

**Division 24: Education — Early Childhood Education, \$13 460 000 —**

Ms A.E. Kent, Chair.

Ms S.E. Winton, Minister for Early Childhood Education.

Ms L. Rodgers, Director General.

Mr J. Bell, Deputy Director General, Student Achievement.

Ms R. Lee, Executive Director, Strategy and Policy.

Mr R. Thomson, Executive Director, Infrastructure.

Ms P. Beamish Burton, Executive Director, Finance and Commercial Services.

Ms L. Criddle, Executive Director, Early Childhood.

[Witnesses introduced.]

**The CHAIR:** Good morning, everyone. Welcome to the Legislative Assembly budget estimates committee. The estimates committees will be reported by Hansard and the daily proof will be available online as soon as possible within two business days. The chair will allow as many questions as possible. Questions and answers should be short and to the point. Consideration is restricted to items for which a vote of money is proposed in the consolidated account. Questions must relate to a page number, item or amount related to the current division, and members should preface their questions with those details. Some divisions are the responsibility of more than one minister. Ministers shall be examined only in relation to their portfolio responsibilities.

A minister may agree to provide supplementary information to the committee. I will ask the minister to clearly indicate what information they agree to provide and will then allocate a reference number. Supplementary information should be provided to the principal clerk by noon on Friday, 2 June 2023. If a minister suggests that a matter be put on notice, members should use the online questions on notice system to submit their questions.

I give the call to the member for Vasse.

**Ms L. METTAM:** Good morning, minister and advisers. I refer to page 502 in budget paper No 2, volume 2, regarding the Target 120 extension. I note there is a \$3 million reduction in 2022–23, with additional funding provided to 2024–25. Given that the government has consistently pointed to this program as one that has —

**The CHAIR:** Sorry to interrupt. Could you clarify that reference number, please?

**Ms L. METTAM:** Page 502.

**Ms S.E. WINTON:** It is the wrong section. We are doing Early Childhood.

**Ms L. METTAM:** Excuse me. Usually, the divisions would be broken up, but this is collectively presented.

**The CHAIR:** Minister, can I clarify whether that section is relevant?

**Ms S.E. WINTON:** No, it is not. My understanding is that we are doing the education division first, and that is why the Department of Education advisers are here. The Department of Communities staff are waiting once we have completed that division.

**The CHAIR:** Yes. It is division 24.

**Ms L.L. BAKER:** Can I ask a question while we sort this out?

**The CHAIR:** Yes.

**Ms L.L. BAKER:** Good morning. I refer to budget paper No 2, page 360, near the bottom of the page, under “Other School Facilities” and the line “Early Childhood Program”. Can the minister tell me the scope of this program, what it is delivering, and what it is likely to deliver this year?

**Ms S.E. WINTON:** Thank you, member, for the question. I am quite proud and privileged to be here, of course, as the McGowan government’s first ever Minister for Early Childhood Education, which clearly marks the priority this government is placing on early childhood.

I make these comments about the early childhood program: it is an important rolling program that delivers a broad variety of minor and major capital projects to continually enhance the early childhood learning facilities throughout our state and, importantly, provide a great learning environment for our young people. We know that having a great environment ensures that the early learning experiences will be the best for our children to develop the skills necessary for lifelong learning. Since 2017–18, the program has funded many much-needed projects. I am happy to list a few

of them. It is certainly not an exhaustive list, but I want to highlight a few of them, particularly one in the member for Maylands' electorate: Hillcrest Primary School, which received \$123 000 in funding for refurbishments and additions to its early childhood learning classrooms. Other examples of works that have been delivered through this program are: Lancelin Primary School, \$36 000 for fencing around the early childhood play area; Paraburdoo Primary School, \$153 000 for shade structures; Illawarra Primary School, \$41 000 for two new pre-primary classroom blocks; Winterfold Primary School, \$26 000 for nature playgrounds, and we know the popular effect they have in our schools; South Hedland Primary School, nearly \$8 000 for shade structures over its kindergarten area; Kapinara Primary School—a great school where I taught for a tiny bit—\$285 000 for a new toilet block for its early childhood centre; Marble Bar Primary School, \$98 000 for shade structures; and Dawson Primary School, \$11 000 for drink fountains in the kindergarten area. I also want to highlight that this year and over the forward estimates, this program will continue to support the important work in our early childhood education centres attached to our schools.

**Ms L. METTAM:** I refer to budget paper No 2, volume 1, page 350, paragraph 2 under “Significant Issues Impacting the Agency”, which states that the department is committed to helping schools support student mental health and wellbeing. Can the minister provide, if any, the paediatric services offered through schools to catch issues early?

[9.10 am]

**Ms S.E. WINTON:** The Department of Education collaborates with the Child and Adolescent Health Service metropolitan Child Development Service to facilitate assessment, early intervention and treatment services for children with development delays or difficulties that impact on their function or participation or the parent–child relationship. WA Country Health Service allied health practitioners such as speech pathologists, occupational therapists and physiotherapists provide services to families attending child and parent centres in regional and remote WA. The Child and Adolescent Health Service allocates speech pathologist time to each of the 13 metro child and parent centres depending on their size and need.

**Ms L. METTAM:** How many speech pathologists are provided in the early childhood sector, and how many vacancies are there at the moment for those allocated positions?

**Ms S.E. WINTON:** I might ask the director general to elaborate.

**Ms L. Rodgers:** In terms of our provision of support for language development, the Department of Education provides language development centres. Speech pathologists are provided and provisioned through the Department of Health. There are five metropolitan-based language development centres that provide a full-time early childhood intervention program for students in the early years, kindy through to year 3, with a diagnosed language disorder. The centres also provide a statewide speech and language outreach service, which is available to all public schools and offers support to early years teachers who have students with speech and language difficulties. We have the number of students whom we work with, if that is helpful, too.

**Ms L. METTAM:** Yes, it would be helpful to get the numbers, but also the numbers of speech pathologist positions and the vacancies.

**Ms S.E. WINTON:** I am advised that the information on the positions would need to be sought through the Department of Health.

**Ms L. METTAM:** Are speech pathologists not provided through early childhood?

**Ms S.E. WINTON:** I am advised that the Department of Education does not employ the speech pathologist; it comes through the Department of Health.

**Ms L. METTAM:** How many psychologists are provided in the early childhood education sector?

**Ms S.E. WINTON:** The school psychologist service contributes specialist support to enhance educational outcomes for students. I emphasise that that is for all school students in the public sector, which takes in early childhood as well. Therefore, my answer is broad. I am advised that there is no specific provision for psychologists for a particular year level; it is based on need. In that context, in 2021 the state government made a commitment of \$42.2 million to employ more than 100 FTE additional school psychologists over the next four years. For public schools, this funding will provide an additional 100 FTE as well as additional supervising and lead school psychologists. As of 30 April 2023, an average of 435.1 FTE school psychologists were employed across the public school system, which is an increase from 376.7 FTE in 2021. I am not sure whether I am able to specifically answer the question about school psychologists for early childhood students.

**Ms L. METTAM:** Can the minister provide how many vacancies there are for those positions? The minister said that there are 435 FTE school psychologists across the whole system. Are some of those positions vacant, or are they additional positions that have not been filled?

**Ms S.E. WINTON:** I am advised that we are on track to meet those targets that I highlighted before. There were four vacancies last week, but I want to highlight, too, that that is a rolling kind of system that will vary from week

to week, month to month. But I would suggest that four vacancies in the overall cohort of school psychologists is a reasonable vacancy rate.

**Ms L. METTAM:** What is the wait time for a child in need to see one of the school psychologists?

**Ms S.E. WINTON:** I will ask the director general to elaborate.

**Ms L. Rodgers:** We do not run a medical model with our psych service, so schools deal with whatever turns up on the day. If a child needs to see a psychologist, that is prioritised immediately within the school day. Similarly, that might be complementary with seeing the chaplain. That extends to overnight and indeed the weekend. If there is a trauma, or something happens in a community in a school, we will make sure that those psychologists are deployed out of hours to support that child and their family.

**Ms L. METTAM:** There have been reported cases of children in significant distress being on waitlists for a considerable period. Given that the school psychologist is available and can respond straight away, is the minister suggesting that school psychologists can provide support more urgently than the health system?

[9.20 am]

**Ms S.E. WINTON:** The member's question about waitlists to see psychologists is really a question for the Department of Health. I re-emphasise the director general's comment that the psychologists who are allocated and available to schools are flexibly placed and able to see students who present to school in a timely manner.

**Ms L. METTAM:** Given that that is the case, there must be a communication issue because we hear about many cases across the state in which children are unable to get psychologist support.

**Ms S.E. WINTON:** Is the member talking about school psychologist support?

**Ms L. METTAM:** Yes—school psychologist support. If psychologists can provide urgent support, how is it that we hear about prominent cases of kids not receiving that support? Where are school psychologists based?

**Ms S.E. WINTON:** I will ask the director general to respond.

**Ms L. Rodgers:** Thank you, minister. Psychologists are based in schools largely; most of our psychologists are school based. We have some flexibility at each regional office because each regional office has the ability to flexibly deploy additional psychologists. We also have some psychologists in the central department whom we can deploy immediately in the event of a trauma. I am not aware of any child who is waiting to access a school psychologist. If that were the case, we would like to know where that child is and we will make sure that they are seen by the school psychology service.

**Ms L. METTAM:** So every school has a school psychologist?

**Ms S.E. WINTON:** The answer is yes.

**Ms L. METTAM:** Are they based at schools?

**Ms S.E. WINTON:** My advice is yes, they are.

**Ms M.J. DAVIES:** The minister said there is a school psych based at every school. I am from the wheatbelt and I am fairly sure that no school psych is based at Wyalkatchem District High School. I think a school psych is assigned to several schools. How often do students see a school psych face to face across an electorate that is 100 000 square kilometres?

**Ms S.E. WINTON:** I will ask the director general to explain.

**Ms L. Rodgers:** Every school is allocated psych time based on the size and need of the school. Schools are also able to buy top-up psych time and, on top of that, the regions are able to flexibly deploy additional psychs based on need.

**Ms M.J. DAVIES:** Would a district high school in the wheatbelt be assigned a psychologist one day a week? How does it work?

**Ms S.E. WINTON:** I will ask the director general to explain the process.

**Ms L. Rodgers:** We have a school psych allocation model, which is based on the size of the school and a range of factors, including key risk factors, if you like, in schools and the community. That school psych model can be provided if the minister is comfortable to do so.

**Ms S.E. WINTON:** Further to that, if the member has specific questions about a particular school and its allocation, I ask her to put that on notice because it varies from school to school.

**Ms M.J. DAVIES:** Thank you, minister.

**Ms L. METTAM:** Does the minister have a rough idea of the allocation and wait time for a school in Margaret River?

**Ms S.E. WINTON:** Just to repeat the director general's comments, it is not one size fits all; the allocation of psychologists is dependent on the specific needs and size of a school. I will not go into the details of specific allocations school by school. It is best that the member put that question on notice.

**Ms L. METTAM:** Can that information be provided by way of supplementary information?

**Ms S.E. WINTON:** No. It is appropriate that it be put on notice.

**Ms L. METTAM:** The minister stated that mental health is a priority and that school psychologists are available in every school and can be seen urgently. She has advisers here all willing to give her information but she cannot answer a simple question about the availability of school psychologists in regional towns where there have been a number of youth suicides. It is pretty important to have that question answered and it is extraordinary that the minister will not answer it here or by supplementary information.

**Ms S.E. WINTON:** We take the mental health of students very seriously. As I outlined previously, the government has made a significant record investment in school psychologist services throughout the state. That is something we should all be proud of. It is having a significant impact on our schools. As we have outlined before, the actual details of specific allocations to schools vary greatly. I appreciate that the member might be particularly interested in the resourcing of specific schools, but I ask her to put that on notice. I also note that this division is Education and I am happy to take questions everywhere, but I also look forward to some questions on the new portfolio of early childhood education. We did have the division on the Department of Education yesterday during which the member could have explored this issue.

[9.30 am]

**Ms M. BEARD:** My question relates to what we have just been talking about and is around early childhood. Obviously, my electorate covers 800 000 square kilometres and has a lot of remote children and a lot of very needy children. Is there provision for those kids in early childhood to have regular contact with a psychologist? Is there a roving psychologist who goes from Meekatharra through to Mt Magnet, Carnarvon and up north?

**Ms K.E. GIDDENS:** Point of order, chair. I think this question has been answered in relation to how the allocation of school psychologists works. It is a repetitious question.

**Ms M. BEARD:** Sorry; I thought that one was different.

**The CHAIR:** I will give the call back to the member for North West Central.

**Ms M. BEARD:** I guess what I am asking is: how do regional schools that are very remote access the psychs who are allocated, given the distance and remoteness? Is a program in place to ensure that those kids are seen regularly, especially the young ones?

**Ms S.E. WINTON:** As we attempted to explain previously, the school psychology service also travels throughout the regions. The school psychology service is for all school students from kindergarten to year 12. As I indicated before, it is not possible for me to isolate which part of the total resource for school psychologists goes specifically to early childhood, in the same way that I imagine it would be very difficult to suggest how many year 11 students access school psych services. I reinforce that the school psych service has a provision for school psychologists for all schools, whether they be in the metro area or regional or remote towns.

**The CHAIR:** I think the minister has answered this question. Can we please move on.

**Ms L. METTAM:** I have a new question. I refer to page 350 of budget paper No 2, volume 1, and the third item under the "Significant Issues Impacting the Agency" about supporting early childhood students with a disability and complex behaviour. Has Burbridge School received any additional school health nurses following the earlier reduction in staffing?

**Ms S.E. WINTON:** I might seek the chair's guidance a little bit on this. I appreciate the question and the importance of it, but we did have the Education division yesterday. My understanding is that questions should relate specifically to the early childhood education area. I appreciate that school nurses have a component for early childhood education students, but, similar to the question around school psychologists, it is very difficult for me to speak in specifics about a particular cohort for programs that take in the entire school system.

**The CHAIR:** I have been advised that it is up to the minister which sections relate specifically to early childhood. I ask the Leader of the Liberal Party to direct her questions specifically to this division on early childhood.

**Ms L. METTAM:** We will move on to another portfolio.

**Ms M. BEARD:** Sorry, I have one more question. On page 360 of budget paper No 2, volume 1, there is a line item for the early childhood program. Estimated expenditure for 2022–23 is \$7 755 000, the estimated figure for 2022–23 was \$4 905 000, for 2023–24 it is \$2 million, and then it will drop down again. Can the minister give a high-level indication of what those programs might be?

**Ms S.E. WINTON:** I spoke about that line item in answering a previous question from the member for Maylands. I will get Rob Thomson to explain the line item in terms of the fluctuations and then I will again summarise some of the investments that have been made in the early childhood program.

**Mr R. Thomson:** The figures in the budget papers aggregate previous or historical expenditure and forward expenditure, so there is an aggregate amount that reflects both past and future expenditure. The amounts in the forward estimates are the amounts that will be allocated to those projects in future years—the amount of \$1.5 million is ongoing.

**Ms S.E. WINTON:** To reinforce what I said earlier, this is a really good program for schools to tap into what are sometimes minor works and minor aspirations for a broad range of things. They can be quite small in nature but have a huge impact for an early childhood setting. The funding will go to things ranging from shade sails to toilet blocks, drink fountains and playgrounds. It is a good program.

**Ms L. METTAM:** I refer to page 350 of budget paper No 2, volume 1, and the sixth item under “Significant Issues Impacting the Agency”. With regard to workforce shortages, has the department been able to ensure that an early childhood teacher is in front of every classroom at the beginning of each term?

[9.40 am]

**Ms S.E. WINTON:** My advice is yes.

**Ms L. METTAM:** How has the minister been able to address the challenges of attracting early childhood teachers in the regions?

**Ms S.E. WINTON:** I know that considerable work has been done, as there always is, in attracting and retaining teachers in our system. I am doing my little bit, too. I am trying to get my daughter to go into early childhood education. It is a work in progress, but I will get there. One daughter in the family who is a teacher would be nice.

Workforce challenges exist in all agencies, and certainly in all areas in all industries. The department’s specific emphasis, which has been quite considerable, is that it is offering attractive employment opportunities to secondary trained teachers from the United Kingdom, the Republic of Ireland, Canada and South Africa to work in regional schools. That includes funded relocation, funded visa sponsorships, salary recognition and a sponsored pathway to permanent residency. The department has also retrained existing primary and other teachers to teach in high-demand settings. The department continues to invest in the successful Teach for Australia employment-based pathway program, which attracts high-performing graduates from other disciplines to teach, and also teach while they are completing their teacher qualification and receiving support. The department also continues to support schools in meeting demand for teacher relief through the increased promotion and use of the casual staff teacher pool and by offering final year pre-service teachers the opportunity to build on their experience by undertaking relief teaching, which has been really successful.

The government continues to deliver attraction strategies to promote careers in public education and encourage teachers to work in regional areas and remote communities, including through the Remote Teaching Service induction, the Remote Connection program and the Teach in WA program. Additionally, \$12.4 million in attraction and retention incentives has been introduced for the 2023–24 school year for teachers and school administrators across the 48 regional and remote schools experiencing attraction and recruitment challenges. Payments vary from \$5 000 to \$17 000, which is paid in two instalments, depending on the location. I know that Minister Buti spoke about this yesterday in estimates. An education and support and attraction centre was introduced for the 2022 school year to address teacher supply issues and education support schools’ incentives. New teachers, existing teachers and administrators with a teaching load working at 59 education support centres and schools will receive a \$5 000 additional payment in 2023.

**Ms L. METTAM:** How many vacancies currently exist amongst the early childhood teacher cohort?

**Ms S.E. WINTON:** I am advised that the vacancy level changes from day to day, given that we have a workforce of some 25 000 teachers. I will reinforce that there is a teacher in front of every classroom every single day.

**Ms L. METTAM:** Does the minister have an idea? She talked at length about the efforts the government is making to attract teachers. Does the minister have an idea of what the average vacancy rate is?

**Ms S.E. WINTON:** I will get the director general to comment.

**Ms L. Rodgers:** Thank you, minister. We have a workforce of around about 60 000 people and pay roughly 60 000 people in any given fortnight. Of those, there are 25 000 teachers. In terms of our total workforce, there are about 2 000 vacancies in any given term. It is always rolling, so those vacancies will be responding to things like long service leave and maternity leave, and some resignations and retirements. There is a whole range of reasons why there might be vacancies. It is, on average, about 2 000 vacancies in our total workforce in a term.

**Ms L. METTAM:** Is that trending upwards? I imagine that the vacancy rate has been a big enough issue to have to seek additional funding for attracting teachers, so we must have seen an overall increase in the vacancy rate that has triggered that response.

**Ms S.E. WINTON:** I think the vacancy rate is consistent, notwithstanding that the member would appreciate there are variations depending on particular school sites and whether they are regional and remote, but it varies. I emphasise—this is coming from the experience of having been in the classroom for 27 years—that when I say there is a classroom teacher in front of every class, I do not mean it flippantly. What I mean is that there is a qualified teacher in front of every single class who is capable and qualified to meet the needs of the students in that class.

**Ms L. METTAM:** I certainly was not questioning the qualification of the teachers or their ability. Can the minister confirm whether that is at the beginning of every term or is the minister saying that every day there is a qualified teacher in front of every classroom? Is the minister saying that is at the beginning of each term or that the minister can guarantee that it is every day?

**Ms S.E. WINTON:** My advice is yes, and that they have to be not only qualified, but also registered to teach in front of students.

**Ms M. BEARD:** I have a final question. I refer to the first significant issues impacting the agency on page 350, which states that a key priority is the success of Aboriginal learners. If we look at the NAPLAN results for years 3 to 5 for Aboriginal children and how they are comparing, are we seeing a significant improvement in that key priority?

[9.50 am]

**The CHAIR:** Just to clarify, it is only early childhood that we are dealing with.

**Ms M. BEARD:** Yes.

**Ms S.E. WINTON:** Are we talking about year 3? That is a bit of a stretch beyond early childhood education.

**Ms M. BEARD:** It probably is. I guess I want to know whether there is any way that we can measure the outcomes of the early childhood programs put in place over the last few years with those children who are coming through now? Has there been a change?

**Ms S.E. WINTON:** I do not think the question is relevant.

**Ms K.E. GIDDENS:** Early childhood is a priority area for me as a former primary school teacher. I am really interested in what the minister might be able to tell us about the other works in progress found on page 360 of budget paper No 2. Brabham Primary School is an offsite early childhood centre. How is the government supporting the provision of early childhood education in Western Australia; and, are there other state-of-the-art facilities like Brabham Primary School being funded or planned?

**Ms S.E. WINTON:** I thank the member for Bateman for the question. It is nice to have her here. There are quite a few of us former school teachers in the Parliament now, and that has got to be a good thing, does it not, everyone? It makes for good governance and, more importantly, for prioritising the school system in our state. As the member knows, our government continues to invest in infrastructure projects in schools not only for all schools, but also specifically around enhancing early childhood facilities and infrastructure. In the last couple of years, a couple of schools in my electorate have received fantastic upgrades to their early childhood facilities.

The member referred to Brabham Primary School that was part of a budget announcement and will receive a \$15 million investment, including \$11.6 million to construct an offsite early learning facility. That facility will include classrooms, a kitchen, a storage facility, external storage and an undercover sandpit. It was really nice to be at the school recently with the Minister for Education and also the Minister for Transport, who is the local member for that school.

The department's asset investment program in 2023–24 includes significant investment of over \$100 million in new early childhood infrastructure. It includes Ballajura Primary School, which will receive \$2.5 million to provide two early childhood education classrooms. Camboon Primary School will receive \$3 million for three classrooms. Dianella Primary College will receive \$1.5 million for new kindy facilities. Harrisdale Primary School will receive a \$25 million investment for upgrades that will also include a new early childhood education block. Hillarys Primary School will receive an investment of \$24 million—I know the member for Hillarys is really happy about this—that will include a new early childhood education block. Kyilla Primary School will receive \$6.7 million to build

**Extract from Hansard**

[ASSEMBLY ESTIMATES COMMITTEE A — Wednesday, 24 May 2023]

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Chair; Ms Libby Mettam; Ms Lisa Baker; Ms Sabine Winton; Ms Mia Davies; Ms Merome Beard; Ms Kim Giddens

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a new early childhood education block. Lesmurdie Primary School will receive \$18.1 million for new early childhood education facilities. Roleystone Community College will receive \$9.7 million for facilities that will also include a new early childhood education block. Baynton West Primary School in the Pilbara will receive \$7.2 million that will include an investment into new early childhood facilities. Wickham Primary School in the Pilbara will receive \$3.5 million for a new early childhood education block—in fact, I am told it is under construction now. The South Bunbury Education Support Centre will receive \$3.4 million for an early childhood education block, and I have already mentioned Brabham Primary School. That list of infrastructure investments clearly indicates not only the overall investment in this year's budget of some \$600 million into important infrastructure upgrades to schools, but also the specific investments into upgrades and new builds around early childhood education centres.

**The appropriation was recommended.**

*Meeting suspended from 9.55 to 9.58 am*