

SCHOOLS — STUDENT NON-ATTENDANCE — GERALDTON

Grievance

MR I.C. BLAYNEY (Geraldton) [9.15 am]: I rise to grieve to the Minister for Education and Training, who, of course, is represented in here by the Minister for Racing and Gaming. I thank the member for taking this grievance.

The issue is student non-attendance at schools in Geraldton. It is getting gradually worse and the current system is not addressing the problem well enough. I see young people—young teenagers mostly—wandering around the streets and the CBD during the day. I see them quite regularly over a period of weeks, so I recognise them straight away. There is obviously no system for recognising them and returning them to school. As I said, the problem seems to be getting worse.

It starts after school holidays. They hang around for one or two months then they usually go back to their normal home. On one occasion I asked a policeman about this. I asked him whether he knew who the kids were. He told me who they were and where they were from. Some were from Karratha and some were from Port Hedland. He said that they had taken them back to the parents, but the parents were not interested. They had said that they were on holiday in Geraldton for a while and while they are on holiday their children do not attend school.

Although the process of identifying a child who has not attended school may not be difficult, contacting the parents to provide this advice may be difficult and may not lead to the child's school attendance or provide a reasonable reason for their non-attendance. Currently, if a student is absent from school, the parent is requested to provide a reasonable explanation within three days and the school is required to take reasonable steps to contact the parent, locate the student and restore attendance. However, in the main, these kids are enrolled at another school somewhere else. That school will not know where the parents are or where the child is because they have just ceased to attend school. If the student cannot be located using reasonable steps, the principal or a nominee is to complete a student whose whereabouts are unknown request form. It must be completed within 15 days of the student's last day of attendance and sent to the student tracking coordinator, who will check to see whether the student has enrolled in a new school and notify the requesting school that this is the case.

I was first alerted to this a few years ago. A constituent rang me and said a group of children who were living in the house next door had not been to school for six weeks; they were always playing outside and were not attending school. I rang the district education office and explained the situation to them. They told me that it was not really their job anymore but they would go to the house and find out the story. They saw the family and were told that they were just there for six weeks from Mullewa and had decided that they would not do anything about the kids' education. That process in no way addresses the problem. If kids simply wag school for a day or initially turn up then go truant, a message may be sent to parents to advise that the children did not attend school that day, and many parents will directly address the matter with their children. The continued or sporadic absence of many students from school should create greater concern. On another occasion, I talked to an Aboriginal education aide. She said that it was obvious to her that there had always been a problem and that when Aboriginal kids go from primary school to high school, some drop out. I have heard that that happens every year with varying numbers. She said she sees kids walking around the streets. She recognises them and knows that they are not going to high school. The current process takes too long to implement and it does not address the issues of intermittent absenteeism and, more importantly, transient families who have withdrawn their children from one school to go somewhere else, which prevents their children from attending school for what becomes weeks at a time. There is no mechanism for the community or businesses to report seeing kids during school hours. In Geraldton, school-age children are not allowed in any business unless they have a note to prove why they are not at school. The business community is doing its bit but there is no follow-up or proactive mechanism to say, "Why isn't that child at school? Let's find out what the story is—who they are and where they are from—and get them to going school". Truancy officers placed at district education offices have the capacity to patrol towns, shopping centres and recreational areas to quickly stop, identify and return students to school when they are seen roaming around on school days during school hours. A quick response to unauthorised absenteeism would be more effective to discourage this type of behaviour. The provision of truancy officers' details or a contact hotline would enable the community and businesses to report absent students to ensure their quick return to school.

Getting students to school and keeping them there is incredibly important. My wife is a retired primary school teacher. She told me once that if a child loses a day, it takes a week to pick it up; if they lose a week, it takes a month; and if they lose a month, it takes a year. Other penalties should be considered for students with a long history of recurrent absenteeism, rather than non-attendance, to encourage parents to enforce their children's attendance at school. I believe that truancy officers on the ground patrolling our streets would make a significant difference. I raised this issue with one of my school principals. I said to her, "What would be the effect of bringing back truancy officers?" She said, "Ian, that would be the best thing that you could possibly do". The system seems to rely on the police to do something about absentee students. It is not really their job; it is another job that has been passed to the police. It really is a job for the Department of Education.

MR P. PAPALIA (Warnbro — Minister for Tourism) [9.22 am]: I thank the member for Geraldton for his grievance, for his ongoing support of schools in his electorate and his obvious interest in good outcomes for students. I am responding today to the issue of student attendance in Western Australian public schools on behalf of the Minister for Education and Training. I will rely fairly heavily on the notes provided to me so that the member for Geraldton gets a response from the minister.

The Department of Education prioritises student attendance in all WA public schools and maintains high expectations of success for every student. Sections 33 and 34 of the School Education Act 1999 provide for the designation and badging of attendance officers. This is an authority under the act, not a position. Any person employed in the department can be designated with this authority. Staff accept the responsibilities of a badged attendance officer as part of their normal duties. Schools designate and locally manage this designation based on individual circumstances and need. Badged attendance officers are able to fulfil duties that would typically be understood as those that would be performed by a position called a “truancy officer” should such a position be designated.

Under section 36 of the act, badged attendance officers are empowered to stop and question any person they reasonably believe to be an absentee student. They are also empowered to enter any premises to which the public has access, free of charge, for the purpose of checking whether absentee students are on the premises. They may question a person about their name, address, age and the name of the school at which they are enrolled. It is an offence under the act for the person not to provide this information or to provide false information. It is also an offence to resist, hinder or obstruct an attendance officer who is exercising his or her powers under the act. Staff in both schools and education regional offices can be designated and badged as attendance officers. As at 30 June 2018, there were 1 104 badged attendance officers in Western Australia. Of these, 117 are located in the midwest education region, which includes the member’s electorate of Geraldton. Of the 117 badged attendance officers in this region, 112 are based in schools. The midwest education region has 45 schools. This number does not include two Schools of the Air nor multiple campuses of the same school. Of the 12 public schools in the state electorate of Geraldton, nine have badged attendance officers. Numbers of badged attendance officers can fluctuate when badges expire, badged officers move schools or an individual school’s needs are re-evaluated.

Even if the designation of “truancy officer” was used, they would not have any powers that are not already conferred on badged attendance officers by the act. The causes of student absence are complex and often challenging. Improving student attendance is best addressed through strong cooperation among schools, families and the broader community and a range of locally determined strategies at the school level to assist and encourage student attendance. The minister believes that truancy officers based in regional education offices would not necessarily have connections with, or knowledge of, the families and communities that local, school-based badged attendance officers currently have. Badged attendance officers have the powers that the member is hoping truancy officers would be able to employ.

Several strategies support schools to improve student attendance. The department provides schools with a student attendance reporting application that supports regions and schools to identify individual students with persistent absences. Data sources support schools to monitor and investigate student attendance for cohorts or individual students. The department has developed an online student attendance toolkit that provides a framework that supports school leaders to plan for improved attendance. The toolkit includes support, strategies and resources for schools to build improved attendance in existing whole-school planning to develop a culture in which all staff, including leadership teams, teachers and support staff, have shared understandings of attendance and play a role in supporting improved attendance.

Currently, nine Western Australian schools participate in the Remote School Attendance Strategy, a commonwealth initiative aimed at improving the attendance rates of Aboriginal students. In the midwest, Carnarvon Community College and Meekatharra District High School are Remote School Attendance Strategy schools. Schools also use a software application to automatically notify parents electronically via short messaging service and/or email about unexplained student absences. This is the methodology to which the member referred earlier. He also referred to an example of cooperation between schools and the broader community to reduce truancy levels, which is the Keeping Kids in School program. This is the program in which businesses are involved. It is a program and was not just initiated by businesses. Keeping Kids in School is a collaborative project involving the Department of Education, the Western Australia Police Force and local businesses. The program encourages local businesses to promote a message to the community that students of compulsory school age need to be at school and not at local businesses during school hours. To verify the legitimacy of school absences, a standardised leave pass can be issued by schools. The leave pass assists badged attendance officers, police and local businesses to identify students and verify the legitimacy of school absences. When there is persistent student absence, attendance advisory panels and responsible parenting agreements are additional legislated measures to address the causes.

As the minister said, the causes of student absence are complex and contextual and need to be addressed through a range of strategies at the local level. The minister does not believe that creating a new designation of truancy

officers would assist in addressing the persistent absence of a small minority of students. I suggest that based on the information provided by the minister, the member for Geraldton should check the number of badged attendance officers at his schools to see whether they are being employed appropriately and effectively. That would be a good course of action in the near term to address the specific problem he raised with the minister.