he thinks about bringing that back, he should look at what was said at that time to see whether it is still worth us talking about Youth Connections when the house had spoken extensively about it back in only April. He and I both did that. It was clear to me from what had been said back in April that we should revisit this because some important things happened in that debate and since that debate. I will start with what that debate was about. A motion was moved by Hon Dave Grills requesting that the house urge the federal government to allocate adequate and continued funding to youth services to ensure that the needs of young Western Australians are met. People used the umbrella of that motion to talk about Youth Connections. Since that motion was moved, the federal budget came down. Despite Hon Colin Holt encouraging us in that debate back in April to be optimistic about what we could expect to see in the federal budget, and wishing that we would be more positive about what would come out of the federal budget, young people and programs directed to assist young people suffered really badly in the federal budget.

Members might recall that I asked a question on 18 June of the minister representing the Minister for Training and Workforce Development, which stated —

I refer to the Abbott government’s recent budget decision to cease funding to the very successful Youth Connections program, which assists secondary students who have disengaged from the school system back into training and employment.

- (1) Has the Minister ... raised concern with his federal colleagues about the gap the loss of the Youth Connections program will create in services in WA?

Unfortunately, the answer to that question from the WA minister was no. When I asked, “If the answer is no, why not?”, the answer I received was —

- (2) The commonwealth’s 2014–15 budget outlined savings —

Read “cuts” —

of over \$1 billion through the cessation or non-renewal of a range of commonwealth programs and national partnerships in the vocational training sector.

Despite Hon Colin Holt’s request that we be optimistic, it was a forlorn request because the federal government cut \$1 billion out of programs to assist young people. When I went on to ask the minister whether he was aware that any of his WA ministerial colleagues had raised concerns about the loss of the Youth Connections program, he said no. It was disappointing to me, despite the fact that there had been a debate in this house in which Youth Connections featured, that the WA minister had not raised any concerns with his federal counterpart and he had not checked to see whether any of his ministerial colleagues had raised it with the federal minister. I find both those elements really disappointing: first, that \$1 billion was taken out of programs to assist young people; and, second, that the WA minister had not raised any concerns about that.

The other thing that happened in the budget reflects the point made by Hon Colin Holt about the government’s attitude of “earn or learn”. I am supportive of that but I am very concerned about the blunt instrument that the federal government has put in place for young people to achieve that; that is, they cannot get access to financial assistance for six months after they lose their job. I am supportive of measures to encourage young people to either learn or get back into the workplace. One program that does that is Youth Connections. Not only has it said that young people have to be earning or learning and there is a blunt instrument—they will not be able to pay their bills for six months—the very programs that would assist those young people to get back into the workplace or get into some sort of learning program have been cut.

We should look at what has happened in WA, which will make that equally hard; that is, the increase in TAFE fees. If young people cannot find work, we want them to enrol in a course to lift their qualifications or whatever, but the state government has dramatically increased the fees for TAFE courses. We are making it pretty nigh impossible for young people to do that, particularly those in disadvantaged areas, who do not have the complete skill set to get themselves into employment. We are pretty much guaranteeing that the numbers of young people finding themselves quite literally destitute will increase because they will not be able to get access to Centrelink payments for six months. How will they find the money, for example, to pay TAFE fees and get assistance to get back into the labour market if we are cutting \$1 billion worth of programs, which is what the federal government has just done? If we combine the effect of what the federal government has done with the increases in TAFE fees, it is an astonishing situation that we are setting up for young people, and I worry about what that will mean. I do not use the word “destitute” lightly. Young people will be unable to pay their bills.

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During the debate on the motion moved by Hon Dave Grills back in April, his final statement in his opening comments was that this is in the interests of all Australians from a social and an economic perspective. That is why it is really disappointing that, despite comments from National Party members in the house that day that the Western Australian minister could take this up with his federal counterpart, he appears to be completely oblivious to the views expressed in this house on that day. The minister is in the other place. We are a strange mysterious creature to those in the other house but it is disappointing that he did not take note of the views expressed in this house on that day and did not take up the issue.

When Youth Connections wrote to me, as it did to all members of Parliament in December last year, I had the opportunity to visit its program operating out of Rockingham. Subsequent to that, I met with Jenny from Geraldton here at Parliament House and spoke about the program more widely. At a forum that was organised by my colleague Dave Kelly, the shadow Minister for Youth, with a range of youth organisations, I met with people involved in a third area of the work of Youth Connections and heard directly from them. I do not want to repeat the numbers related to the success of this program but it is highly successful. If we accept what the Leader of the House said—that it was a five-year agreement, so everybody knew it had an end date; in fact, this government has been generous and given them an extra six months—nevertheless, if we have a program that is successful and at the same time we want to put a policy setting in place which says we want to make sure that young people are either learning or earning, I do not see how we can justify cutting funding to a program such as Youth Connections. It does not make sense. It does not fit with the policy setting. The policy is that all young people need to be earning or learning, and we have an evaluation after five years that a program is highly successful at keeping those kids engaged not just while they are on the program but one year and two years after they have completed the program. How is it consistent with the policy setting of earning and learning that the government would cut the funding from that program or not find another way or proactively engage with its state colleagues in maybe trying to find a joint way of keeping that program alive? It does not make sense. It was the wrong policy decision by the federal government and it will be exacerbated by some of the decisions made by the state government, particularly with respect to the fee increase for TAFE courses.

HON ADELE FARINA (South West) [11.39 am]: I rise to support the motion moved by Hon Darren West and put on the record my strong endorsement of the comments made by all the previous speakers, who have covered the issues extremely well. I know Hon Darren West would like the opportunity to say a few words in reply so I will keep my comments very brief.

Youth Connections provides a very, very important service. It fills a gap that is missing in the community in service delivery. For a very small amount of money, it is making a huge difference in the lives of many young people. Skill Hire has the Youth Connections contract for the greater Bunbury area, which takes in Collie, Harvey, Waroona, Donnybrook and Capel. It also has the contract for the Warren and Vasse region. It is very concerned about the fate of the young people for whom it provides services once the Youth Connections funding comes to an end. In greater Bunbury, Skill Hire is contracted to provide services to 130 to 170 young people a year and in Warren–Vasse it is contracted to provide services to 100 to 120 a year. Most members who have spoken have talked about the fact that Youth Connections provides services at that critical transition period from school to employment and much of the literature points to helping youth in the age bracket of 16 or 17 to 24 years. The average age of the client in greater Bunbury and Warren–Blackwood is 16 to 17 followed by 14-year-olds. That highlights that the services provided through the Youth Connections are picking up those students who should be in school and are registered to be in school, but who are simply not attending; they are disengaged. Without this service being able to pick them up and provide them with the direction and some basic skills training, these youths will be lost. The chance for them to engage with the community at some later time is lost.

Many of Youth Connections' clients are early leavers. Often they are still enrolled at school, but are not attending and many have not attended since year 7. That is a frightening statistic. The service receives clients on a referral basis and the main forms of referrals are through juvenile justice and Centrelink, as well as some parents referring their children. A number of the young people are self-referred, and these clients are often homeless, which highlights the point that Hon Sue Ellery made about the “earn and learn” edict by the federal government which affects those who are not earning or learning and their access to the dole.

The providers are telling me that there is no equivalent service in the south west, so once the funding for this service is gone, these children who are at risk and who are benefiting greatly from the service will be lost to the system.

Noting the time, I will conclude. I know Hon Darren West wants a couple of minutes. Many of the comments that I had to make have already been made by other members. We have a serious problem in the south west with having enough jobs for youth and ensuring that they are job-ready. Youth Connections helps provide valuable skills and job-ready skills to the youth in the south west who are otherwise disengaged from education or

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employment. It is absolutely critical that the federal government continues to fund this service and if the federal government does not continue to fund it, the state government has to pick it up. The ramifications for society if we do not will be much greater.

HON DARREN WEST (Agricultural) [11.45 am] — in reply: I appreciate the comments of all the members on this very important motion. I think in general there was support of what is trying to be achieved. In closing I will make a few comments in reply, specifically to the Leader of the House on his contribution. I was somewhat remiss in my earlier remarks in not acknowledging specifically that disengaged youth come from, for instance, the western suburbs of Perth. We are not talking about only disengaged youth from low socioeconomic areas. There are some very famous examples of people in high-profile and well-paid positional positions having trouble with their families and becoming disengaged.

I was pleased to hear the Minister for Education give some glimmer of hope that there may be some propensity on that side of the house to see whether there is a way to make this work. There is a flaw in the minister's proposal that if we build it, they will come. It does not work like that. Curriculum and Re-engagement schools are great; I have been involved in the board of a CARE school and I acknowledge the challenges faced in running CARE schools. One of the biggest challenges we face is getting students to turn up. Programs such as Youth Connections work with those students and get them to come to CARE schools and behaviour management centres and get them back into mainstream schools and then into employment. The Youth Connections program is the mortar between the bricks of these other important initiatives. It takes a whole toolbox approach, rather than individual programs and regimes.

I cannot stress enough that Youth Connections is the mortar between the bricks that makes this whole thing work. It needs to be used in conjunction with other initiatives. I applaud the initiatives the government is undertaking in this area and I note the Minister for Education's desire to work more strongly in this area.

This program works; it is not expensive and it is already in place. It is important that it continues. On behalf of the communities that I represent, especially the city of Geraldton and all the other smaller communities that I represent, I implore the government to find a way to make this program continue because it is so, so important and it has been so, so successful and it has changed the lives of so, so many people and will continue to do so.

Motion lapsed, pursuant to standing orders.