

SCHOOLS OF ISOLATED AND DISTANCE EDUCATION — STUDENT CHARGES

Motion

MRS M.H. ROBERTS (Midland) [4.03 pm]: I move —

That the government immediately cancel all bills sent to secondary schools for year 11 and 12 students doing courses through Schools of Isolated and Distance Education.

The issue of schools having to meet some of the costs of students doing courses through the Schools of Isolated and Distance Education was first raised with principals in this state last year. Clearly, this is about part of the three per cuts, the cut to the education budget and the transfer of costs and saving money from the education budget to pay for things like the increased salary of the chief of staff to the Premier.

Despite this issue being raised with principals, I am told that principals were not advised about how much the costs that would be transferred to them would be, when that would occur and, indeed whether it was final that it would occur at all. It is interesting that the Minister for Education often makes claims in this place to the effect that this was something that was talked about a long time ago, that this is something that the former government was going to do or other claims of that nature. It is a little poor of her to make these claims and generalisations without providing any evidence of her claims. This is not something that the former Labor government would have done. It would never have passed these costs on to schools. It did not and it would not, but it is being done by the Liberal–National government. I would be very interested to see whether and how the National Party members vote on this motion or whether they will talk it out so that Parliament does not vote on it and they can pretend that they support education in country schools. I am told that advice was given to principals at government schools in April this year; certainly some schools received that advice in April.

This is really a budget cut from last year's budget, one that the minister was not forthcoming about during part of the budget process last year. It was not announced. A couple of days after last year's budget, the minister announced a range of cuts that would affect education services. However, this issue does affect services in education. In estimates last year the minister told me that there would be no cuts that would affect education at the coalface. She said that basically it would not affect student learning. It is clear that this cut will affect student learning. It will restrict subject choice for students at, the very least, dozens of senior and district high schools throughout the state.

Schools have now been advised that part of the total cost for a student doing SIDE will come out of their next school grant payment. The Department of Education said it costs about \$4 000 per student per subject to do SIDE, and that private schools are charged an amount of \$2 000.

The member for Churchlands used to talk a lot about openness and accountability when she was on this side of the house. Now that she is a minister, we see little evidence of it; those attributes seem to have been forgotten. She used to talk about parliamentary standards. Now we find that she has none. There has been no accountability or honesty about the cuts to education services. Members need only consider her answer to the question asked by the Leader of the Opposition today about what the key cuts to services will be. Clearly, when one looks at this year's education budget, it is clear that there will be cuts to services. What are those services, minister? Either the minister does not know what those cuts to services are, in which case she is totally incompetent, or, alternatively, she is dishonest. She is not telling the house what those cuts to services will be when she knows what they are. One of her responses was to wait until estimates next week.

The DEPUTY SPEAKER: Member for Midland, I believe you referred to somebody as being dishonest. You cannot refer to somebody as being dishonest.

Mrs M.H. ROBERTS: I did not actually call the minister dishonest. I said that if she were to be doing something, then she would be dishonest. That form of words has been generally accepted practice in this house.

Last week this minister denied that years 11 and 12 courses were being cut from district high schools. She used the euphemism of it just being an adjustment to the senior school allocation. Members know what that means. It means that funds are being cut so that years 11 and 12 students will be forced to go to senior high schools. They will be forced away from the district high schools that they were once at or are currently at.

This minister told the Leader of the Opposition to wait until estimates—wait until next week—to find out what those cuts to services are. Does she know what the cuts to services are? Could she not say? Is she incompetent? Is she dishonest? Does she know the answer? Could she have said today what they are? Could she have been open and accountable to the house? I think there is at least some possibility that she could have been open and accountable but chose not to. I pose those as questions. I have not accused the Minister for Education of any of those things. Sharyn O'Neill, the Director General of the Department of Education, said to a committee hearing

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of the upper house that those cuts to year 11 and 12 were part of the three per cent budget cuts. Quite clearly, they were known when last year's budget was brought down; they were known when this minister attended estimates last year. However, there was no mention of these cuts to what the minister calls adjustments to the senior schools allocation, which are affecting year 11 and 12 students at at least 21 district high schools, when she addressed the estimates committee last year, nor was there any admission of these cuts at any time since by the minister until she was questioned in this house last week. This is not openness and accountability from this minister. It is simply hiding the cuts in education and letting people find out by themselves.

Parents were first advised of that change to year 11 and 12 at district high schools towards the end of last year, yet it formed part of the budget back in April–May. Why were parents not advised earlier, because had they been they would have been in a better position to make choices about their future and their children's future? Some parents in country areas are saying to me that although the minister says that the choices are to travel by bus to go to a senior high school, to go to boarding school or to study with the Schools of Isolated and Distance Education, she neglects to point out the fourth option—this is what people are telling me—which is for them to move from a country town to a place where they do not have to send their child to a boarding school or put their child on a bus to travel for a very long time in each direction each day.

What has been exposed is another hidden but immensely significant cut that is being rolled out. This is forcing each high school in this state to contribute a payment for any students doing SIDE. I am told that the fee is \$1 000 per subject and that that fee is being charged to high schools for the first time in 2010. It was not charged before and it was not something that our government was planning to do. It is a new cut. I believe that if we were to ask the director general of education, she would say that it is part of the three per cent cuts that they have to make to the education budget. This \$1 000 per student is a further cut to school budgets. This government has already slashed school budgets. It removed the \$100 per student subsidy towards school fees. It removed the amount of money that each of those schools was getting for its year 11 students engaged in community service work. Now the government is charging those schools for students who want to do a subject that is not available at their school. The minister is looking at me in a very puzzled way because I am sure it does not affect Churchlands. I am sure that at Churchlands Senior High School in her electorate all kinds of subjects are on offer and there is a full range.

Mr C.J. Barnett: It is a very large school.

Mrs M.H. ROBERTS: Does the Premier think that Kalamunda Senior High School, for example, should have to pay \$1 000 for its students to do a subject such as French, physics or something else not on offer?

Mr C.J. Barnett: I will speak later.

Mrs M.H. ROBERTS: I hope that the Premier does and I hope that he agrees with this motion, because I think this is one of the most scandalous changes that his government has made to education in this state. It is to restrict the choices of students in year 11 and 12 at probably dozens and dozens of metropolitan and country high schools. The Premier may have furrowed his brow too, but that is exactly what he is doing. It is called policy by stealth. There was no announcement of this and no trumpeting by the minister that this is what the government was going to do and why the government was going to do it. There was no honesty and accountability. There was no statement after this year's budget or last year's budget that the government was going to impose more costs on schools and that it would reduce their school grant by \$1 000 per subject for each child who does a SIDE course.

Silently, letters have been sent to principals in country and metropolitan areas throughout our state. No doubt the minister will again accuse me of scaremongering and say that this is not happening, just as she told me last week that the cuts were not happening at district high schools. However, I can assure members that it is happening. I have spoken to people at the Western Australian Council of State School Organisations and people who represent the parent community in country and metropolitan areas. I have spoken to people in the metropolitan area. Many are a little frightened to speak out because they are afraid of being further victimised by this.

Mr C.J. Barnett: Further victimised? Who has been victimised?

Mrs M.H. ROBERTS: We will get to that.

Mr C.J. Barnett: That is a careless, irresponsible statement.

The DEPUTY SPEAKER: Premier!

Mrs M.H. ROBERTS: A number of teachers and principals do not want to be singled out and identified as complaining about these cuts because they are afraid of what will happen to them. Whether the Premier likes it or not, that is what they have told me. They do not want their school identified. I will mention some schools on the record. In some instances I have not directly spoken to a couple of these schools, but I have heard the same

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Mrs Michelle Roberts; Mr Tom Stephens; Mr Andrew Waddell; Mr Mick Murray; Dr Elizabeth Constable; Mr Colin Barnett; Deputy Speaker; Mr Joe Francis; Mr Peter Watson; Mr Terry Redman

figures from a number of sources. I think that what we should have here is some accountability from the minister. I think that if the minister is honest and accountable, at the very least she will table the amounts of money that every high school in this state has been billed for SIDE courses this year, because the bills have gone out only in the past couple of months and they are significant. Principals are telling me that they had not been expecting bills of this magnitude. They certainly had not planned on this expenditure as part of their school budget process. I am told that Merredin Senior High School received a bill for \$25 000. I believe that Northam Senior High School has received a bill for some \$37 000. That is a \$37 000 bill for Northam and other country high schools like it. There are many in the member for Collie–Preston’s electorate and the Bunbury electorate, and in all the country electorates. For example, I have been contacted by Newton Moore Senior High School, where students who are doing French this year through SIDE have been told that it will not be on offer to them next year because the school will be charged \$1 000 per child who does it. I do not know whether the minister thinks that this is an acceptable outcome, but that example hit home with me. This is a time when people acknowledge the importance of learning other languages and the great benefit to young people in our state of being able to learn another language. They have received great encouragement from the Deputy Prime Minister of this country to study another language, to travel and to learn more about the world. The opportunities that it can provide them with in their lives and businesses in the future are phenomenal. It is a disgrace that in a state as wealthy as ours this minister and this government would deny those children that opportunity. The choice for parents who have children studying French at Newton Moore in year 11 this year and who would like those children to go on to year 12 is perhaps to send them to boarding school or to a school in the metropolitan area or to make them travel some further distance to another school in the south west where that subject is on offer. I do not see why they should have to do that. Students have for years and years and decades and decades effectively been doing these subjects through SIDE. I highlighted Merredin Senior High School’s \$25 000 bill, or thereabouts, and Northam Senior High School’s \$37 000 bill. Metropolitan schools have received significant bills. I ask the minister if she will provide a list of the bills that have gone out to schools.

Will the Minister for Education and member for Churchlands be honest and accountable to this house and provide a list of the bills that have gone out to schools?

Dr E. Constable: I will answer that when I speak.

Mrs M.H. ROBERTS: Has the minister no standards of openness and accountability?

Dr E. Constable: I will answer that when I speak.

Mrs M.H. ROBERTS: The minister is going to have to provide the information sooner or later, so why will she not undertake to provide it now?

Dr E. Constable: I did not say I would not do that. I said I will answer that when I speak. You are having your turn. I will have my turn.

Mrs M.H. ROBERTS: The minister is truly hopeless. I urge the minister not to leave the chamber. I want to read out a letter from Kalamunda Senior High School. I want the minister to listen to this, because she always denies what I am saying. She always says it is scaremongering; it is not happening. I do not think this minister would know if her head was on fire, because she does not seem to know anything about what is happening in schools. I want to read a letter from Kalamunda Senior High School that went out to the parents of a student in year 11. The Premier should also listen very closely to this, because I do not think he can be very proud of this. The letter reads —

Dear Mr and Mrs —

I have deleted the name —

I am writing to you regarding ... —

I have deleted the child’s name —

course selection for Year 12 in 2011. ... is one of 7 Year 11 students doing one of their courses through SIDE.

In previous years schools were able to enrol a number of students through SIDE at no cost to the home school. In 2010 the Education Department is charging schools to enrol students in SIDE courses.

The minister is just chatting away to the Premier. She is not interested in what is happening to kids at Kalamunda high and throughout the state. The letter continues —

The cost for each student is \$1,000 and the \$10,130 for 2010 (7 Year 11 students and 3 Year 12 students) is being taken from our next school grant payment.

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Although this poses a financial impact on us for 2010 we will pay the \$10,130 to ensure students can complete Year 11.

Unfortunately we will not be able to carry this cost in 2011. As a consequence your child will need to select their courses from those that we can offer in the school.

I am disappointed that this has occurred, as I believe SIDE offers a wonderful service in allowing students to do a wider variety of subjects than schools can offer.

If you would like to discuss your child's choice for 2011, please contact either our Senior School Deputy, Mr Carlos Notarpietro or myself at school.

Your sincerely

Mrs Kathy Ritchie

Principal

28 April 2010

This written advice confirms all the verbal advice that I have had from schools throughout our state, and also from parents. Parents have been told that in year 12, their child will not be able to continue in a subject that they are doing in year 11, because the school has been sent the bill for that course. I do not know about the member for Wagin or the other members of the National Party, but I can tell them this: the schools in their areas will be significantly affected by this decision. Merredin District high School—I am not sure if the member for Wagin has heard this—has been sent a bill for \$25 000. Northam District High School has been sent, I am told, a bill for \$37 000. I am told that some country high schools have been sent bills for in excess of \$50 000. This money is coming directly out of their school grant. The letter from Mrs Ritchie make that clear. I have spoken to other principals. I have not spoken to Mrs Ritchie. This letter was given to the member for Forrestfield by the parents of a child who goes to Kalamunda Senior High School. Those parents clearly are not happy. Why should parents have to send their child to a different school for year 12, and either put their child on a bus or make the choice to board their child somewhere, when their child should be able continue to go to the local school and do SIDE? I ask the minister what she is going to do about this and how this is going to be resolved. We will see what happens with Mrs Ritchie. As I said to the Premier, a lot of the principals I have spoken to do not want to be directly quoted. They do not want their school to be singled out. Mrs Ritchie is not alone. Her response is the response of every principal I have spoken to.

Mr C.J. Barnett: Did she give you permission to use her name in Parliament?

Mrs M.H. ROBERTS: No, she did not. It is interesting. The Premier seems to be more interested in cover-up than anything else. He does not think I should have used Mrs Ritchie's name without her permission. The fact of the matter is that this is a letter that has gone to the parents of a student at a public school. The Premier and his government are running down public schools in our state. This government, if it stays in office for much longer, will be the ruination of public schools in our state. This minister and this Premier have slashed the budgets of public schools. They are cutting out courses that were previously available at district high schools. They are attempting to force parents to either send their kids to a boarding school, or send them on a long bus trip to a senior high school. The minister says that parents were consulted. They were not. Even the director general says that parents were not consulted. The minister denies that that is happening, yet we know that it is happening.

Last week in Parliament I raised a number of examples of what is occurring. An upper house committee is looking into this very matter. This is not even sensible cost cutting, because I think what will emerge is that the comparatively paltry amount of money that will be saved by cutting what the minister calls the senior school allocation will not end up being a saving at all, particularly if the students involved opt to catch a bus. In another furphy that the minister perpetrated last week, she said that there are existing bus services, and there will be no extra cost in sending these children to senior high schools. I have been told that some of these bus services do not run at the appropriate times, and that some of these services no longer exist. I am told that on some of these bus services, all the seats on the bus are already taken; so there are no extra seats. There does not appear to have been any homework done on that aspect.

Interestingly, the government has a royalties for regions program through which it claims it is spending more money in the regions. I am not sure that that is not money that has just been re-badged. I can tell members that this government is very, very bad for education in the regions. Under this government, more and more year 11 and 12 students will be forced to board in the metropolitan area or forced to board at major centres in the country. More and more students will be forced to travel long distances on buses to do years 11 and 12. Students who do not happen to go to a wonderful school like Churchlands Senior High School, or a school in the Premier's electorate, which have a vast array of year 11 and 12 options on offer, and who want to do languages

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and subjects like physics, will not be given that opportunity at schools at which they have previously had the opportunity to do those subjects through the Schools of Isolated and Distance Education.

I believe that options should be available to parents at those country and metropolitan schools. This school in Kalamunda is not alone. I have heard that other metropolitan schools have received similar bills and they have given similar advice to parents that they simply will not be able to wear the cost. They will not be taking \$10 000 or more out of their own school budget. The students will either be forced to not study a language or a subject such as physics or chemistry as it is not on offer at this school, or go elsewhere. I do not think that is acceptable. There is a very easy answer to this. The easy answer is to retain the status quo. We should allow those students at Merredin, Northam, Newton Moore, Kalamunda and assorted other schools in the metropolitan and country areas to continue to have students enrolled in SIDE. I ask the Premier to not charge the schools \$1 000 per subject per student enrolled in SIDE. I think it is a disgrace. It restricts education and opportunity for young people in this state. This is a wealthy state. It is a state that can and should do better, not worse. The Premier should be appalled at the decision that has been made by his minister and by her department.

MR T.G. STEPHENS (Pilbara) [4.31 pm]: I rise to support the motion moved by the shadow Minister for Education, because unfortunately great damage has been done to the educational fabric of Western Australia. This motion highlights the fact that bills have been sent out to parents of students who are enrolled in Schools of Isolated and Distance Education courses.

Mr C.J. Barnett: To parents?

Mr T.G. STEPHENS: Yes, effectively to parents through the schools.

Mr C.J. Barnett: No, it's not.

Mr T.G. STEPHENS: The Premier will have the opportunity to reply.

Mr C.J. Barnett: You're actually wrong on your first premise. Your opening sentence is incorrect.

Mr T.G. STEPHENS: Related to the damage that is being done to the educational portfolio by the Minister for Education is this reliance upon SIDE for the delivery of education for remote communities, not only those that have been referred to in this debate so far but also other locations. Today I had a call from a community desperate for the help of its local member of Parliament. The community pointed out that two of its students are required to enrol in SIDE courses. A truck arrived in the Patjarr community to pick up its whole classroom, its teacher's house and its toilet block. Ten students were photographed beside the truck today. I will pass the names across —

Mr J.J.M. Bowler: There hasn't been more than two for the whole year, and you know that.

Mr T.G. STEPHENS: I will pass this list to the member. He should not become a defender of an inept minister.

Mr J.J.M. Bowler: I'm just saying that's a mistruth and a misrepresentation. There hasn't been more than two in any day this year, and you know it. They may have 10 for a photo but they've had only two students there all year.

Mr T.G. STEPHENS: I would like this list to be passed to the member for Kalgoorlie.

Mr J.J.M. Bowler: You know that's dishonest.

Mr T.G. STEPHENS: The member for Kalgoorlie is doing that community a disservice. Today they sent me, through their advisor, the names of 10 students within that community, two of whom are expected to rely upon SIDE support. Two of them have enrolled in SIDE. The member can pass that list to the education minister. I am not proposing to make those names public. They are the names of 10 students. Two of them are connected to the awful tragedy that we have all just seen displayed in reference to the treatment of people in that area with the loss of that life in that part of that world and the destabilisation of that community. Ten students sat out there in that remote community today while the truck rolled in and picked up their classroom, their teacher's accommodation and the toilet block. It amounted to \$325 000 of expense. Those facilities were taken away from those students and taken to other locations, leaving behind no capacity within that community, no telephone link, no computing facilities and no internet facilities. The educational support worker who delivers education to those 10 students leaves at the end of this week in the absence of ongoing support for the needs of that school. Today on Sorry Day that has compounded the reasons why that community will be sorry about being citizens of Western Australia while this government and this minister are damaging the fabric of the educational structure of Western Australia. All I can do is rely upon the advice that I get from that community. Today that is the advice that I have, with the list of those 10 names of students who have been in that community, some of them for a considerable period. Two of them arrived back in that community this week.

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Mr J.J.M. Bowler: That's in your electorate, but, as you know, the rest of the community is in my electorate. They've advised me quietly and behind the scenes that they support the moves, saying Patjarr is unsustainable.

Mr T.G. STEPHENS: That might be the view of people outside the Patjarr community. It is clearly the view in the education portfolio but it is not the view of the community whose school is being taken away by this minister.

My argument in support of the motion that is before the house today is to take this most urgent opportunity to draw this matter to the attention of the minister. I hope that the member has passed the list of 10 names of students within that community to the education minister. Two of those students have been told to enrol and rely upon SIDE for their services. I do not know whether that service will be billed out to the students in that community through some extension of this user-pays process that seems to be rolling out while this minister is in charge of education. Certainly some of the students have been told that if they want education, they should go to Coolgardie. Other students have been told to enrol in the School of the Air, but apparently it was unable to provide them with any support or facilities to deliver education.

Today is Sorry Day. We have heard this government bleat from the other side of the house about its compassion and interest in Aboriginal affairs. All I would say to members is that it is not on display in the education portfolio under this minister in reference to the Patjarr community, whose classroom was removed, whose teacher's accommodation was removed and even whose toilet block was removed. I do not think that is good enough for 10 students.

Mr J.J.M. Bowler: Member for Pilbara, do you concede that this is the only day in the year they've had more than two? Isn't it a coincidence that when they go to take the school away for the photo opportunity another eight turn up?

Mr T.G. STEPHENS: The member is not right. I am talking about my electorate, not the electorate of the member for Kalgoorlie. The advice that I have had is from those people in my electorate. It wedges right down to the bottom end of my electorate and it is not a place that I can visit regularly. However, all I can rely upon is the advice of the community. The consistent advice that I have received this year from that community is that there has been destabilisation in that community as a result of the death of the man in the back of that police van. Gradually, the opportunity has re-established itself. Now today 10 students are finally in place, only two of whom arrived at the beginning of the week. The other eight have been there for extended periods this year.

Mr J.J.M. Bowler: That's not true.

Mr T.G. STEPHENS: It is true.

Mr J.J.M. Bowler: Are you saying that eight attended on one day?

Mr T.G. STEPHENS: There were 10 students in that school today. The school has been taken away from them. The school has not been allowed to accept enrolments this year. Children in that community who have tried to enrol have been told they cannot enrol because there is no school there. They cannot enrol in the Department of Education's facilities. They have been refused enrolment in the place where they live.

Mr J.J.M. Bowler: I find that hard to believe.

Mr T.G. STEPHENS: It is the truth, as it is put to me by that community. I have not found Aboriginals in these remote communities prone to telling lies to their local member of Parliament. All I can do is advocate on their behalf in the face of what is a growingly heartless government, as displayed by this education minister in the handling and the carriage of her portfolio. I believe that it is my job to position the argument of that community. I beg the member to butt out. It is my job and it is part of my electorate. If the member is supporting the closure of the school that is not in his electorate, he is doing my electorate and the people in my electorate a disservice. He should butt out. I will not argue for the shutting down of facilities in his electorate. He should not do it to mine. It is my job to represent that community, not the member's.

Mr J.J.M. Bowler: The people at Warburton, which is the headquarters of that community, tell me they support the closure of the school. It is in my electorate.

Mr T.G. STEPHENS: The headquarters might, but the community does not. All that means is that the community that puts the case to me is entitled to expect me to put its case to the Minister for Education in Parliament, and not for the member for Kalgoorlie to interrupt any further.

Mr J.J.M. Bowler: I won't interrupt any further, but if you tell me to butt out, I will keep on interrupting. Take your choice. You can spend the rest of this time debating with me and not the minister. What do you want?

The DEPUTY SPEAKER: Member for Kalgoorlie!

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Mr T.G. STEPHENS: During question time I put to the Minister for Education the arguments that have been put to me, most recently by contact via emails from that community. They have said to me, yet again, that there are now 10 students within that community. Places such as Sandstone and Gascoyne Junction have schools that have been protected by this Parliament because they had 10 non-Aboriginal kids in attendance. If it is good enough for the white students at places like Gascoyne Junction and Sandstone to have a school that meets their needs, it should be good enough for the Patjarr community, rather than being subject to directions that they must enrol in SIDE for their education. That is the subject of this motion. If I am to believe the arguments I have heard on this side of the house, it is a process that places these communities at risk of receiving bills for their education, which is different from the process that was previously on offer to them.

I hope that I will get the chance to go back to that far southern part of my electorate and visit Patjarr fairly soon; I hope to be accompanied by anyone with an interest in meeting with the 10 students there and try to get to the bottom of it. Apparently the school facility that was put there, presumably with commonwealth government funds to assist the state in the delivery of education services to the Patjarr community, has simply been lifted up on a truck and shunted off elsewhere by a heartless minister who is doing damage to the delivery of education from one end of Western Australia to the other. I am annoyed with the Minister for Education over her handling of her portfolio; if ever there were a portfolio that is fundamental to the delivery of good to the people of Western Australia, it is the education portfolio, but it requires the deployment of focus, competence, compassion and intelligence to respond to the challenges of education, and that is not on offer from this minister. That has been evidenced by the arguments put by the lead speaker in this debate in reference to the SIDE issue, of which the Patjarr community is now a sideshow, because some of those students are being directed to participate in SIDE.

MR A.J. WADDELL (Forrestfield) [4.42 pm]: I rise in support of this motion. This matter was brought to my attention recently when I was contacted by a constituent who, quite frankly, was at the end of his tether. His daughter was enrolled at a school in a neighbouring electorate, and the member for Midland has indicated that he received a letter from the principal that essentially meant that her dreams and hopes of a future in veterinary science would probably be dashed. This is a young lady who had worked very hard for the first 11 years of her schooling with this particular dream in mind. In order to achieve enrolment at her preferred university, she would have had to take a certain number of prerequisite subjects, but, unfortunately, the school in which she was enrolled was unable to offer all the prerequisite subjects in a manner in which she could take them. They were, in fact, all offered, but they were not offered on a timetable or grid that she could manage. As a consequence, she was enrolled in the SIDE program.

I was not exceptionally familiar with the SIDE program; many people in the metropolitan area may not be familiar with it. I imagine that most members who represent country constituencies are extremely familiar with it. The Schools of Isolated and Distance Education is the centre for distance learning in the Western Australian Department of Education, and it was created through the amalgamation of the Distance Education Centre and the five Schools of the Air. According to its website, its goals are to look after kindergarten to year 12 students; full-time students unable to attend a conventional school due to geographic location or isolation; Western Australian students travelling Australia or the world on a long-term basis with their parents; Western Australian students whose local high school does not offer the subjects they wish to study, or does not offer a timetable that allows them to join the class; students suffering from long-term illnesses; and part-time adult students undertaking courses to improve their education and employment options. This is an organisation that has clearly been set up to help people who, for one reason or another—geographical isolation, illness, travel and a range of other reasons—are unable to attend a conventional school. These are often children who are disadvantaged in some way, so it is an excellent program, designed to assist them.

As I said, I was approached by a constituent on this matter. I understand that there are in excess of 30 students in my electorate who are enrolled in the SIDE program, and that each of the high schools has been subjected to this charge. In fact, as the member for Midland stated, the high school in question is Kalamunda Senior High School, which is not, in fact, in my electorate, but a large number of students who reside in the High Wycombe and Maida Vale areas travel up the hill to that school.

Mr C.J. Barnett: Do you know what the particular subject was?

Mr A.J. WADDELL: Yes, I do; it was biology, I believe. In fact, for the benefit of the house, I will read the letter that was sent to me by the constituent. It was in fact CC'd to me; it was sent to the member for Kalamunda, as will become apparent.

Dr E. Constable: What was the date of the letter?

Mr A.J. WADDELL: The date of the letter is 17 May.

It states —

Extract from Hansard

[ASSEMBLY - Wednesday, 26 May 2010]

p3468c-3487a

Mrs Michelle Roberts; Mr Tom Stephens; Mr Andrew Waddell; Mr Mick Murray; Dr Elizabeth Constable; Mr Colin Barnett; Deputy Speaker; Mr Joe Francis; Mr Peter Watson; Mr Terry Redman

Dear Mr Day

We are writing to you to express our concern regarding a recent decision of the Department of Education and Training (DET) to charge schools for students undertaking Schools of Isolated and Distance Education (SIDE) subjects.

This decision was conveyed to us in a letter from the Principal of Kalamunda Senior High School (KSHS) where our daughter is studying Year 11 biology as a SIDE subject (due to clashes with other subjects in the study grid line) to ensure she has prerequisites to enrol in tertiary veterinary studies. A subsequent meeting with the Principal has indicated that the school will fund the cost of the \$1000 per student in 2010 (as this has already been taken out of their school grant) but will not be funding such in 2011. This means that our daughter will not be able to complete her biology studies in Year 12 at KSHS. How can she be motivated to perform in Year 11 biology if she is aware that she will not be able to undertake the subject in Year 12?

Although we do not know the details of the decision of DET, it is clear that this is about the ongoing inability of the Department to effectively manage significant funding reductions being imposed by the Government. When both the Principals of SIDE and KSHS were questioned on the breakdown of this charge they were unable to clarify the basis of it. It is clear that it has not taken into account the input and support that the KSHS puts into the program and in fact is contrary to the subjected charges of the SIDE website which show an enrolment cost of \$50. It is clear that it would be better to enrol direct with SIDE rather than through KSHS. We believe this has been suggested but has been dismissed by DET.

As parents who support public schooling and want our children to succeed, we believe the decision is very short sighted both for our daughter and future students who need to undertake SIDE studies to fit into study grids. As discussed with the Principal we need to look at options so that our daughter can continue to study biology in Year 12. One option is to canvas sponsorship and associated advertising to fund this. Although you may think this is a drastic measure, we are sure that some sponsors would jump at the opportunity to fund this as part of their community involvement as well as for the coverage they would receive from the local and state media. We are sure this is not the image the government would like portrayed regarding public schooling in this state.

As the local member, a community representative on the KSHS School Council, and also a Minister in the current government, we believe you have the ability and means to ensure that appropriate funding is allocated for students to undertake SIDE study to complete their educational direction.

Your response to this issue would be greatly appreciated before we consider what options are available to us.

That letter was copied to me and to Ms Sharryn Jackson. I do not criticise the member for Kalamunda for not responding to the letter; he may have responded to it by now. He had not responded the last time I spoke to the parents. However, it was sent on 17 May. I understand, from the level of correspondence that comes through my office, that that is a short time. However, when I received the letter by email, I put down my evening meal at the time and picked up the phone and spoke to those parents. There are very few things that actually incense me as much as that letter incensed me. It incensed me because I am often reminded of the few opportunities for people in my area of the world. Education is one of the ways in which people can get themselves out of a constant cycle of poverty where there are low expectations in the community. We need to encourage students to seek their ultimate capacity; we need to encourage them to seek their goals; and we need to encourage them to pursue their dreams. We can do that through education. This cost is a slap in the face for those students. It angered me because it is \$1 000 per subject in the context of the budget that we are dealing with here; that is, \$30 000 within my electorate. I am sure it will impact greatly on the member for Collie–Preston's electorate. I am sure that it will greatly affect all the electorates of National Party members, yet \$430 million in unallocated funds is sitting in the royalties for regions program. If we consider this cost is \$1 000 per subject, we could fund 430 000 subjects with that unallocated \$430 million in royalties for regions.

National Party members stand in this place every day and crow about how they are for regions, about how they are for supporting people in the regions and about how they are for ensuring that people in the regions get their fair share, yet there is evidence in this budget that the government is ripping out from families in the regions the very basics that they should expect. It is not a lot to ask that children get the education they deserve. They should not have to expect to pay fees like this to receive the kind of education for which they are asking.

When I was at university, I got involved in student politics because of the introduction of a \$250 administration fee. At that time higher education was free. As students, we were out there shouting and screaming about this

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little \$250 fee and how it was the end of the world. Everyone laughed at us and said, "It's only \$250; you should count your blessings." Indeed they were right; we should have counted our blessings. We were saying back then, when we were rallying against the \$250 administration fee, that this was the thin end of the wedge. Indeed it was the thin end of the wedge, because shortly after the \$250 fee came the higher education contribution scheme. HECS has continued to go up and up and now there are students who are leaving university with tens and tens of thousands of dollars of debt to their name.

This cost is the thin end of the wedge. This is saying to our communities that we expect you to start paying more for your public schooling. This is saying to kids, when they make their subject selections, "You had better think carefully about what you want to do, because it might affect your parents who you hear arguing about their inability to pay their increasing electricity bills and who you hear arguing about the fact that they don't have enough money to pay the water bill that is going up. Are you going to put extra pressure on them by selecting a topic that you know is going to create a conflict in the grid and therefore you might be enrolled in SIDE and therefore they're going to be hit with this \$1 000? No; you will do the right thing and you'll not choose those things. You'll lower your expectations." That is my fear—that this cost will force people who have already low expectations to continue lowering their expectations. This is the thin end of the wedge. This is a disgrace. We are a wealthy state. We can afford this. We do not need to attack the people who are least able to defend themselves. This really shows what this government is about.

MR M.P. MURRAY (Collie–Preston) [4.54 pm]: I also rise to speak along similar lines to previous speakers.

What a disgrace is happening here! Western Australia has been a showcase to the world in the way free education has been provided to our children for many years, and here we go—we are collapsing the education system. We are bringing it back to centralisation so that if students do not travel, they will not get the education they wish for. Although we all know that students in some communities are not able to attend the top-of-the-range classes, they will not be able to attend the class they wish through the Schools of Isolated and Distance Education. That, in itself, is a compromise for our education system. However, the way we are headed here is certainly a lot further than that. It is incumbent on every member of this chamber to make every effort possible to give students and children the chance that others have had for an education.

I can tell members that the first SIDE arrangement that came into Collie was not well accepted. However, people there copped it because they could foresee that it would keep the school and the students in the community going. Now that has been taken away as well. I just cannot believe the cuts to education by this Minister for Education; I really cannot. There is still time for her to change her mind and retrieve the situation. When I was first alerted to this, I had to check whether it was true. Six or seven students in one class getting an education are not always part of just one class. There might be six or seven students in another class, but when they come back together, the class is probably 10, 15 or even 20 children, and they are learning and, really, assisting within the school grounds, thereby ensuring that teacher numbers are still at the right levels. Once the numbers in schools drop off, people move on. It is similar to what happens in years 11 and 12: once those classes collapse—people move on and move out of the towns as well.

I have said before in this place that once a school collapses, the community collapses. I foresee that happening very quickly if these cuts to education go ahead, because at the moment students can get the education they want. Most people accept that they have to move from a remote area for university studies. They might have to move to a community such as Bunbury, or even to Perth, to find a course that suits their needs. Most students come to Perth and start their studies at the University of Western Australia and other universities around the place. That is accepted. However, here we are asking people who cannot get the specialist studies in their communities, to relocate to communities that have changed in the past 20 years. Health and safety is another problem in these communities. When we send away young kids who have just turned 17 years of age, they go out in their cars and drive along country roads. What a disaster happened the other week for young people who were going home from TAFE in Bunbury! I do not want to bring that matter into this debate.

Dr E. Constable: Terrible.

Mr M.P. MURRAY: I see the Minister for Education shaking her head. But we must remember that those people were going home from their studies in Bunbury. We do not want to see that sort of thing happen again. Why did they have to do their studies in Bunbury? It was because their courses were not available in their community. We do not want to see that happen again—ever. That is why courses of study should be available in towns of any size.

Another thing I note is that principals are very reluctant to speak out. They have a clause in their contracts that they must keep their issues internal. Why are they reluctant to speak out? It is because they will be punished in the future. They will be punished by not being sent to where they would like to go. There will be a black dot on

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their résumé to indicate that they should not be listened to because they brought out through the back door issues that were happening in schools. No-one has been up-front and honest in this debate. The information on what is happening in schools has leaked out. Now we have heard members quote in Parliament a few letters that people have sent out about what is going on. I have been told that the charge for these SIDE courses for students is \$1 100. Yes, it is expensive, but what value do we put on education? Most people in this place have been very lucky to have had an education, and it was probably propped up by their parents in one way or another. Many people do not have the financial status to be able to pay for their children's education. What happens then? It drives them to other schools. We are privatising our schools by stealth. We are sending these children away from public schools to private schools that will provide their education, or we are sending them to other schools in other towns. That is very wrong.

We have heard about year 11 and 12 students in country areas who now have to take longer bus trips to get to school. It is good to see that there are two National Party members in this place. It is a shame that those members have not stuck up for the availability of education in country towns. As the previous speaker said, \$400-odd million is unallocated, yet we cannot find \$1 000 for each student. We must not forget that not all students at these schools need that \$1 000; in some cases, only five students at each school need it. That amount is absolutely nothing in that context. If National Party members cannot give a hand in those areas, it just goes to show that royalties for regions has gone to the pack. Education is one of the base planks of country towns.. I do not care how hard we need to work to make sure that education is available.

Let us talk about Narrogin. What would happen if the education system in that town collapsed? We have seen a number of social problems arise over the past few years. Some of those problems are similar to the problems in Collie. In recent times, that town has had its bump, and it swaps around. Surely the member can see the value of keeping these kids at school. They need studies that suit their requirements. It is hopeless trying to get kids into a class that they do not want to participate in. They become disruptive and cause problems, or, in many cases, they simply do not turn up. How are we going to educate these kids? We need those classes. If it costs \$1 000 per student, so what? That is a very minor amount compared with the problems that could be caused later on with health issues, social issues, vandalism and so on. If these kids are not occupied, we will have those problems and the costs will be seen in other areas.

Some schools, one of which is in my electorate, have been sent bills of around \$30 000 for the education of children. That money has not been budgeted for, so where are those schools going to get the money? Will they have to hold sausage sizzles and chook raffles to keep their schools open? I do not think that should be the case. This money should be paid for by the government. It is what we pay our taxes for. The Department of Education should have the freedom to be able to do that with its budget, because it is not happening at the moment. I remember the holier than thou attitude that the minister had when she sat on this side of the house. She had plenty to say on issues like this. I know that very well and I admired her for having her say. She has swapped sides, she has changed her alliances and she is not doing her job for the children of this state. That really disappoints me. She certainly kept the house in a lot better order when she sat on this side because of the standards she set. But, by gee, her standards are dropping very quickly. It is disappointing that I have to have backdoor meetings with principals and schoolteachers about this issue, because they are too scared to stand at the front of their school and talk about it in case they get into trouble. I think it is a blight on the system. If we cannot talk about this issue and we cannot work it out, who is going to lose? Our communities will lose. We will lose our freedom of speech. Our children will lose their future. That is probably the strongest way I can put it. They will think, "My headmaster wasn't game to stand up for me, and the P&C is a bit worried because it might cause its funds to dry up, yet I want my education but I'm not game to yell out loudly because there may be another impact."

We have talked about years 11 and 12. Why has the National Party not yelled and screamed and said that more Schools of Isolated and Distance Education courses are needed so that we can keep those classes open. We need to keep our communities going so that we are not left with just signposts, as has happened in many country communities. I have heard the argument that country communities will lose their identities if the shire council amalgamations go ahead. Let us see how quickly a community loses its identity if it loses its school. It will happen a lot more quickly than it will with an amalgamation.

A number of people travel up and down the hill at Collie. Some of them are paying \$80 a week to travel to their special education classes.

Dr E. Constable: We're still working on that one.

Mr M.P. MURRAY: The minister says that she is working on that. I am glad that she is not working on my car and charging me 60 bucks an hour, because that would be a very large bill! I rang those people last week and they have not heard where we are headed with that.

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Dr E. Constable: Some of them have heard.

Mr M.P. MURRAY: Some of them have? I rang them because I do my follow-ups on these issues, and some of them definitely had not heard last week. Does the minister see the point? It is the same thing. It costs \$80 a week to go to their special classes, yet the government is squibbing at paying \$1 000 a year per student. The impost has been put on others who wish to go outside that system for a particular type of education class. As another speaker said, they might want to be a vet or a doctor. Why should we penalise those people? There is no sense to that. I realise that we must have regulations so that parents do not take their children out of a school that is quite good because of personality problems with the teachers or just allow their children to swap schools willy-nilly. Again, the government is running away from the issue rather than fixing it up.

The government is not able to provide education in Collie, a town with a population of roughly 9 000 people. Where do we go next? Do we start to say that it is cheaper to close the schools in Bunbury and move the students to Perth? I refer to the Premier's future dream of superschools. It will mean that kids will have to travel and live away from home. If we think about the breakdowns that occur within our communities now, this will certainly increase the problems suffered by young children who move away from home early in their life.

The silence from the National Party is deafening. There is \$400-odd million in the budget, yet we cannot provide \$1 000 to these students. However, we can find money for plastic cows, talking toilets, a kiln for a ladies' group and a wood lathe for a wood-turners' group. I could go on and on. The basics of our children's education are being left behind. This is something that we should take stock of. It is something that the Premier should take control of because if he does not, it will bounce back. Country communities are starting to jump up and down about other issues on which they have been overlooked. There is more to this state than just the north west. We need to understand that a lot of the state's economy also comes from the South West and the Great Southern. It is extremely disappointing that the support is not going back to those regions. Certainly, that is the heartland of the National Party, whose members sit in this place and say nothing about this issue. It is going to go on; it is not going to go away.

Mr D.T. Redman interjected.

Mr M.P. MURRAY: It will bounce back in the future. The person who has his mouth open now is on a very fine margin when the preferences are taken away. If I were him, I would stand up today and really fight for these people's future. It is something that he has not done thus far, and I look forward to what he has to say in this house very shortly.

DR E. CONSTABLE (Churchlands — Minister for Education) [5.09 pm]: I am really pleased to —

Mr M.P. Murray: Is there nothing from the National Party members?

Dr E. CONSTABLE: I go first. Is that all right?

Mr M.P. Murray: National Party members are weak. You let those kids down.

The DEPUTY SPEAKER: Order, member for Collie–Preston.

Dr E. CONSTABLE: I am very happy to respond to the opposition speakers on this motion about the Schools of Isolated and Distance Education courses that are available to senior high schools.

The member for Forrestfield gave an interesting background of SIDE and where it came from. I tried to get some history of this before the debate. In talking to the Premier as a former Minister for Education, we think that probably the antecedents go back to about the 1930s. As the member for Forrestfield said, it was in about 1955 that the five campuses of the School of the Air and other services were combined under the Schools of Isolated and Distant Education. At that time it was considered that there was a need for it.

What is interesting about this debate—it will unfold as I continue my comments—is that the character, the need for learning and the courses that SIDE now provides might make us think before long about changing the name from the Schools of Isolated and Distant Education to one that is more appropriate. The list that the member for Midland asked for, and which I will table shortly, suggests that almost every metropolitan and regional senior high school in this state is using the online services that are provided.

Some very interesting and rapid changes in technology dovetail into the changes that we have seen over the past few years with the new curriculum for years 11 and 12 course. All 52 courses could not be offered by any one school. The view is that if a large high school can offer somewhere around 15 to 20 courses, that school is providing a good choice and suite of courses. We are finding that SIDE has provided a great service to smaller schools and even larger schools when a student might want to do a language, as the member for Midland and other members pointed out, or a subject such as ancient history if it is not offered at the school. SIDE provides a great service in cases of a problem on a gridline and a student really wants or needs to do some subject for his or her future. The need for online learning through the use of technology is making a huge difference to what

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students can be offered and the way schools will be organised and run in the future. The developments are very exciting.

Later I will mention the Twomey report, which was commissioned when the Labor Party was in government. In that report, Lance Twomey refers to online learning, using technology to deliver learning and how something needs to be done about it. That is exactly what this government is doing.

SIDE is used by people living in remote areas and in small communities. For many years, primary schools have been the main user of SIDE because of languages other than English, and that has come about, as all members know, from the shortage of teachers of those subjects. Primary schools are not charged for that because of the need for that service.

More recently, with changes to the 52 courses now being implemented, more and more senior high schools and other schools have been taking up the services of SIDE. What we see and what I have been trying to describe is a change in context for SIDE. Education has changed dramatically in the past decade and SIDE has been able to adapt to provide more services across the state. We find an increasing range of demands impacting on the capacity to deliver high-level programs to all students in all schools across the state; I refer to changing demographics, to students having more diverse needs and to a range of needs covering students' interests in vocational education and training and tertiary-bound units. Students feel that the new courses available at the universities are courses they want to have a go at. Students with disabilities often make use of SIDE further in their schooling. The linking between school training and employment is one of those things that is a changing landscape. Part of that changing landscape is, of course, the 50-odd new courses in senior secondary schooling.

Another thing that makes a difference is, from time to time, teacher shortages. Currently we are in a good situation. We know from projection work that in the next three, four or five years across Australia there probably will be teacher shortages, particularly in mathematics and languages other than English. We have an ageing workforce. We know that some courses will be short of teachers and SIDE will continue to play a big part in providing online learning to many students.

All of these issues provide challenges for this government as it plans education for the future. This government's aim, which from what members opposite have said in this debate appears to be the opposition's aim, is to provide the best possible opportunities for all years 11 and 12 students as we move forward. The core in education is for the government to plan well.

I mentioned the Twomey report. Lance Twomey, in his report, looked at online learning and the need for the use of technology that must make a difference to the delivery of education. In 2007 he made comments to the effect that this state was not doing it well and much needed to be done.

Mrs M.H. Roberts: It has got a lot worse under you.

Dr E. CONSTABLE: I have not finished. When I have finished the member for Midland can comment. I did not interrupt the member and she should not interrupt me.

Mrs M.H. Roberts interjected.

The DEPUTY SPEAKER: Order, member for Midland!

Dr E. CONSTABLE: I understand that interjecting is disorderly and I do not have to answer questions when the member is speaking. The member's questions will be answered in my contribution.

The Twomey report makes reference to the fact that in 2007 the organisation of SIDE services and associated services was incoherent. It states that the current system is uncoordinated, minor in its impact on Western Australian education and substantially underfunded.

Mrs M.H. Roberts: How can it be made more coherent?

The DEPUTY SPEAKER: Member for Midland!

Dr E. CONSTABLE: I will come to that point in a moment and in my own time, member for Midland. The former government had this report from Lance Twomey, but did nothing about it. We are doing a lot about online learning and providing online services. We will continue to do so because we see it as a major factor in education in the future.

I did make a note of the member for Midland's earlier comments. I can assure her that when she said that all this is part of the cuts to budget, she was wrong. When she said that the government is transferring costs, again, she was wrong. The truth of the matter is that these students doing SIDE are double funded. They are funded when they are enrolled in SIDE, and they are fully funded for their school. They are double funded.

Mrs M.H. Roberts: Now you will charge the school. It is called double charging.

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The DEPUTY SPEAKER: Will the minister resume her seat. Member for Midland, will you please stop interjecting?

Dr E. CONSTABLE: We do not double fund patients in hospitals. We should not be double funding students in schools. SIDE is funded for its enrolments and the school gets fully funded for its enrolments. That means that government is paying twice, when perhaps it should not have to. It has already been said that the cost to do a course through SIDE is just over \$4 000 per student per course. As part of this process, a letter was sent to schools last November informing them that there would be a \$1 000 charge to offset some of those costs because of the double funding of students. When the opposition was in government, it had a policy that was almost the same as this government's policy. However, it was happy to double fund students doing SIDE and students at school. The Labor government's policy was that they should pay almost exactly —

Mrs M.H. Roberts: They have got them at school anyway. They have got to meet those costs. It is double charging.

Dr E. CONSTABLE: I do not think the member for Midland gets it.

Mrs M.H. Roberts: You are restricting students' choices. Have a look at the real impact.

The SPEAKER: Member for Midland!

Mrs M.H. Roberts: Sorry, Mr Deputy Speaker.

Dr E. CONSTABLE: The member for Midland just does not get it, does she? If we are funding a student to do a subject in a school, we employ a teacher and that has a cost attached to it. Schools get funding through their school grant. School grants are very interesting. I am sure that the member will be very interested when she sees the list to see what is in the bank balances of these schools, particularly Kalamunda Senior High School, which has \$1.4 million with still the second amount of funding to come. It is being asked, because of double funding, to pay a small amount of \$10 000 towards those costs for those students. In fact, it is able to retain 75 per cent, recognising that supervision and other services are needed for those children, but they are not marking, they are not teaching and they are not providing the work to students. They are not doing any of those things because Schools of Isolated and Distance Education is doing it. SIDE is doing that and the school is fully funded for a full course of that student. That is what is happening here. They are being double funded. That is what we are addressing. We are not cutting costs and we are not transferring costs. They are being funded twice, so we could not possibly be doing that.

I have a couple of examples, which might be quite interesting, at least to members on this side of the house, which I would now like to run through. I have an example of Kalamunda Senior High School. If we look at comparative costs between the policy that Labor had in government and the policy that is now in place this year, under the previous policy Kalamunda Senior High School —

Tabling of Document

Mrs M.H. ROBERTS: The minister is clearly reading from a lengthy typewritten document —

Dr E. Constable: My own notes.

Mrs M.H. ROBERTS: It is not handwritten and it is a lengthy typewritten document. I would ask her to table that, because I do not believe it is something she has prepared herself.

Mr C.J. BARNETT: Just on that point, if it is an official document, it is quite reasonable that it should be tabled, but from where I am standing these are clearly the minister's own notes. In any case, a simple courtesy would be to allow the minister to continue to use them. If you, Mr Deputy Speaker, wish to examine it later, it is not an official document. However, the minister should be able to continue her speech, using her notes. With respect, if you should wish to look at them later to see whether it is an official document, I am sure the minister will be quite agreeable for you to do so.

The DEPUTY SPEAKER: Minister, is the document you are referring to your notes or an official document?

Dr E. CONSTABLE: Mr Deputy Speaker, it is definitely my notes with my scribbles after I did some typing on a few pages.

The DEPUTY SPEAKER: There is no need to table those notes.

Debate Resumed

Dr E. CONSTABLE: I wanted to make some comparisons between the policy that was in place under the former government and the policy that is in place now in terms of the costs and how it would work. The previous government recognised the double funding. It had a policy that recognised the double funding. We will take

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Kalamunda Senior High School. It has 773 students. Under the previous government there was a rather complicated policy of providing a few free places and then charging the school for the rest. Kalamunda was judged to get five free enrolments in SIDE. There was then an additional cost for the school to pay after those five places were used up of .02 full-time equivalents per subject per student for the rest of the enrolments. Kalamunda has 10 enrolments in SIDE at the moment. The cost to Kalamunda in 2007 terms would have been \$7 236. The cost under the current government for each subject student would be .14 FTEs, or \$10 130. This is a school with a bank balance of over \$1.4 million and with several hundred thousand dollars of its second tranche of school grant to be paid in July. The sum of \$10 000 is a very small amount to be paying when a student is double funded.

Mr M.P. Murray: What about the schools that are not so well off?

Dr E. CONSTABLE: The member needs to see the list. Northam Senior High School had 35 subject enrolments in 2010. Under the policy of the previous government in 2007, because it was a country school it was allocated a quota of 12 free enrolments. The additional cost of .02 FTEs for the other 23 enrolments would be almost half a teacher's salary. The cost would be approximately \$33 385, which it should have paid to SIDE. The cost under the current government is \$35 456 —

Mrs M.H. Roberts: It is the first time they have got bills for SIDE. Are you denying that it is the first time they have got bills for SIDE?

Dr E. CONSTABLE: I am not denying that at all.

Mrs M.H. Roberts: That is my point.

Dr E. CONSTABLE: The previous government was quite happy to double fund students in schools, which is the most irresponsible budgeting that I can possibly think of. It was quite happily double funding these students in schools, which I think is an irresponsible waste of taxpayers' money.

Mrs M.H. Roberts: I think that double charging is obscene. That is what you are doing.

Dr E. CONSTABLE: We are not double charging. The member is just making that up. The bank balance at Northam Senior High School right now is \$670 000, with the second tranche of the school grant still to come in.

I want to take up the point that was made by the member for Forrestfield, because I am very concerned about the letter that he read. I think that it is absolutely abhorrent that a school would offer a biology subject through SIDE, allow a student to select it and then say that it is sorry that —

Mrs M.H. Roberts: It is because you have imposed a fee next year. Don't you get it?

Dr E. CONSTABLE: I get it.

Mrs M.H. Roberts: You have imposed a fee for this year and next year.

Dr E. CONSTABLE: I did not interrupt the member. I think it would be really nice if she would just button up for a little while.

Here is a school that was quite prepared to have a student double funded this year. It was told at the end of last November that there would be a charge of \$1 000 so that it could plan for it.

Mrs M.H. Roberts: You go picking on this school. It is happening at all the schools.

Dr E. CONSTABLE: The member picked on this school, too.

Mrs M.H. Roberts: I made that point. You know that. It is the same response for all the schools. Do not single it out.

The DEPUTY SPEAKER: Member for Midland, I call you now for the second time.

Dr E. CONSTABLE: I am responding to an issue raised by the member for Forrestfield, which I think is an extremely serious one. It is quite abhorrent for a school to offer a student year 11 SIDE when the student is being double funded and then say that, because it has to pay 25 per cent of the cost, it will not do it next year and the student cannot do it in year 12. I will be taking that issue up immediately with the director general. It is bad education and it is not fair to that student. I will not accept for one moment that that student should not be offered SIDE next year in that school. I am really pleased that the member raised it. If there are any other examples, would members please let me know? If nothing else comes out of this debate, it is that that issue has been raised. It is bad education for principals to be making decisions about students in that way because they think they should be double funded if a student does something on SIDE. More and more students will want to

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do subjects on SIDE as we move forward in the coming years. I am fully supportive of that. SIDE is providing excellent education for many students and will continue to do so.

I started by making some comments about how the landscape in education is changing and how we need to make sure that our online offerings continue to be good. We know from some of the research that was done last year on students who did English on SIDE in their final year that the average result for those students was higher than the state average. SIDE is a great product.

Mrs M.H. Roberts: They need to rake in a bit more money to improve it.

The DEPUTY SPEAKER: Order! The minister.

Dr E. CONSTABLE: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker.

SIDE does a great job. We are looking at how we can improve that, because we know that the one direction for us in the future is to continue to make sure that online learning is done well and that we harness all the best technologies in this vast state of ours so that students from the farthest points from Perth, as well as in Perth, are given the very best opportunities.

Mr T.G. Stephens: The minister did not even reply to a school that is desperately waiting for her response to its needs!

The DEPUTY SPEAKER: Order, member for Pilbara!

Tabling of Document

Mrs M.H. ROBERTS: Mr Deputy Speaker, the minister did say that she was going to table the list at the end of her speech. She has not done that. I was expecting a list of all the schools with SIDE and the amount in dollars that they are being charged this year.

Dr E. Constable: I will just check that it is in order, because it dropped onto the floor.

Mrs M.H. ROBERTS: Is that going to be tabled?

The DEPUTY SPEAKER: Order. If I may, just to get this out of the way, the document has now been tabled by the minister.

[See paper 2136.]

Debate Resumed

MR C.J. BARNETT (Cottesloe — Premier) [5.30 pm]: I want to make some comments on this motion. Can I just say that Western Australia has a very fine Minister for Education. Members opposite might want to think about what they are saying about this minister. We have a minister who has an impeccable background in education, and who is setting a standard in our government schools that I for one feel proud to see being put in place. Not only is she doing a very fine job as education minister, but also she is being a role model in education. The member for Midland should have a bit more respect. I am very pleased that Western Australia has an education minister of the calibre and experience and qualities of the one that we have right now.

Mr T.G. Stephens: Tell that to the community of Patjarr!

Mr R.F. Johnson: When were you last there?

The DEPUTY SPEAKER: Order, Minister for Police.

Mr C.J. BARNETT: I want to pick up on a couple of points the minister made. They were interesting observations, and they reflected a good contribution by the member for Forrestfield, who does raise some important points. There is no doubt that with the advancements in technology, what can be delivered through remote education—online education—is very different from what was possible just a few years ago. Who knows what will be possible in just a few more years—not only in the variety and quality of materials, and the audio and the visual, but also in what can be done to build the supports around that technology. That is important. We would be silly, in a state as big as Western Australia, not to take full advantage of advances in technology.

Secondly, as the minister pointed out, there are now 52 courses in the year 11 and 12 stream. Most of us—certainly those of us who are beyond the age of 50—can think back to the choice of subjects that we were offered. That choice was very limited, even in large high schools. A wide range of subjects is now available—52, as I have said. Therefore, even in a large high school, not all of those 52 courses will be available. In medium and smaller schools, if a student wants to do a particular course such as biology—as in the example mentioned by the member for Forrestfield—or a particular science course, a particular school may not be able to provide that course, for whatever reason. Not all schools, even the largest ones, provide every course. It may be a language course. Newton Moore Senior College was mentioned. I imagine that Newton Moore does offer a

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foreign language course. I do not know what it is. It may be Japanese. I do not know. Clearly it does not offer French. So if a student wants to do French, a student should have the option of doing French and using the existing course and the existing technology to do that. We should use technology that is available and allow students to have a choice beyond what is offered at the particular school that they attend. That provides more choice for students. It allows greater variety in their education.

Having said that—I would hope members would agree—we then need to look at the funding that goes into senior high schools. Schools are basically funded according to student enrolment. The money follows the student. The student enrolls in the school, and taxpayer funds, both state and commonwealth, follow the student to the school. If the student then exercises choice—for example, to do French through SIDE—it is only logical that that public funding will follow that student’s choice. That empowers the student to exercise that choice. In other words, the money that has gone to that high school—in this case, not even the full cost, but \$1 000—will follow the choice of the student to access a SIDE course. It is quite appropriate and quite logical that that should happen.

Mr E.S. Ripper: Except that the school budget is a bit rigid.

Mr C.J. BARNETT: No. As the minister has demonstrated in the papers she has tabled, schools have the funds to do this. Schools may make a decision that the number of enrolments in a course in their school is so small, or is so intermittent from one year to another, that they will not have a teacher in that particular discipline. That may be a sensible management decision for that school. However, the individual school student—the young lady who wants to do biology—should not be precluded from doing biology by that decision of the school if that option is available through SIDE, which it is.

What I think is wrong in this exercise is that I am, like the Minister for Education, concerned if school principals are writing letters to parents—I do not have a copy of the particular letter that the member for Midland referred to—to say that their child cannot do a particular SIDE course because —

Mrs M.H. Roberts: That is exactly what the situation is!

Mr C.J. BARNETT: I will tell the member for Midland why she would not be a role model as Minister for Education. It is because she has no courtesy, and that is a standard that we want in our schools.

Mrs M.H. Roberts: The pot calling the kettle black! You are the rudest person in here!

The DEPUTY SPEAKER: Order! Member for Midland, you keep interjecting. You have been called twice. I do not really want to call you for the third time. This debate has been quite an intelligent debate. So can you just let the Premier carry on.

Mr J.R. Quigley: It was an intelligent debate.

The DEPUTY SPEAKER: Order! Member for Mindarie, I call you for the first time,

Mr C.J. BARNETT: I doubt that it is the intention of the school principal in writing a letter such as that to convey what might be interpreted as a certain impression to parents. If that letter is pointing out or implying in any way to the parents that their son or daughter cannot take a SIDE option because it will cost the school \$1 000, that letter is either misinformed or poorly written. It is not costing anyone \$1 000. This is a transfer of funds within the government education system. That is all it is. It is basically a transfer from a school to another part of the education system. No parent is being charged. No child is being charged. It is free education. A school should not be implying that somehow a child who exercises choice is imposing a cost on education in this state. The child is not. The child is in all probability saving the school funds, because the school will allow that option rather than offer a course for one or two kids. I will be interested to look at some of those letters. The minister has already indicated that she will act to make sure that proper information is conveyed to parents. I would hope that schools, as they develop further, will have courses that they operate and deliver on the school site, and another selection of courses that they can make available through SIDE and perhaps even support through tutoring operations at the school site. That will give students as wide a choice as possible, and the best quality of education. School principals should not be conveying an impression to parents that if their child exercises choice, that child is limiting or costing the school in some way. That is not the case. It is all taxpayer money—public money—for the education of a child. If a child exercises choice, the dollars should follow that child and that child’s choice.

MR J.M. FRANCIS (Jandakot) [5.38 pm]: I really enjoy these private members’ debates in this Parliament, because it encourages me to go out and learn things about subjects that I really do not know too much about. Obviously I did not go to school in this state, and I have not been blessed with children in the education system, so, other than visiting schools in my electorate and talking to parents, that pretty much exposes my limitations; and I am big enough to admit that.

Extract from Hansard

[ASSEMBLY - Wednesday, 26 May 2010]

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Mrs Michelle Roberts; Mr Tom Stephens; Mr Andrew Waddell; Mr Mick Murray; Dr Elizabeth Constable; Mr Colin Barnett; Deputy Speaker; Mr Joe Francis; Mr Peter Watson; Mr Terry Redman

This particular motion has encouraged me to learn a lot more about this issue. The first thing that I did was go to the state government website for the Schools of Isolated and Distance Education. For members who may not be familiar with SIDE—there are probably others apart from me—the SIDE website states —

The formation of SIDE —

Schools of Isolated and Distance Education —

resulted from the amalgamation of the Distance Education Centre and the five Schools of the Air. The Schools of Isolated and Distance Education are located on six campuses. &In addition to the SIDE Primary School [K–7] and SIDE Secondary School [8–12] on the Leederville site, there are five Schools of the Air located in Carnarvon, Kalgoorlie, Meekatharra, Port Hedland and Kimberley [Derby]. Each school has its own principal. The Director, Isolated and Distance Education performs a quality assurance role across all schools. In addition, the Director has a management role for the Indian Ocean Schools [Christmas Island DHS and Cocos Islands DHS] and the School of Instrumental Music.

Part of me wishes I had attended that school. I can promise members on my side that I will not be bringing my guitar into the chamber and singing.

Mr R.F. Johnson: If you do that, I'll bring in my drums.

Mr J.M. FRANCIS: My guitar is in my office.

It continues —

The Flexible Learning Project in Schools [FLIS] is a new initiative in 2006 which is under the SIDE directorate. The schools have a large and diverse student population ranging from Kindergarten to Year 12:

Importantly, it continues —

- full time students unable to attend a conventional school due to geographical isolation
- WA students travelling Australia or the world, on a long term basis, with their parents
- WA students whose local high school does not offer the subjects they wish to study, or where the timetable does not allow them to join the class
- students suffering from long term illnesses
- part time adults undertaking courses to improve their education and employment options.

It looks like an outstanding program and something that will obviously benefit students in this state. I am not quite sure what other states do but I pray that other states have a similar set-up.

Education is consistently being challenged by evolving and dynamic demands. This obviously has to be met with a similar response. This, in turn, places great demand on the provision of funding. It goes hand in hand with the pressures that are applied to it. Educational opportunities must be given to all students in this state, irrespective of locality or situation. I am a firm believer in that. I do not think students should be disadvantaged because they live in regional areas or they choose to study a subject that is not catered for in their school. When I went to school, I was privileged enough to go to a Jesuit boarding school. The language of Chinese was not offered. Latin was compulsory. It is absolutely amazing how we have moved on in education systems across Australia over the past 20 years. The ability of any student in Western Australia to study Chinese is phenomenal. All governments, regardless of political persuasions, should be commended for that. Students' schooling is a vital plank in positioning themselves for future possibilities and a platform for life. It is all about freedom of choice. That is one of the reasons I am a big fan of these programs. If students wish to study a particular subject, be it biology or a foreign language, because they want to be an interpreter or a doctor, they should be given every opportunity to do so. As I said, choice is a key principle that I believe in, and it is a key principle enshrined in the School Education Act 1999.

SIDE gives students the choice to access other subjects that supplement their studies, primarily to undertake subjects that are not provided at the school they are enrolled in. I noted in my research that the potential of SIDE courses has been recognised by parents, with an increase in students taking up SIDE studies since 2004. I will not go into too much detail, but enrolments in SIDE have nearly doubled since 2004, including for home-based adults. Moreover, the number of full-time students learning through SIDE in years 11 and 12 has doubled from 174 to 323.

Mr M.P. Murray: Will it go down when country high schools are shut?

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Mr J.M. FRANCIS: I am confident it will go up because it is an outstanding program. I am a bit of a betting man. We are going to be here for a few more years and I reckon I could arrange a bit of a wager with the member on the numbers for next year and the year after.

Dr M.D. Nahan interjected.

Mr J.M. FRANCIS: I am covered by privilege.

I admit that online teaching is not a substitute for face-to-face contact with teachers. Rather, it gives students an advantage of studying courses they could not have studied otherwise. In the ideal world, we would love to have a teacher in front of every student for every single subject but it is just not feasible to have a Chinese expert or a biology expert in every single school across Western Australia.

Mr P.B. Watson: You can have them in the city but not the regional areas.

Mr J.M. FRANCIS: Once again, it comes down to population density and the location of the school.

Mr J.R. Quigley: Why doesn't it come out of royalties for regions? They are giving us the money from China and then we send it back and buy Chinese teachers.

The DEPUTY SPEAKER: Member for Mindarie!

Mr J.M. FRANCIS: I think he has finished. I think he has got it off his chest.

I looked at a couple of reports while researching this matter, including a report by the former director general of the Western Australian education system that confirmed online or distance education services to be an important part of the solution. This message was repeated in the Twomey report of 2007. The new policy of this government builds on the existing policy of the former government. It is very important to note—this is government policy, and the education minister has repeated this assurance to me—that no school or student will be worse off and assistance will be given if anyone encounters any difficulty. No-one will be worse off. People's situations will remain the same or they will be better off. That is an important principle and an important undertaking.

That brings me to the Twomey report. It went into a bit of detail about SIDE. It is worth noting what Professor Twomey stated in this report. I will read briefly from page 77, which reads —

The education system in Western Australia would benefit considerably by bringing the three areas of SIDE, WestOne and OTLS —

The Online Teaching and Learning System —

together under the same management to enable optimal use of workforce and resources possible, and to facilitate the development of digital content and online delivery.

I have always said that I am a bit of an analogue man in a digital world. I acknowledge that the member for Forrestfield is a far greater expert on these issues than I am, but I did listen with some interest to his comments on this matter. Anything that we can do to help our students use more of the current technology that is evolving is obviously worthwhile. The report continues —

The focus must be on providing Western Australian students with the best possible education allowing:

- blended and flexible learning, where traditional classroom teaching is facilitated and augmented by first class online learning
- subject learning to continue in the absence or lack of a specialist teacher by accessing online delivery, usually under the guidance of another teacher or education assistant
- independent learning, wherein students are allowed to utilise learning resources in their own time and at their own rate, helping them to take greater responsibility for their own learning (this is mandated for senior school students in some American states and European countries)
- distance education where the traditional text-based arrangements are amplified by online delivery and the opportunity to use facilities such as internet chat rooms to enable discussion of issues with a specialist teacher (e.g. often the expert who developed the package) and with other students of the same subject or discipline.

It is worth noting that one of the recommendations in this report states —

The current system is uncoordinated, minor in its impact on Western Australian education and substantially underfunded.

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That leads me to the next question. I follow these issues in chronological order. What did the Labor government do about the recommendations in this report on SIDE? Any guesses? It did not release the report for a very long time. One thing I do remember from reading the newspapers at the time was that there was untold pressure for the education minister to release this report, and he did not do it for a fair amount of time. The previous government did nothing about this recommendation; it did not provide the funding to make use of the online learning that Professor Twomey recommended. I would suggest that if the previous government had started this reform in 2007 or even 2008, we would be in a very different situation today, because things move very quickly in the world of technology and there is a whole generation of students who have been—I will not say undereducated—somewhat left behind because this program was not started earlier.

There are a couple of problems with what the opposition is claiming in this motion. Firstly, the government is implementing the previous government's policy, which was not implemented by the previous government. Secondly, as the Minister for Education rightly pointed out, the students in these programs were double funded; they were funded through the school and through SIDE, so someone along the line was doing a little better than he should have. Considering that one of the Liberal–National government's very successful and popular policies gives authority to schools to govern their own budgets, meaning that school principals and staff have greater freedom over how they spend their money, funding is no longer tied in the way it was previously. It should be noted that schools receive funding that can be used specifically for the purposes of SIDE. SIDE is funded to deliver programs also, and I believe in the principle that whoever provides the service should receive the funding, rather than two agencies providing the same service and receiving double funding. It should be broken up. If a school is getting it, fine; if SIDE is getting it, fine, but let us not double fund it, because that is a blatant waste of taxpayers' money. There is no need for it, and the money can be better spent in other areas of the education system. If students are studying at school, they should be funded through the school. If they are studying through SIDE, they should be funded through SIDE. That is very simple. This change has absolutely nothing to do with cutting funding; it is about providing funding to the areas where a service is being delivered, funding the people who deliver the service, about proper government and good government and not wasting money by double funding the same student for the same program. That is plainly unsustainable.

MR P.B. WATSON (Albany) [5.52 pm]: I have been approached by Kojonup District High School and Gnowangerup District High School. They are very disappointed, as I am. There is a National Party member in the house tonight, the Minister Assisting the Minister for Education, who is not even bothering to talk about how people in country areas will be affected. He is not talking about how schools in Kojonup provide tremendous programs to retain their students, programs that will be lost under what is going to happen. We hear all the time about the National Party and royalties for regions. I am sure that if Kojonup and Gnowangerup were up north, there would be funding for them straightaway. The National Party has lost all idea of what it was here for in the first place. All it worries about now is winning seats up north; it no longer worries about people in the bush. The Minister for Agriculture and Food used to be in the paper all the time in my electorate, saying that the previous government did nothing for people in regional areas, and that if the National Party were elected, it would look after people in regional areas. Now he sits there and has obviously been gagged. What is he going to do, get up and support the Minister for Education, who is trying to take things away from people in regional areas? Members should go to Kojonup or Gnowangerup. They are not even in my electorate—they have to call me and email me, and they did so today; I will show members afterwards!

Several members interjected.

Mr P.B. WATSON: The member can laugh, but he is falling asleep at the wheel!

Several members interjected.

The DEPUTY SPEAKER: The member for Albany has the floor, but unfortunately we cannot hear him at the moment. Give him a chance.

Mr P.B. WATSON: Thank you very much, Mr Deputy Speaker, for your protection!

We hear about the National Party in the bush. I get out into the regions—I am not up north all the time—and I can tell National Party members that they are on the nose; they are well and truly on the nose. They can laugh as much as they like, but I heard people say the same about the Labor Party before the last election. I see the member for Riverton laughing; he has not yet even had to defend his seat in an election! The National Party is losing its core values. When the member for Merredin brought about the royalties for regions program, I applauded him. However, he has only picked out some regions.

Several members interjected.

The DEPUTY SPEAKER: Members!

Extract from Hansard

[ASSEMBLY - Wednesday, 26 May 2010]

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Mrs Michelle Roberts; Mr Tom Stephens; Mr Andrew Waddell; Mr Mick Murray; Dr Elizabeth Constable; Mr Colin Barnett; Deputy Speaker; Mr Joe Francis; Mr Peter Watson; Mr Terry Redman

Mr P.B. WATSON: It is meant to be royalties for all regions, not just the ones where the National Party wants to win seats at the next election. Age pensioners were promised four lots of living allowance, but they are only going to get three. National Party members can laugh as much as they like, but I get out in their electorates. The only time we see the Minister for Agriculture and Food is when his car is parked at the airport. That is the only time people see him; they do not see him in his electorate. I have been doing some work in his electorate, and in the electorate of the member for North West. They are both on the nose. I was in Carnarvon recently for a committee hearing, and the member is on the nose up there. He does not even go to his office. We spoke to people up there —

Several members interjected.

The DEPUTY SPEAKER: Members! The member for Albany has the floor. It is all very well to have some banter, but unfortunately he is being drowned out.

Mr P.B. WATSON: I know that people ring up other members when they cannot get what they want, but the amount of feedback I have had from National Party members is astonishing. Parliamentary members of the National Party should wait two and half years and see. They have taken their eyes off the ball; they are driving around in big cars, flying up north, and all the money is going up north. If members ask people in my electorate, the first thing they will say is that they do not get any money anymore; it is all going up north. Did the member for Vasse have a nice coffee yesterday?

All I can say is that I am getting feedback about National Party members in their own electorates. There are tremendous projects in place in Kojonup to keep kids in school, and all these things will be lost. These kids will be travelling to other schools. Gnowangerup is exactly the same. I know that the member for Wagin is a very good member, but he does not listen; it does not matter how safe his seat is. When I got into Parliament, I had to achieve a swing of 17 per cent, and I got in, so there is no such thing as a safe seat. I would like to see what the National Party will do for regional areas. I applaud it for the royalties for regions program, but it is taking its eye off the ball.

MR D.T. REDMAN (Blackwood–Stirling — Minister for Agriculture and Food) [5.58 pm]: I do not have a lot of time to talk.

Several members interjected.

Mr D.T. REDMAN: I have always been happy to front any debate in this place —

Several members interjected.

The DEPUTY SPEAKER: Order, member for Collie!

Mr D.T. REDMAN: I have always been prepared to front a debate in this house or anyone out the front of the house who wants to take up issues. I have always been prepared to front issues in my electorate and will defend —

Several members interjected.

The DEPUTY SPEAKER: Member for Albany, I gave you some protection!

Mr D.T. REDMAN: I will always vigorously defend the position the National Party has taken in supporting regional Western Australia. I will provide a little of my background, because I think members sometimes forget. For my own education, I went to seven different schools. Year 1 was at a primary school at Liveringa station in a little town called Camballin; it is now called Looma. That was in 1969. We were there for two years; my dad was the principal at that primary school. I went to a range of regional primary schools, then went to Swanleigh Hostel and Lockridge Senior High School as an 11-year-old. I did three years at boarding school and then finished up doing years 11 and 12 at Esperance Senior High School. In respect of credibility and understanding of the educational challenges in regional Western Australia, I stand on my history and the educational background of my family, and I stand on the support that the National Party has for education in regional Western Australia, and its commitment to the delivery of services, education, and quality medical support in regional areas.

Debate adjourned, pursuant to standing orders.

Sitting suspended from 6.00 to 7.00 pm