

SCHOOLS — STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES — FUNDING

Motion

HON SUE ELLERY (South Metropolitan — Leader of the Opposition) [10.10 am] — without notice:
I move —

That this house expresses its concern that school communities are reporting funding to individual students with disabilities in schools is less than those same students would have received under the previous funding model and calls on the government to report on how this will be fixed.

Mr President, 2015 marked a number of changes in public education; in particular it marked the introduction of the student-centred funding model. That funding model is made up of a range of components, essentially per-student funding, and then there is a series of different what I will refer to as buckets of funds that are allocated to schools based on the particular characteristics of the school and its student enrolment. Some of the characteristics are enrolment-linked base allocations, so that a general amount of money to ensure that every school, no matter the size of the enrolment, is able to carry out the basic operations that need to be carried out. Then there is an allocation based on the Aboriginality of the student enrolments, an allocation based on English as an additional language, an allocation based on the locality of the schools—recognising that some of our schools are indeed in the most remote parts of the world, not just Australia—an allocation to take account of social disadvantage using a formula to recognise the level of social and economic disadvantage of that area, and an allocation related to disability. That is an allocation to assist schools to provide the support in every classroom that children with a particular level of need must have to be able to learn and participate in the classroom. It includes a separate educational adjustment allocation to enable mainstream schools to implement programs and learning for students with additional learning needs. Then there is another bucket of money called “targeted initiatives”, which is about specific programs run at specific schools.

From the beginning of this year I have been contacted by school communities expressing some concern to me that the model was generating less money for individual children with disabilities than those same students had been allocated under the previous model. I think it is important to note at the outset that the area of funding for students with disabilities is often fraught. Parents aspire, of course, to have the very best for their children. They want not only the very best academic education outcome for their children, but also equally the social benefits of their children being in mainstream schools. They want their children to have friends and to be invited to birthday parties, to participate in sports days, to receive merit certificates and to go on excursions. Depending on the level of support needed in each classroom to assist every child with their particular level of need, the resource level needed to achieve those aspirations that parents have for their children is high. There has always been a tension about getting the resource level right. So that is not new; there has always been a tension about that, and I am not saying that has occurred only this year by any stretch of the imagination.

However in 2015, school community after school community is reporting to me that the allocation under the model this year is clearly less for students with the same need; that is, students whose assessment has demonstrated that the level of support they need in the classroom has not changed from the level they needed previously. There has been no change in the child’s diagnosis and no change in what that child needs to be able to participate in the classroom. When I have asked school communities to explain to me exactly how it is the case that they believe the model is different, two things have been put to me by those school communities. Firstly, there appears to be, if you like, what I might describe as a shaving or a cut off the top and off the bottom of the allocation for each level. When a child has a disability and requires educational assistance in the classroom, an assessment is done. There is a range of levels—they dropped, I think, from eight to seven under the new model—and within each of those levels is the range of the level of support that a child receives. Under the old model, the school received dollars for a component of the time an education assistant needed to assist that child. For example, it has been put to me that a child assessed as needing level 1 support under the old model would have generated 0.2 full-time equivalent of an education assistant. That was worth so many dollars; let us say that was worth around \$9 000. Under the student-centred funding model, the dollar value of the part of an education assistant’s time is equivalent, for a level 1 classification, to about 0.165 FTE. Members can see that between the two different models a little less of the dollar value of the education assistant’s time has been allocated to that particular level.

The other point that has been raised with me by school communities is that it appears that the assessment tool used to classify these children has also been adjusted, such that it lets fewer children through the eligibility hoop, if you like, than were allowed through and assessed at that level under the old model. School communities are saying to me that they think this reflects poor planning and poor preparation for how the student-centred funding model would apply to the most vulnerable students in our education system.

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I meet with school communities in a variety of settings and ways. There is a range of formal visits I have with schools. When the visits are to a public school that is not in my electorate, they are always approved by the minister's office. In those visits I meet with the staff of the school, the school leadership, and very frequently either the school board chair or parents and citizens association representatives will attend. That is one way I meet with school communities, but I also meet with school communities in different settings. It is quite common for school boards to invite me to attend a meeting of theirs, and they will allocate some time for me to talk and to listen to the issues they have to raise with me. It is quite common for me to be invited to address P&C meetings and it is quite common for me to be invited by Labor members to forums or morning teas that they hold when they bring all their school parents' representatives together in a single event and we will have conversations around that. It has been abundantly clear to me this year that at all those get-togethers, in some way, shape or form people have been raising with me the concern that this model is still causing concern in the allocations for children with disabilities, and it is not generating the same level of funds that a particular child would have received before. We are now in August, term 3, and these issues have still not been resolved. It appears to me that planning by the department for applying the student-centred funding model to students with a disability was underdone. There were serious frustrations at the start of 2015 with the department's response to queries and concerns from schools that when they applied the model, it appeared that they were getting less money for a particular child. It was reported to me that phone calls were not being returned. It appeared that a default position was being taken for all students and that the process and deadlines for requesting a review of that default position were not properly explained. Time lines were not explained to people, and the process was not properly explained.

I asked some questions in the house about that, but I took the view that these were probably just teething problems at the start of the system, and I expected that the department would be able to resolve those issues. Indeed, I understand that the department arranged a number of forums for school leaders to talk through some of the issues being raised. However, as I said, we are now in term 3, and every single one of the school communities I met with over our six-week break raised this issue with me. It left schools with the view that the disability allocation part of the student-centred funding rollout had not been properly planned, resourced or explained to schools. Now, in term 3 of the school year, schools are saying that they are still of the view that, despite the announced \$20 million injection of funds into the disability component of the student-centred funding model, they are not able to see in their school, with their particular cohort of students with disabilities, how they have received any additional funds for the students for whom their job is to provide the very best education.

This is important for ensuring that the aspirations of parents of disabled children are able to be met, but it also resonates with, and is being raised as an issue of concern by, parents of children without disabilities. Some children need extra assistance in a classroom to help them remain focused on the learning task and not disrupt other children. An important part of the job of the education assistant in assisting that child is not necessarily about physical assistance, which is the case for some children, but is about making sure that that child is able to participate in the class without effectively disrupting everybody else. This issue resonates not only with parents of children with disabilities; it resonates very strongly with all parents, because they want to make sure that their children are not being disrupted in their learning when other children require extra assistance to remain focused and not disruptive.

The frustration is that school communities are saying to me that nothing has changed in a particular child's needs, diagnosis or level of support needed, but the level of funding under the new model is lower. Schools are saying that they have less money than they had before. The most common form of support that is paid for is part of an education assistant's time. The most common example that I have been given is that last year this child was entitled to, and the school received money for, 0.4 full-time equivalent of an education assistant's time, and this year the school has been allocated 0.1 FTE. That is the most common combination of numbers put to me by school communities. They are saying there is absolutely no change in what the child needs, in what the school thinks the child needs, or in the psychological or other clinical assessments, but the resources made available to the school to assist that individual child have been reduced.

There is a serious disconnect here. The government is saying it has put an additional \$20 million into the budget specifically to address the needs of children with disabilities. The numbers have not changed significantly in 2015. Of course, enrolments are up, but there is no extraordinary increase in the number of children with disabilities, so it is not the case that that \$20 million has been absorbed by the additional number of students with disabilities. There is probably a bit of that at the margins, but that is not what the issue appears to be. It appears to be twofold; that is, there has been, if you like, a shaving of the dollars attached to each of the levels for which children are assessed, and the assessment tool itself has been tightened so that fewer children are getting through the various levels. I ask schools to tell me how this is actually working and what tells them that they are receiving fewer resources for these children. They are saying that there is a double whammy effect here.

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Whereas under the previous system they were allocated so many dollars for the FTE cost of the education assistant, the new model has shaved a little bit off the dollar value that schools would use towards the cost of that education assistant, and the assessment tool itself has resulted in different levels of assessment. If we add, on top of that, that schools feel really frustrated about their ability to get assistance from central office to help them resolve these issues, we have a combination of effects.

Getting the resources right in the central office to address these issues is, I think, entirely fixable. It concerns me that it appears that the preparation and planning work on how this will apply to students with disabilities within the model itself had not been done before the start of 2015, and the department is now playing catch-up in assisting students with disabilities in mainstream schools. It is of significant concern that the matter has not been resolved at this point in the school year. I hope that the minister is able to spell out how it is, and that at the next tranche of meetings and visits I have with schools, people are able to say that the situation has changed and they can now see how they are getting more resources; that \$20 million is flowing out this way and that way, and they are getting additional assistance from the department in resolving issues they have with understanding the new model. I hope we will hear from the minister that that is the case.

The other issue that schools have raised with me is understanding, or not understanding, as the case may be, how the review process works once they are given information from the central office about exactly what level of assistance they will get for each child. It is not clear or transparent to schools, and it is not easy for them to lodge an appeal, understand the review process, and work their way through all the documentation required. Meanwhile, they are being told to use their own resources and reserve funds to top up what they think needs to be provided for the best educational outcome for that child, while the department works through its systems. That is a message that many schools have given me. That response generates another level of frustration, because school reserve funds have been allocated and approved by school boards to be spent on all manner of things and put aside for all manner of planning. That schools are being asked to just take the money out of their reserve funds to top up funding for a disabled child's needs that the system does not generate is not a satisfactory way for schools to properly manage and plan financially, and it is not an adequate way to ensure that provisions for students with disabilities are met.

That is of concern to me, because it appears that this government has managed to achieve the golden trifecta of electoral issues. Western Australians are deeply, deeply concerned about this government's capacity to manage the health system; they are deeply, deeply concerned about the government's cuts to education; and, as of yesterday, we have seen crime statistics blow out significantly, and Western Australians will, undoubtedly, be concerned about that. That is the golden trifecta in terms of state electoral issues—health, education and law and order. The government has managed to put a big cross next to its performance in respect of those three issues, and in respect of the issue of how we properly fund some of the most vulnerable students in our education system. I really hope that, in the Minister for Education's response today, the minister is able to say, "I recognise that there has been a problem here, and we're doing our best to sort it out, and this is how we intend to sort it out—X, Y and Z. Here's the plan to resolve it". I would not like us to go into the 2016 education year still with a situation in which children who are eligible and need to receive the assistance of, for example, 0.4 of an education assistant's time, are not able to get that assistance for the second year in a row as a consequence of the introduction of the student-centred funding model.

The theory of a model based on the particular needs of every student is one that I support, and it is a good direction for Western Australian education to move in. But it appears to me that the preparation for children with disabilities was not properly explained to people and was underdone, and it needs to be fixed.

HON PETER COLLIER (North Metropolitan — Minister for Education) [10.31 am]: I have limited time and an enormous amount that I would like to get through, so I will not be taking any interjections today. I have some facts in my notes that I will be relying upon to put on the public record exactly what the situation is with disability funding.

I thank Hon Sue Ellery for bringing this issue to the house today, but I will say that it is not a new issue; this is an issue that has been around ad infinitum. As long as we have had students with disabilities in our public schools, we have had an issue with funding. It is not new, it is not unique, and it has been exactly the same for year upon year. The problem, of course, is that students with a disability are widely divergent in terms of the level of that disability, and determining a funding model for that level of disability has always been problematic. That is not new, but the important thing is that we are providing funding for students with a disability, and that is an absolutely imperative component of pedagogy in the twenty-first century. I will go through a few things with regard to the generic nature of students with a disability, look at the new student-centred funding model, and then identify ways in which the government has made every attempt to make the process much more transparent, fair and equitable to all students with a disability.

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I will say at the outset that this has absolutely nothing to do with funding. Funding in our public schools has never been higher; from any state government in the history of Western Australia, it has never been higher. Funding is not the issue; the issue is making sure that we direct the funding appropriately for each child, and we have certainly provided more funding for students with a disability than ever before.

The simple fact of the matter is that more and more students with a disability are coming into our education system, and that is a good thing in terms of inclusive education and making sure that every child feels significant. The number has increased significantly over recent years, by around 20 per cent. For example, there were 8 628 students with disabilities in our public schools in 2015 compared with 7 185 just five years ago. That is an increase of around 20.08 per cent, and that brings challenges with it but at the same time it ensures that we value all students in our community.

The department provides a range of educational programs and services for students with disabilities including standalone education support schools, and I am sure a number of members have been to those schools; specialist programs and education support centres in mainstream schools; specialist programs in mainstream schools in deaf education and vision impairment; specialist programs in mainstream schools for autistic students; and access to consultants, specialised equipment and support services for those students with disabilities that remain in mainstream schools. As I said, it is as diverse as one can imagine.

Under the new model of funding there is a base level of funding for each child, including those with a disability, and that goes from kindergarten to year 3, year 4 to year 6, year 7 to year 10, and year 11 to year 12. On top of that, there is the captured bucket of money for students with a disability, Aboriginal students, students from low socioeconomic areas, students who have English as a second language, and students who live in the regions, for the special challenges that those students face. It is a very transparent, equitable system of funding and it replaces an outdated mode of funding that was based on sweetheart deals and instances in which we had no idea where the money was going.

One of those cohorts of students is, of course, the one we are talking about today: students with a disability. It is important that we ensure that all students with a disability are funded appropriately. To be eligible for funding as a student with a disability, the student must have a medical diagnosis in one of eight categories: global development delay; intellectual disability; autism spectrum disorder; vision impairment; deaf and hard-of-hearing; severe mental disorder; physical disability; and severe medical or health condition. Once the student is deemed eligible, a judgement is made by an expert team related to the amount of adjustment that is needed in the classroom for this student to participate appropriately. This judgement is made on the basis of evidence that is provided by doctors, teachers, school psychologists and others. The level of funding is based on disability type, school type, degree of disability and level of teaching and learning adjustment. Once again, this is the same process that has been in place for many years, but it is very, very complex because of the nature of disability. Each child who has a disability is obviously unique in the level of the disability, and it is very, very difficult to ascertain exactly what that level of disability is, and it always has been. This is not something that has just emerged as a result of the student-centred funding model.

The decision might be that minimal adjustment is needed or considerable adjustment is needed, in terms of funding for that child. For example, minor adjustments might include decreasing the amount of oral and written information; limiting the amount of choice; and assigning additional time to complete work tasks. Substantial adjustments for a child with a disability might include using an interpreter to access the curriculum; providing an individualised program for part of the day, dependent on individual need; and providing intensive individualised social skills training. Extensive adjustments might include providing individualised physical prompting throughout the day; using highly individualised teaching strategies, such as applied behaviour analysis; and incorporating intensive reinforcement schedules into the program, for example, every one to three minutes.

I went to Carson Street School just recently, which is for students with higher order disabilities, and it is a lot different from mainstream schooling where children with disabilities might have autism or some other physical or intellectual disability that can be attuned to mainstream schooling. To get the funding, there are particular levels for trying to ascertain exactly what a child's disability might be. There are seven levels in the disability allocation, with each level generating a different amount of funding to reflect the amount of adjustment required. Level 1 is \$8 900; level 2, \$21 000; level 3, \$33 000; level 4, \$42 900; level 5, \$51 600; level 6, \$58 000; and level 7, \$68 000. They reflect the level of a particular child's disability. The department also has three students whose needs are so exceptional that further allocation is provided. The funding for these students has not changed under this model, with allocations of \$97 655, \$102 135 and \$82 004 respectively. That is a bit of background in terms of the levels for students with a disability and the fact that they are quite disparate, and that is reflected within our education system and always has been.

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There is a big difference here. I take on board Hon Sue Ellery's comments that a number of schools are expressing concerns, because certainly a number of schools initially raised concerns with me. A lot of that has dissipated and the department has continued to work with schools, because I mentioned this to the director general and she mentioned to the department the schools' concerns that they were actually getting less, and a lot of work has been done over recent months. A big and important difference is the actual level or category of a child with a disability. The previous model operated on 96 possible levels of funding, which is extremely complex and made it very, very hard to ascertain a child's disability. The simple fact is that the descriptions of each level were so similar that it was difficult to discriminate against them. How does a person discriminate against someone who is on level 86 as opposed to someone on level 85 or level 88? It was very difficult and caused more confusion than ever. I have to say that we have had a number of complaints from members opposite and from my own party that the previous structure just was not working and students were not getting an appropriate level of funding.

Hon Sue Ellery: Do you think there is not a problem now?

Hon PETER COLLIER: No, I do not. I think it has actually rectified a lot of those issues. We have reduced the number of categories from 96. Of those 96 categories, over time, eight categories were mostly used to distribute funding because children could be categorised within those eight categories, but still there were 96 categories. I have to make quite clear from the outset that eligibility has not changed, we still have the same criteria and a child with a disability with a previous categorisation can still be categorised as a child with a disability. That has not changed.

The next step in the process has always been the opportunity for review if circumstances change for a child. This part of the process is of course necessary and sensible because children's circumstances change. The child may develop more skills requiring the teacher to make a few adjustments or the child's disability is such that with growth, maturity and age, fewer adjustments are required. Equally, with the passage of time, the student may require more assistance and therefore more adjustments are required. This is not a static process, but rather a dynamic process. This is understandable because students do not stay at the same level of competence or maturity. What was needed in primary school may not be the same as needed in secondary school. Again, that is no different from anything that has occurred in the past. Reviews in the new model are consistent with the practice of review in the previous model—that has not changed.

The difference is that the new model provides funding rather than teacher or education assistant time. This is an important concept that needs to be remembered.

Hon Sue Ellery interjected.

Hon PETER COLLIER: I am sorry, but I just do not have time. I did not interrupt the member and I just have a lot to get through. It is important, and the member has brought up a valid point here.

This allows the school to make its own decisions about what is needed to support each student and does not assume a one-size-fits-all approach—that there is an EA for one school and an EA for another school. Now schools can make a determination on what they require. This is eminently sensible and something the schools have been calling out for. It has rectified a problem that existed in the past—the one-size-fits-all component, which has not worked.

The seven rather than the 96 levels of funding are easier for people to understand and administer and they take some of the mystery out of past funding decisions and allocations. It is much more concise in terms of the determination of a child with a disability. As I said, 96 levels of disability made it so problematic that in many instances it was a very, very subjective process to determine a child's level of disability.

Most importantly, the new model of funding allows for an educational adjustment allocation, which is an additional \$20 million of funding. I keep saying that more money is going into disability services than ever before. The new \$20 million is going into funding students with a disability. Those students with disabilities or learning difficulties that fall outside of the eight eligibility requirements have never received funding—for example, students with dyslexia—so we are broadening the base. The new injection of funding allows schools to cater for those students, which is a new, important addition to the model. This funding will be untied and at the discretion of the school. There is no application or external process; it is in the hands of the schools to meet the needs of their students who need particular help.

I have so much more to say, but to conclude and provide some clarity, there has been no reduction in funding; in fact, there is an additional \$20 million. I know that does not answer Hon Sue Ellery's concerns about where that funding has gone, however, I might point out that there was \$285 million to support students with a disability in 2014 and there is \$305 million this year, which includes the new educational adjustment allocation. It is true that some schools, parents and teachers have reported a reduction in funding from the previous year. This is an

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important point: each case is different. This may have resulted from the review of a child's level in the move from 96 to seven levels. In this change, some students received a higher allocation and some received a lower allocation than under the old model. In fact, 2 292 students received a higher allocation and 1 667 received a lower allocation than under the old model; the others remained the same. Any change of this sort was based on evidence provided by the school and considered in the light of adjustments needed in the classroom. Although adjustments have been made to individual student allocations, the majority of students have received higher allocations. The process of reviewing the level of each child's situation also highlighted a number of cases in which students had previously been provided with incorrect resourcing levels. These students' assessments were corrected, which resulted in larger changes both up and down for a small group of students. Yes, there will be students who will get more funding and there will be some who will get less, but the funding will more appropriately, more adequately and more transparently reflect their level of disability. That is the important thing and what matters. We now have a situation that is transparent and it is up to the schools to make those allocations.

As always, schools can have a review of funding—that has not changed. Given the concerns raised, I will ask that the director general once again write to schools to remind them of their capacity for review, but that capacity has always been there. We are providing adequate funding for students with a disability and the process is now much more transparent and fairer than it ever has been.

HON DARREN WEST (Agricultural) [10.46 am]: I thank Hon Sue Ellery for bringing before us today this motion that this house expresses its concern that school communities are reporting that funding to individual students with disabilities in schools is less than those same students received under the previous funding model and calls on the government to report on how this will be fixed. I think it was great to hear from the Leader of the Opposition and the Leader of the House, who are both very passionate about education. I will quote Oscar Wilde: we can have lies, damned lies and statistics. I think it is very important that we talk about these things.

Hon Jim Chown interjected.

Hon DARREN WEST: I look forward to Hon Jim Chown's contribution to this debate. Should he be good enough and patient enough to listen, he might hear something.

The ACTING PRESIDENT (Hon Brian Ellis): Order!

Hon Jim Chown interjected.

The ACTING PRESIDENT: Order!

Hon DARREN WEST: I will ignore that interjection.

The new funding model is okay, and we have said that we support a possible new funding model, but we will always have questions about how it is rolled out and delivered. I often refer to a school in my electorate, Rangeway Primary School, which I spend a lot of time at, and how the school is constantly battling with less funding under this new funding model. We have talked about that before.

I move around schools a lot. I have become known in my electorate as a person who is very proactive and passionate about education. Members who have taken the time to read my maiden speech or who were in the chamber for it would know that education featured very heavily. Everywhere I go around my electorate, no matter whether it is a social function or an opening or a meeting, the subject of school funding is raised with me. It is raised with me by people on school boards, parents, school communities and board chairs. An issue often raised with me is that there is less school funding for areas of special need and less available for students who need education assistants. That is the most commonly raised issue—the reduction in the number education assistants in schools to work with disabled kids and kids with special needs. Of course, this is most concerning for school communities. A lot of the costs for these students' extra needs are forced back on parents and school communities, with many good souls volunteering to help in their schools by working with kids with special needs and disabilities.

As Hon Sue Ellery put it, the parents of disabled and special needs students want their children to be as mainstream as everybody else's children. They want their children to have the capacity to be engaged and involved in the school, just like the parents of their more able-bodied classmates. I think it is very important that they are treated in that way.

I think the minister was referring to the Holland Street School in Geraldton, which has been open since 1960. It takes in students with severe disabilities and severe learning disorders. Students at the Holland Street School are aged between four and 18 years old. The last information I have is that there are 42 students and 35 of the most amazing and dedicated staff who work in that challenging environment. Even families of students involved in this school tell me that they still do not really fully understand how the student-centred funding model will work for them. They are concerned. They feel as though not enough information has been provided to them. They

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harbour concerns about the future of their school and what it will mean for their students. Of course, there are various levels of disability. I have spoken of the Holland Street School, which is a truly inspirational place to visit in Geraldton. As we all know, there are students with lower levels of disability right down to behavioural issues and special needs. An increasing number of children are being diagnosed with autism, Asperger's syndrome and other learning disorders of the like. I hear what the minister is saying about the extra \$20 million available, but I do not think that takes into account the challenges provided with offering services across a state as vast as Western Australia. In small schools, there may be only one student with a disability, so of course there will be extra costs per student with the extra assistance and funding that is needed. The fact that more and more students are being diagnosed with these learning disorders will eat up that \$20 million and more.

In 2015, as Hon Sue Ellery also pointed out, many school communities are telling us that they are confused about the new funding model—what it means for them. They feel as though there has not been sufficient planning in bringing this funding model forward. They feel that the resources and funds for their schools have been reduced and that the rollout has been anything but smooth. There has also been an adjustment to how students are assessed. Many parents are unhappy with this adjustment. Many people feel that it has not worked in their favour. I take on board what the minister has said—from 96 down to seven levels certainly sounds like a positive move. However, the old system was understood; it was acknowledged and it seemed to work within the sector. I understand that simplification is a good thing, but the new system is not understood in the sector and people are having difficulty coming to terms with that. Also, an assessment of one point within a seven-tiered system will have a profound effect on the funding that a student will receive under the new model, whereas a larger number of points would have produced a smaller change in the amount of funding. Loss of education assistants, as I have pointed out, is one of the biggest issues that are raised with me in schools, which is a direct result of changes in funding. We will talk later on about the other issue in that, which is how we can encourage people to the regions and grow the north of our state. I suggest that reducing the number of jobs in the public sector is not going to do that.

I do not think that these are just teething problems anymore. I agree with Hon Sue Ellery that the changes to the funding model are certainly not clear; nor are they understood across school communities, in the schools themselves or across the sector. I think we have moved past the point of saying that, yes, it is a new system and we accept that there will be issues in implementing the new system. As we have seen in other infamous rollouts of services across the state, certainly this one has lingered on for quite a long time and the confusion is noted and renowned. I, too, would like to hear that it has all been fixed, but I do not think—accepting that the minister only had 15 minutes to proffer a lot of information to the house—as someone who is as interested in education as I am that all the answers were contained in that 15 minutes. Although I will dig up the *Hansard* and perhaps run it by a few board chairs to see whether it provides them with any clarity, I think the sell job needs to be more extensive.

I meant to point out when I was referring to the assessment system that it remains very subjective. The minister pointed out that the majority of schools received more funding for students with disabilities—the majority. But what about the rest? This has a profound impact on the families of those students and school communities when funding is reduced. There are also future issues that need to be considered and what new challenges we might face in this area. Although I understand that the new funding model is being rolled out and that we are dealing with it at the moment, we will encounter further and further issues and problems in this area. The funding model should be robust enough to be able to withstand the challenges that come along in the future.

In summary, I think that the motion is good. I am glad that we are talking about disability funding in schools. It certainly is an important area of public policy. I agree that the system is not particularly good or well accepted and I think that the government needs to move quickly to clarify the position for not only schools, but also school communities and families and those who have disabled children. It is a good motion. I welcome the discussion from other members.

HON STEPHEN DAWSON (Mining and Pastoral) [10.56 am]: I, too, rise to support Hon Sue Ellery's motion that this house expresses its concern that school communities are reporting funding to individual students with disabilities in schools is less than those same students would have received under the previous funding model and calls on the government to report on how this will be fixed.

Over the past few months, the Leader of the Opposition has asked a series of questions. I am sorry I was not here to hear her contribution this morning or, indeed, the minister's response to her contribution. But I am aware from talking to school communities in my electorate that there is still a sense of confusion months after this new student-centred funding model was rolled out. I am aware, too, that in the Legislative Assembly estimates committee hearing in June this year, the shadow parliamentary secretary, Tony Buti, asked the minister's representative a series of questions about the number of students from schools that sought an official review of the funding that they would receive under this new student-centred funding model. From that list, I can see that there are a number of schools in my electorate, including Cable Beach Primary School, Esperance Primary

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School, Karratha Senior High School and Kununurra District High School, which sought official reviews of the funding that they were receiving for students with disabilities in their schools. This information was dated 11 June 2015; I dare say that there will be a number of other schools that have sought a review since then and have appealed the amount of funding that was received for students in their schools. In the case of Cable Beach Primary School, an appeal was lodged about one student at this stage; in Esperance Primary School, it was in relation to two students; in Karratha Senior High School, it was in relation to two students; and in Kununurra District High School, it was in relation to three students. Having spoken to principals at other schools in my electorate, I have no doubt that this remains a serious concern. I am sorry that I did not hear the Minister for Education's contribution. I hope these concerns are being worked through in a methodical —

Hon Sue Ellery: He says that it's all been fixed.

Hon STEPHEN DAWSON: Having talked to principals in my electorate, I certainly do not think that it has all been fixed. Indeed, some schools are fighting a number of outstanding issues. I am aware that some schools previously had a 0.4 education assistant to work with a student with a disability. However, since the introduction of the new student-centred funding model, that allocation may well have dropped to a 0.1 allocation, which makes a huge difference in the classroom to not only the student with the disability, but also other students and the teacher, because the teacher's level of support in the classroom has declined. That has huge implications for all students in the classroom.

The new student-centred funding model provides funding on a per student basis. It also takes into consideration other characteristics, including an enrolment-linked allocation. The number of students at a school is presented to the department on census day and funding is allocated as a result of the numbers on that day. Principals in the Kimberley and Pilbara in particular are always concerned about census day because Aboriginal families can be away for long periods for funerals or other events and their children do not rock up to school until after census day. Those schools have to deal with the staffing they were allocated on the census day. There can be a great difference between the number of students at a school on census day and the number of students at a school three or four weeks later. I am not sure what the answer is, but there must be recognition, at least in the Kimberley and Pilbara, that student numbers vary and fluctuate and that schools in those areas are penalised for the rest of the term.

The student-centred funding model also provides a locality allowance so that schools in remote and outer regional areas that meet certain criteria receive an additional allocation that is linked to their locality. There are allocations linked to Aboriginality, English as a second language, social disadvantage and, as this motion refers to, disabilities. I have no problem with trying to fund schools in a better or more coordinated way, but people who say that there are no problems have their heads in the sand. I know from having talked to principals in my electorate that there are problems. I understand that today the minister said that extra money has been allocated along with the new model. I was concerned to hear him say that there are no outstanding issues because there are outstanding issues. I think he said that he would check that with the department. I am pleased that he said that and that he will take heed of this morning's debate and ensure that when concerns are raised by school principals right across the state, they will be looked at and addressed. It is not a case of principals making this stuff up or telling me one thing and telling the department or the minister's office something else. We know from questions asked in the other place during estimates that there are concerns about a number of students and that their issues are having big implications.

As shadow Minister for Disability Services, I am often contacted about the issue of funding for students with a disability. Many parents contact me about a range of concerns and about the access their children have to quality education in our state schools. I am aware that a House of Representatives inquiry is looking into this issue. The inquiry is looking at current levels of access for and attainment by students with a disability. It is also looking at the impact on students and families associated with inadequate levels of support. Families have raised issues with me. One particular family referred to the issue of dyslexia or dyscalculia. The family said that it is a hidden disability that it deals with daily. The school system exposes this disability in a way that makes the young man concerned different from his peers. However, there is no special funding for that disability and no recognition that children who have dyslexia need extra assistance in the classroom.

Hon Sue Ellery: It is not recognised as a disability in the education system.

Hon STEPHEN DAWSON: No, it is not. Therefore, there is no extra assistance for these children in the classroom.

I apologise to the Minister for Education because I did not hear his full contribution this morning. I heard him mention the issue of dyslexia. I will read *Hansard*. The particular family whose year 6, 11-year-old son who has dyslexia is having huge issues ensuring that he gets a quality education and the extra level of support that he needs. I will be pleased to read in *Hansard* that this issue will be fixed under the student-centred funding model, but I am not sure that that will be the case. There are a number of other hidden disabilities out there and we must

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ensure that the Department of Education recognises those disabilities so that the students with those disabilities receive the required level of support in the classroom. Every child in this state deserves to go to school and deserves to get a quality education. It is a concern that some students are missing out. I hope that as the student-centred funding model continues to be rolled out and the problems ironed out, issues such as this are raised and addressed so that all students can learn at school.

HON SIMON O'BRIEN (South Metropolitan) [11.06 am]: Hon Sue Ellery has very faithfully brought an issue of concern to the attention of the house and addressed it in her normal thoughtful and insightful way. I commend her for that. This is the right place to raise the matter, not least for because it helps inform other members who may not be as familiar as Hon Sue Ellery with some of the ramifications of the policies that we are discussing, but also because we have a responsive minister present in the house in the form of the Minister for Education. In my experience, he has always been responsive to individual situations that are brought to his attention, whether they are a request for resolution, in an area related to disabilities in schools or any other matter that relates to education. I place on the record my observation that when he says that he will take on board the matters that have been raised and invite further specific matters to be brought to his attention if required, I hope he does so in good faith so members can respond with confidence.

I want to add to this debate this morning a couple of points of background that may assist some members who are perhaps not as aware as Hon Sue Ellery about the subject contained in her motion. It was some years ago now that Western Australia, at a government level, took a number of important steps in its disability policy. One of them was the principle that, to the extent possible, children with a disability should have access to mainstream educational opportunities—the shorthand for that in the sector is “mainstreaming”—and for a whole range of very good reasons.

Another major policy attitude change pioneered in Western Australia was individual funding for people with disability in not only matters of education, but also how they access the assistance that is provided through government funding or services. In both of those commendable initiatives, as with others, it is easier said than done, and sometimes it is easier to talk the talk, as they say, rather than walk the walk as the practicalities becomes obvious. It is not easy to adopt either of those changes. It costs a great deal of money to provide the resources necessary to supervise and deliver mainstreaming and, indeed, to supervise and deliver individual funding. Nonetheless, successive governments in Western Australia have pursued these policies in the face of the difficulties that arise. I think that is a good thing. It is not without difficulties, but I think that we have probably made more progress with individual funding and the freedoms that that brings because we have been doing it longer. There is an interesting juxtaposition in mainstreaming the education system and the disability sector.

One thing I know about the Department of Education is that it is, probably by necessity, very much driven by formulaic solutions—the number of children in a classroom depending on their age and the number of teachers they have to have, and all the rest of it. That seems to work fine when dealing with an organisation with as many people involved in it as the Western Australian Department of Education. What is the expression they use, minister? Our Department of Education is the biggest organisation this side of Melbourne. The last time I looked, I think there was a shade under 30 000 teachers alone, and of course there are many more students than there are teachers. A great number of Western Australians are involved in our education system. Those formulas work very well until we look at the exceptions—for example, places in regional areas in which there are not the same dynamics as there are in a large metropolitan school catchment, where it is not a question of whether the school has 16 or 32 children in a class because the whole school might have 23 kids. It is then that questions arise about how the school provides the right mix of students or the variety of subjects and so on. We have all seen that. Indeed, there have been debates in this place involving the Minister for Education about whether different high schools are providing the full curriculum to meet the needs of all students. We are familiar with all that. So when we look at the school population of students with disability who require additional supports in a school environment, we find that even within a large school they are a small subset of the total number of students. Therefore, it is not surprising that we will always be able to find cases in which, particularly in some views, the needs of individual students are arguably not being met to the extent that our intended policy would require.

Recently, there have been changes—the minister has referred to this—about the way the model is applied, and he has discussed that in the limited time available to him this morning. One thing I know is that whenever a model is changed, particularly in a government service delivery area, a couple of things will arise. Firstly, if people want to do the exercise, they will find what are called winners or losers in every situation. I prefer to think of it not as winners or losers, but as winners or people who are benefiting from it and others for whom the system needs to be adjusted further to make sure that they are not disadvantaged. I see Hon Sue Ellery nodding in agreement because she is finding that my words are helping to give expression to the whole point that she is raising in this motion. That is my intention as well, and that gives substance to my claim that we want to find

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winners, and if we have people who cannot be identified as winners, then we find out what further yards we have to go in walking the walk to make sure that they are receiving the assistance that we would want them to receive.

That brings me back to my opening, or earlier, remarks about the Minister for Education, who has undertaken to note what has been raised, to continue to contemplate it, to discuss it in the forums available to him and, where possible, to seek to address shortfalls in individual circumstances that can be notified to him or his office or his department. As I believe it is commendable that Hon Sue Ellery has brought this to the attention of the house, I think it is commendable that the minister continues to display that attitude. I want to conclude by saying that I also have an interest in this matter that I share with both sides of the house, and I look forward to further progress being made to continue to ensure that all children are included in the mainstream of Western Australian society.

HON SALLY TALBOT (South West) [11.17 am]: It is lovely to find myself on the same side as Hon Simon O'Brien. It is happening with increasing frequency these days, and I do not think we will ever get used to it.

Hon Simon O'Brien: If it gives you any comfort, it makes me feel a bit uneasy as well when you say that.

Hon SALLY TALBOT: I know. It is a distinct queasy feeling, is it not! Never mind; we have quite a few months left yet.

Hon Ken Travers: Come back; all is forgiven, Simon.

Hon SALLY TALBOT: There is plenty of room over this side.

Hon Simon O'Brien: Yes, there is, isn't there! Perhaps I may be more relevant here.

Hon SALLY TALBOT: I must not waste time; I have a lot to say.

I like the way Hon Simon O'Brien couched his remarks in terms of winners and losers. That provides me with a nice segue into the points that I was going to make. There is clearly one big winner in this debate today, and that is Hon Peter Collier, the Minister for Education, who has clearly won the Sir Humphrey award for explanations. I am sure that for anyone who spends their life sitting at a desk with two or three computer screens in front of them, shifting data around from Excel spreadsheet to Excel spreadsheet, the contribution to this debate this morning by Hon Peter Collier would have filled their hearts with joy, because that is what Hon Peter Collier was doing. He was shifting data between spreadsheets. It was all very impressive in a technical sense. He had all the key lines down pat about how he is concerned about transparency, fairness and equity, and he is doing his best to make that come about. However, the sad thing is that the triumph of Hon Peter Collier in being awarded my inaugural Sir Humphrey prize as a winner this morning is that it is vastly overshadowed —

Hon Ken Travers interjected.

Hon SALLY TALBOT: I think Sir Humphrey was the one who was the epitome of that kind of gobbledegook. "Weasel words" is the expression that has now been brought into the English language by Don Watson.

Hon Peter Collier: You just can't help yourself.

Hon SALLY TALBOT: Hon Peter Collier would be surprised at how much control I have over this. He should see me when I really let go.

The PRESIDENT: Order!

Hon SALLY TALBOT: Yes, I am sorry, Mr President.

The PRESIDENT: Let us get back to the debate on the motion itself, which refers to students with disabilities and funding.

Hon SALLY TALBOT: Hon Peter Collier talked about transparency and fairness and an equitable outcome. I put to him today that his winning this inaugural award is put into the shade by the fact that the losers in all this are the children who have lost their funding to be supported in the classroom to help them deal with mainstream education when they have a disability. They are the losers.

We have in front of us the data that my colleague Hon Stephen Dawson referred to, which is the official data about the number of schools that have requested reviews of disability funding. It is a pretty long list. I am distressed to see, for instance, that the South Bunbury Education Support Centre had to make an appeal over five students. A significant number of schools are on the list—probably 40 or 50 altogether—and a great number of students. Of course, we know that this is only the tip of the iceberg.

Hon Peter Collier interjected.

Hon SALLY TALBOT: I am not taking interjections, Mr President; I am addressing my remarks entirely to you.

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This is only the tip of the iceberg, because we know from the estimates hearings that the department is counting only the formal appeals that were lodged with the department about the amount of funding. Hon Sue Ellery tells me—I have every reason to believe that she has given me and others an accurate report of her experience—that every single school that she has visited in the past 12 months or so has raised the issue of reduced funding for students with disability. Just as Hon Stephen Dawson said, principals are not making this up; Hon Sue Ellery is not making this up. These are reports to us on this side of the chamber from people on the front line who administer these budgets. I am sure they are telling honourable members opposite as well, but they have a tin ear when it comes to these things, with the very notable exception of Hon Simon O'Brien, who clearly has heard what his local schools are telling him: that funding for individual students has been cut.

I would like to pay one other tribute to the honourable minister, which is that he does tick the transparency box. Even on the basis of the data that he put forward this morning, I think he does tick the transparency box. I say that because one of the things that absolutely distresses me is how absolutely clear parents are about how much money they have lost. They are very, very clear about that. They are telling us that last year, under the old system, the default funding amount for a child classified with what the department calls a level 1 educational need was 0.2 full-time equivalent of an education assistant, which is essentially one day a week. Compare the old system with the new system. The dollar amount allocated today to that same child at a level 1 educational need assessment is 0.165 full-time equivalent of an education assistant. That is less than one day a week. It is—if my maths are correct—0.35 less than one day a week. That translates directly to less money.

It seems to me that if the minister had been a little more frank with people about the way this new system would work, he could have mounted an argument that would have brought public support along with him. In my neck of the woods down south I have regular dealings with a large number of people who are professionals involved in the education system. Some are teachers, some are principals, some are education assistants and some are peripheral and ancillary workers in the education system. One of the things they often mention to me is the period we went through when allergies in classrooms were seen as a major problem. I am not sure that I have the exact details of this right but, broadly speaking, we put an EpiPen facility in every classroom. Because we did that, and obviously people have to be trained to use EpiPens and cannot always rely on a child having that knowledge as it is very dangerous if it is used wrongly, there was a rise in the number of education assistants during that time. It may be that we have reached a time when we can phase some of them out because there are now different ways of catering for children who have those kinds of allergies. However, the minister did not do that. The minister went in there with all guns blazing and talked about more money and more support, and then refused to hear the case of individual students who have actually lost or had a reduction in their money.

Who does this affect? I agree exactly with Hon Stephen Dawson that the situation would be better if only the minister would walk into this place and admit that something about all this does not add up and that he will get to the bottom of it—I know he has said those things in the past—instead of giving us a snapshot of his three or four computer screens and shifting the data around. As it is, all this government is doing, with a model that is grounded in principles of fairness and equity—so it ought to work—is making it harder for people. To add insult to injury, the minister conveys, both through his own comments and the comments that come from the education department, that we have it all wrong because we do not understand that it is not about the child. We are not supposed to be focusing on individual children. “Focus on the individual child”, the minister says to Hon Sue Ellery, “and you are just being distracted from the real problem.” What are we supposed to say to people who walk into our electorate offices and who come up to us at community meetings and say, “Here’s my child. They used to get this much support at school and now they get this much minus”? As Hon Sue Ellery and other members have said, many of those parents are withdrawing their children from mainstream education because it is just not worth the pain, the misery and the agony of trying to do it. The minister says, “Oh, no, it’s not about the child.” So, that is what we are supposed to say to these people: “It’s not about you; it’s about what happens in the classroom and, you know, bear with us over time and it’ll all pan out and it’ll all be fair.” It is not fair, and that is why we bring a motion like this in here today, and that is why we demand that a proper explanation be given.

HON SUE ELLERY (South Metropolitan — Leader of the Opposition) [11.27 am] — in reply: I thank members for their contributions to the debate, and I thank the minister on behalf of the government for his response and for the undertaking that he has given to pursue the matters I raised in the debate today. I am, however —

Hon Peter Collier: I might withdraw it after that last contribution. I have to say that that was unbelievable.

Hon SUE ELLERY: I hope that Hansard caught that the minister has withdrawn —

Hon Peter Collier: No, I said I might withdraw it after that last contribution because, quite frankly, that last contribution was insulting to you as an opposition leader.

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Hon SUE ELLERY: Is the minister threatening me or what exactly is he doing?

Hon Peter Collier: No, I am saying it is factually incorrect. I'm being as accommodating, as always, as I possibly can be, but when I have to listen to that nonsense, quite frankly, I'm going to be less accommodating.

Hon SUE ELLERY: The minister can tell me when he is finished and I will make my contribution.

Hon Peter Collier: Like you didn't interject on me when I asked you not to?

Hon SUE ELLERY: Is the minister done?

Hon Peter Collier: No.

Hon SUE ELLERY: Okay; will the minister tell me when he is?

Hon Peter Collier: No. I can keep going. Do you want to give me another five minutes? I'd love to.

The PRESIDENT: Order! Unfortunately, Leader of the House, you cannot keep going because you do not have the call.

Hon SUE ELLERY: I had started by trying to be gracious, but I cannot be bothered now.

I genuinely hope, when the minister has had the opportunity to have a Bex, that he reflects on the importance of making sure that he takes up this issue with the department and pursues a way to make sure that schools are confident. The minister might not accept that what I am putting to him is still the case in term 3 of 2015—that is, that schools have fewer dollars to spend on child X who has exactly the same level of educational need in the classroom in 2015 as they had in 2014. The minister might not accept that that is the case.

Hon Peter Collier: I didn't say that. I said nothing of the kind.

Hon SUE ELLERY: I am saying that the minister may not accept that; he may or he may not. But whether he does or not, if schools cannot confidently say to the opposition spokesperson on education, "This system is working fabulously. We have every dollar we can get out of the new system and we have at least as much as we had last year", the minister has a serious problem. When schools are doing really well and are happy with the changes that this government has introduced, they tell me. I have a little, I guess, spiel, if you want to call it that, when I talk with school communities. I say, "I want to know what's working really well, and I want to know what some of your challenges are." They tell me the things that are working really well and they are proud of the things that are working really well, and then they tell me the things that they face as challenges. Every single school community that I spoke to in the six-week break—certainly before that as well—said to me that they feel deeply, deeply challenged and that they cannot be confident that the new student-centred funding model is giving them at least the same as they were able to provide for those students with a disability under the old model. If they cannot confidently say that to me when they want to tell me how proud they are of the good things that are happening in schools, the minister has a problem and he needs to fix it. The minister needs to take this seriously. Even if all it is—I do not accept this—is a communication problem and every single school community that I have spoken to just does not understand, the government has a problem. But I actually think it is beyond that; I think it is the case that the new model was not properly planned out.

The PRESIDENT: I am pleased to see that some people do agree on some things at least because I believe you are both Eagles supporters!

Motion lapsed, pursuant to standing orders.