

SCHOOLS — BULLYING

Grievance

MS C.M. ROWE (Belmont) [9.21 am]: My grievance today is to the Minister for Tourism, representing the Minister for Education and Training in this place, and is about bullying in our schools.

As a mum with two young children, I am always extremely troubled by the persistence of bullying in our schools. In fact, I would go so far as to say that it is always right at the forefront of my mind, as I know it is with many parents. Children should absolutely feel safe at school—it is pretty much as simple as that—so they can not only reach their full potential educationally, but also, critically, because of the catastrophic effects bullying can have on their mental health. We have seen a number of really tragic examples of how traumatic bullying can be for young people. It can be so bad that it can lead children to take their own life. Last year, 14-year-old Dolly Everett took her life because of the bullying she experienced at school and online. Many of us read the news coverage of this story with horror, and we continue to read stories about children even younger than Dolly who are experiencing intense depression, suicide ideation and in some instances having taken their life as a result of bullying at school and online. This is why I feel so passionately about stamping out bullying in our school system.

Australian research suggests that up to one in four students have experienced some level of bullying face to face and one in five have experienced bullying online. Let us reflect on those numbers, as they are pretty significant and speak to the prevalence of bullying in schools. We need to ask ourselves why bullying is so prevalent. I feel we all need to take responsibility because bullying occurs within a social context. Students integrate values and social norms from school and wider community social contexts as they develop their personal relationships. Ultimately, each and every one of us in our community is responsible for working as a community to stamp out bullying. The physical harm caused by some types of bullying is well recognised but, as I have just mentioned, short and long-term psychological harm can also result from bullying, including depression and anxiety that can last for a person's lifetime, affecting every aspect of their lives.

In my electorate, I have met with many distressed parents whose child has been bullied. Often they will bring their child in to meet with me so that I can hear firsthand what they are experiencing at school and online. I remember hosting a youth roundtable in my office with local schoolchildren. I had no agenda for the meeting; I wanted to know the issues they faced in their daily lives. I was absolutely horrified that each and every one of those students articulated to me that the number one issue they faced was bullying and that it was causing them enormous problems and certainly extreme distress. They had often experienced bullying over an extended period. It did not matter which school they attended, the bullying seemed to follow them and it continued online at home. This was not isolated to students in my electorate. Often the bullying was physical. One of the girls said that in one instance she was kicked to the ground and then another student continually kicked her in the stomach. This happened outside school hours, but was on school grounds. It was very, very distressing for the child and, of course, for the parents. One girl who came in to speak with me along with her parents explained that she had experienced ongoing bullying at school and that her bully then continued to harass her online by text messages. She showed me some of the messages she had received via Facebook Messenger in which the bully was telling her to kill herself.

Let us be clear, bullying is not a harmless part of growing up. It has severe and immediate impacts on a child's participation in school, and not surprisingly their ability to learn and enjoy school. Bullying can create high levels of social anxiety and a sense of loss of dignity and control over their life, it makes children feel powerless and can have lasting harmful effects on their life.

I would like to mention some great initiatives across my electorate to tackle bullying. The staff and fantastic principals at Belmay Primary School have introduced short meditations once a day in class. At Rivervale Primary School, instead of having students do yard duty, the teachers and/or principal will interact and play with the students. The school says that it has had a 90 per cent drop in incidents of schoolyard arguments and bullying as a result of that program. I would like to take this opportunity to congratulate those schools for the positive effect that they have had. I note that all my schools across the electorate have really dedicated principals and teaching staff who work tirelessly to ensure that school is a harmonious place for kids to go.

This grievance is certainly not about attributing blame to the schools, because they do a fantastic job, but our society has a bullying problem. Bullying is not a school problem; it is a societal problem. It takes a whole-of-community approach to tackle bullying. My schools are doing a great job, but I am becoming increasingly frustrated that this issue persists, certainly in my electorate and right across the state, because of the profoundly negative effect it has on the lives of the victims of bullying. I would like to know, minister, what action will be taken to help our schools, our families and our children work towards eradicating bullying in our schools. Thank you.

MR P. PAPALIA (Warnbro — Minister for Tourism) [9.28 am]: On behalf of the Minister for Education and Training, I thank the member for Belmont for the grievance. The minister also thanks the member for her ongoing

support of schools in her electorate and in particular her passion for highlighting the dangers associated with bullying and the challenge of confronting bullying in schools.

It is important to make the point that most schools in Western Australia have strong leadership and a strong school culture, and manage bullying incidents really well. We need to acknowledge that fact, because frequently the bad things get all the attention and are magnified in people's minds. However, the minister acknowledges that some parents are concerned that the balance for managing bullying incidents in some schools is not right. The government is aware of these concerns and knows the importance of developing strategies to help prevent and manage bullying in schools. As the member for Belmont acknowledged in her contribution, bullying can happen both in person and online. Research indicates that one in four students has experienced some level of bullying face to face and one in five has experienced bullying online.

The member outlined the issues associated with the challenges and consequences of bullying. The people doing the bullying do not necessarily understand the full extent of the impact on those being bullied and the long-lasting and damaging impact on a person's health, including fatigue, depression and anxiety. Those effects can continue even after the situation is resolved. Bullying can also have a social impact when someone experiences self-doubt and reluctance to participate in group events. That has a terrible consequence for students' study. All the matters the member outlined are serious concerns and it is important that schools, parents and the community work together, because it is everyone's responsibility to participate in and contribute to positive behaviour at school, to build positive relationships and to demonstrate respect and tolerance towards others.

The Minister for Education and Training wants me to say that a safe, supportive and respectful learning environment, free from bullying and harassment, will maximise wellbeing and academic outcomes for students. She believes that more people talking about bullying, which is happening now, is a good thing, because it needs to be called out and identified and responded to. It does not necessarily mean that bullying has become more prevalent, but that people are recognising the importance of talking about it.

The minister acknowledges the work the member for Belmont has done in local schools and wants the member and the house to know that as a result of the member's advocacy, the minister recognises that this is a serious issue and is something to which we need to provide an additional response. The Minister for Education and Training asked her parliamentary secretary, Hon Samantha Rowe, MLC, to lead a project of work to help reduce bullying in schools. The goal of this work was to share best practice examples of the work happening in schools across the state to address bullying. Hon Samantha Rowe visited metropolitan and regional schools and stakeholders across the state to see the practices they have implemented to create a safe environment and to reduce bullying behaviour. She also held a forum late last year for students, parents and school staff, focused on how bullying is experienced and handled, and the existing resources and strategies that are used by young people, parents and schools. This helped identify the key things that schools, students and parents can do to help prevent or reduce the impact of bullying. It was clear from those discussions that, as well as improving resources for schools, parents needed help to navigate working with their child's school and how to identify when bullying is occurring. The parliamentary secretary will release a newly developed bullying resource for schools and parents tomorrow on the National Day of Action against Bullying and Violence. The resources will help schools and parents access a wide range of materials to help reduce bullying. The resources for parents include information about what their school should provide in relation to bullying policies and how bullying is addressed; the definition of bullying; signs of bullying; a step-by-step guide of what parents can do to support their child and work with their school; and contact details for support services.

Some parents are concerned that the balance for dealing with bullying in some schools is not quite right and victims are being told to change their behaviour and perpetrators are being let off. By providing some advice on strategies used in those schools that manage bullying well, parents can be assured that the issue of bullying is being taken seriously. We know that many schools in Western Australia have been able to address bullying effectively. All public schools are required to have an anti-bullying plan, including measures to address all forms of bullying. The plan includes rules regarding the use of mobile phones and other electronic devices.

The Department of Education recognises the seriousness of bullying and cyberbullying and plays an active role in ensuring that schools are educated in keeping students and staff safe. The department has a range of measures in place to help teachers and school staff and to provide ongoing support to students, including school psychologists, mental health programs and preventive programs. Schools employ a range of measures from school-wide programs, targeted mediation and access to school psychology services through to suspensions and, in extreme cases, exclusion. The resources the parliamentary secretary will release tomorrow will complement the great work already occurring in a lot of our schools.

The McGowan government is also delivering on a number of election commitments to help make a difference. It is providing 300 schools with 0.1 FTE of a level 3 teacher time per school to oversee the delivery of evidence-based mental health programs; funding to allow public secondary schools to choose to use the Safe Schools program to

help reduce bullying and discrimination; and ongoing funding for in-school chaplaincy services. A positive school climate is critical for preventing bullying, but support must also extend beyond the classroom. Other influences on the lives of young people can have an impact at schools and we know bullying is not an issue that is isolated to school grounds; it extends well beyond the school gate. The member's advocacy has raised awareness with the minister. The minister has her parliamentary secretary onto this matter. I look forward to the additional resources being announced tomorrow to help schools further.