

Division 29: Education Services, \$332 384 000 —

Mr M.W. Sutherland, Chairman.

Dr E. Constable, Minister for Education.

Mr R. Strickland, Chief Executive Officer.

Mr B. Parkin, Executive Director, Corporate Governance and Non-Government Schools.

Mr R. Willis, Finance Manager.

Ms R. Kemp, Acting Director, Education and Training Regulation.

Mr T. Werner, Director, Higher Education and Legislative Review.

Mr M.R. Brown, Manager, Non-Government Schools.

[Witnesses introduced.]

The CHAIRMAN: I call the member for Southern River.

Mr P. ABETZ: I refer to page 374 of budget paper No 2. About halfway down the page under “Expenses” is a line item entitled “Supplementation Grants for Special Education Students”. Is that the Schools Plus funding for students with disabilities? If it is, how much does that work out at per student with special needs?

Dr E. CONSTABLE: Schools Plus is a program within the Department of Education and Training. Through the Department of Education Services there is additional funding and supplementation grants to non-government schools for special education students. I will give some detail. Additional grants are paid for students with disabilities by applying loadings to the normal state per capita grant. Depending on their category, non-government schools get a general state per capita grant for each student, and then there are loadings for students, depending on their disabilities. The loadings are 110 per cent for students with mild disabilities, 210 per cent for those with moderate disabilities or 360 per cent for those who are categorised as having severe disabilities. We have additional grants for students with high support needs, those with very severe disabilities. Based on four sessions a week, the additional amount would be \$10 415 for a child in kindergarten with a very severe disability and \$26 038 for pre-primary, primary and secondary students. That is in addition to the base grant.

Mr P. ABETZ: If a student needs a full-time teaching assistant, that will still leave the school out of pocket.

Dr E. CONSTABLE: The member would find that parents pay school fees and there is also a base grant. I cannot answer that question about how much out of pocket schools would be. There is certainly a large grant to support schools in these instances. I will ask Mr Strickland to add a comment.

Mr R. Strickland: Non-government schools get about 25 per cent of their funding from the state government, about 50 per cent from the commonwealth government and about 25 per cent from school fees. Our loadings of 110 per cent, 210 per cent and 360 per cent are much more generous than what the commonwealth government gives. If there are any shortfalls, it is in the commonwealth funding.

Mrs M.H. ROBERTS: I asked the minister a question about the Rural and Remote Education Advisory Council and the position of its director. What is the future for that group under this minister and this government?

Dr E. CONSTABLE: For the committee?

Mrs M.H. ROBERTS: For the committee and for the functions that it fulfils.

Dr E. CONSTABLE: I understand that this committee was set up under Hon Norman Moore when he was the minister, so it dates back to the previous Liberal government. It seemed to be important then and continues to be important now. I only learnt of this in the past week or so, and I am still in discussions with the department. I would like to see that committee continue. Two or three recent meetings have been chaired by the minister assisting, Hon Terry Redman, because it is an area that is of obvious interest to him.

Mrs M.H. ROBERTS: I am aware of that.

Dr E. CONSTABLE: In the next short while we will be sorting out where we go from here. As far as I am concerned, the committee will continue its work.

Mrs M.H. ROBERTS: The minister may have had drawn to her attention a letter that Mr Don Boyd, the director of the Rural and Remote Education Advisory Council, wrote to RREAC members. He said that negotiations to extend his secondment from the Department of Education and Training had not been successful and that his last day with the RREAC secretariat would be Thursday, 21 May. I have seen and heard some of the responses that the constituent groups have made to the cutting of his secondment. A view has been expressed by more than one person that Education is punishing this group and taking funding away and expecting that the royalties for regions should fund this kind of thing. There is a growing view by some people that because of the

money going to royalties for regions, some of the mainstream departments such as Education are making cuts to regional budgets. Is the minister able to tell me whether any money is being cut from the area of rural and remote education?

Dr E. CONSTABLE: The member raised a number of issues in her question. The first is a letter written by Mr Boyd. I have not seen that letter. He is held in very high regard by the members of the committee for the work that has been done over the past three years. Decisions about secondments and employment of people within departments, as the member knows from the Public Sector Act, are decisions for directors general and others, not for ministers. I have not been involved in that decision.

Mrs M.H. ROBERTS: I well and truly understand that. People are suggesting to me that this is to save money and that is the motivation for the redeployment.

Dr E. CONSTABLE: I am not aware that that was the motivation. All I know is that the decision was made by the department not to renew that secondment. We will be looking at the best way to support this committee in the future. It is early days given that it has only occurred in the past week or so.

Mrs M.H. ROBERTS: I ask for supplementary information. Given that the minister does not know whether money will be saved as a result of this move and any moves at RREAC, will she be able to provide me with that information by way of supplementary information?

Dr E. CONSTABLE: I am not exactly sure what the member is asking for.

Mrs M.H. ROBERTS: I want to know whether there is any cut to the RREAC budget.

Dr E. CONSTABLE: I can get that information for the member. Given that it is early days in determining where the committee goes from here, I may not have that information in the next 10 days.

Mrs M.H. ROBERTS: If not, I am quite happy for the answer to say that the minister does not have that information available. If it is available, will the minister provide it to me by way of supplementary information?

Dr E. CONSTABLE: I will ask Mr Strickland to comment on this and I will see how we go with the supplementary information. I am quite prepared to do that.

Mr R. Strickland: Mr Boyd was seconded from the Department of Education and Training because he was a suitable person to go into that role. I negotiated a three-year secondment with the former director general. The Department of Education and Training has a strict policy that secondments are only for three years. I was advised by the director general that those three years had come up. Mr Boyd has gone back and we are now in a situation of looking at how we replace him. Under the previous arrangement, the Department of Education and Training had contributed half of Mr Boyd's salary. Another arrangement will now need to be made, and we will do some negotiation to find a suitable person. We do have funding in the budget for at least half a full-time equivalent at Mr Boyd's level, which was at the highest level of principal, plus a level 2 officer, plus some additional funding, and that has not been reduced at all.

[3.10 pm]

Mrs M.H. ROBERTS: Given that there seems to be some unanimity about the credentials of Mr Boyd, and I note that Hon Matt Benson-Lidholm and, indeed, Hon Terry Waldron, have commented on what an excellent appointment Mr Boyd was, it seems to me to be rather short-sighted to move someone on just because the department has a fixed policy of allowing a person to do a great job for only three years at a time. Will the minister reconsider that policy and allow Mr Boyd to continue in that role—a decision that I know would be applauded by hundreds of people in rural and remote Western Australia?

Dr E. CONSTABLE: The decision to have Mr Boyd return to the Department of Education and Training was made by the Director General of the Department of Education and Training, not by officers of the Department of Education Services.

Mrs M.H. ROBERTS: I am advised that it was because of a policy of not allowing anyone to stay in a position for longer than three years.

Dr E. CONSTABLE: But that policy is a policy of the Department of Education and Training, not the Department of Education Services.

Mrs M.H. ROBERTS: Does the government set policy or do the bureaucrats set policy?

Dr E. CONSTABLE: The department makes decisions about the employment and deployment of people. I do not do that. I will discuss the matter the member has raised with the Director General of the Department of Education and Training.

Chairman; Mr Peter Abetz; Dr Elizabeth Constable; Mrs Michelle Roberts; Ms Andrea Mitchell; Mr Paul Papalia; Mr Mark McGowan

Ms A.R. MITCHELL: I refer to page 373, “Cashflows From Financing Activities”, and the item “Proceeds from borrowings”. What will be the impact on non-government schools of the decision by the government to not follow through with the undertaking to provide an additional \$10 million for the low interest loan scheme? I believe this was supported by the former Labor government as well.

Dr E. CONSTABLE: During the election campaign, I understand that an undertaking was given by the then shadow spokesperson for education and training, Hon Peter Collier, that an additional \$10 million would be provided to non-government schools for low interest loans. Subsequent to that, of course, the Building the Education Revolution funding has been provided by the commonwealth. That funding has made a huge difference to all schools—not just public schools but private and Catholic schools. On the basis of that, and on the basis of the drop in interest rates, it was decided that it was not necessary to continue with that funding.

Mr P. PAPALIA: So you are going to cut your funding and let the feds take it up!

Dr E. CONSTABLE: There has not been a cut. We are just not increasing the funding for that.

Mr M. McGOWAN: That was applauded by the Catholic and independent schools.

Dr E. CONSTABLE: The Catholic schools, along with other non-government schools, will do very well from the Building the Education Revolution funding, which they were not aware was coming—\$305 million for Catholic schools, and \$208 million for non-government schools—and that has negated the need for this additional funding.

Mr M. McGOWAN: We were both committed to it—the government followed us—and the schools applauded it, and everyone was happy.

The appropriation was recommended.