

COTTESLOE EARLY INTERVENTION CENTRE

Grievance

MR P. PAPALIA (Warnbro) [9.11 am]: I grieve to the Minister for Education this morning on behalf of my constituent, Steph Carbone. I say, at the outset, that Steph, in my view, represents a living state treasure. She and her husband, Joe, have fostered over 360 children, and 40 of the most recent have been high-needs children. When Steph comes to me, and to this place, with an issue about disabled children, we should, in her case, listen.

I also fear that this grievance represents or highlights what may be a very sad and potentially very damaging pattern of behaviour by this government in the way it treats, in particular, disabled children. Recently, we had the embarrassment of the Carson Street affair in which the department, under this minister's leadership, announced it would cut funding to Carson Street School. Only after it was shamed by the opposition into a backflip, did that position change.

Dr E. Constable interjected.

Mr P. PAPALIA: A decision was made, announced and then rescinded after some public pressure. We subsequently had the Premier tell the disabled people, their carers and loved ones, of this state that they are well off; they should be happy with their situation; they should go away and not support the national disability insurance scheme. Subsequently, after a bit of public pressure, we see the Premier backing away from that statement. Now, sadly, I fear that we are bringing to this place, a third incidence of this minister and her department making an announcement, making a decision and then subsequently deciding to consult with the people who are most impacted upon by that very poor and short-sighted decision.

I will outline what has occurred. On 26 May, the minister released a press release entitled "Statewide Education Services to deliver improved support for schools". There is no mention in that release that the Western Australian Institute for Deaf Education early intervention centre was to close and be shifted. Nothing in that release states that; that line does not appear. Buried within the release is the line "including deaf and hard of hearing; speech and language development" in the paragraph that refers to the types of services and experts that will be shifted to and co-located at Padbury. I understand the justification that the Department of Education will be providing the minister; namely, that services will be co-located, therefore making administration a lot easier. Having everyone in the one place makes it easier for the bureaucrats. I can understand the minister accepting that, signing off on it and issuing this press release. However, I am concerned because the minister has not talked to the people who will be most impacted upon by that decision.

The next piece of evidence I have is contained in an email sent to the Premier by Steph Carbone on 24 June. According to my notes, Steph writes —

Hi, Mr Barnett

Could you tell me why you are moving WAIDE, the WA Institute for Deaf Education?

In her email, she suggests that she has not been officially contacted by the department, that she has not been officially contacted by the minister, and that she has not been contacted by anyone to tell her that the early intervention centre at Cottesloe is closing and will be shifted to Padbury, which is a very, very long way north of its current location. Steph inadvertently found out about this announcement during discussions with someone in the department, who has provided support to her in her home, while enthusing about the benefits to be had from early intervention at the early intervention centre as a result of experiencing those benefits for her foster son Elia, who, now aged 12, has Down syndrome and is also deaf. She took Elia to the early intervention centre and saw a profound and positive impact as a result of that early intervention. Steph was enthusing to the person from the department about how she intended at the very earliest possible opportunity to take her daughter, Destiny—who is deaf and blind and also challenged with a mental disability—to the centre. Steph said that she was looking forward to getting her daughter to the early intervention centre to get her the early intervention that would have positive benefits. However, she was told by the person from the department, "I have been told that we are not to tell you about this, Steph, but I am sorry, the early intervention centre is shutting down and is going up to Padbury." That is how Steph heard about it. That is unacceptable.

In response to her email to the Premier, Steph then received a letter from the minister in which, according to my notes, the minister stated, in the second paragraph—

As you are aware, the Department of Education has announced the intention to relocate a number of specialist services.

The minister is assuming that Steph knows about the decision, but she knows only because she found out inadvertently when a good Samaritan, who was told not to tell her, told her!

Later in that letter, the minister goes on to state —

I am advised that in the near future a senior officer from the Department of Education will meet with families from the WA Institute of Deaf Education and the Early Intervention Centre, to consider the impact that the move may have on individual families, and to ensure a quality support service continues to be provided.

The minister makes the decision, makes the announcement, and then goes and finds out what the impact will be! Does the minister not think that is slightly out of kilter? Does she not think that the better or preferred course of action might be to talk to people before a decision is made?

When Steph approached me, she told me there are no other services down her way. Steph lives in Karnup. In the morning, including a trip to preschool, it already takes her about an hour to get to Princess Margaret Hospital for Children. I think she leaves home about 90 minutes before her appointment time at PMH. If the service is moved to Padbury, that will add between 45 minutes and one hour to her journey. She will just not be able to do it. Her child, Destiny, and the 30 other kids at the centre who live south of the river will be deprived of the services they require. I want the minister to answer: what has she done to consult with people; when did she do it; and what services will the department provide in the southern suburbs for the people who are going to be deprived of this much-needed service the moment it is shifted to Padbury because the bureaucrats have told the minister to do it?

DR E. CONSTABLE (Churchlands — Minister for Education) [9.17 am]: I start by reassuring the member for Warnbro that there will be very good services for people living in the south metropolitan area.

Mr P. Papalia: Early intervention centres?

Dr E. CONSTABLE: Let me just go through it, so that the member will know about it in detail.

I have been to the centre at Cottesloe twice since I have been the minister. The reason for that is that the people working there feel the facilities are not adequate for what they need to do. In fact, the early intervention centre is located at, I understand, the former Mosman Park School for the Deaf and was not purpose-built. At Padbury, we will have purpose-built facilities. It is very important that we have that. I recognise, and the government recognises, the great importance of early diagnosis and early intervention, and working with parents and their infants and children when they have a disability such as hearing loss, or if they are deaf. The early intervention program, in fact, goes back a long way, to 1975. It started in Johnson Street in Cottesloe before moving to its present location. It was originally called the Parent Infant Centre, which suggests how important it is that we work with infants and parents together, because parents need to learn a lot of skills.

The reason for moving the centre to the Padbury site is so that we can have a purpose-built facility. I recognise, as does the member for Warnbro, that Perth has grown a great deal over the past 20 or 25 years.

Mr P. Papalia: But you can't use it if you live in Karnup!

Dr E. CONSTABLE: Hang on! Just a moment; let me finish and you will have the answer that I think you are looking for.

I recognise the very points that the member made about travel and so on. However, a purpose-built centre is needed to bring together a whole lot of services—diagnostic services, services for parents to learn how to manage a child with a cochlear implant or hearing aids and a whole range of things. It is really important to note that the staff at the WA Institute for Deaf Education in Cottesloe have been isolated from their colleagues who specialise in the areas that the member mentioned—intellectual disability, visual disability and so on. So they will all be working together, and they need that cross-referencing and working together. At the same time, I recognise exactly what the member has said, and this has been put in place. It must be borne in mind that Padbury will not be ready until the end of next year. It will be almost 18 months before it will be ready. There is plenty of time to negotiate and talk to parents about their needs—those parents who will find that centre very difficult to access because of its locality.

Mr P. Papalia: So you are confirming that you didn't talk to the parents before making the decision.

Dr E. CONSTABLE: I am confirming that some discussions have already happened with parents in the last few weeks—I have been told that by the department—and that there will be facilities —

Mr P. Papalia: What sort of discussions?

Dr E. CONSTABLE: I was not at the discussions. That is something that happens between the staff at the Department of Education and the parents, but some discussions have occurred. Let me just finish. There will be a location for parents from south of the river so that they will still be able to access the early intervention services and will not have to travel to Padbury. In fact, we will end up with more than we have now. We will end up with the Padbury service and we will end up with an early intervention service for people who live south of the river, recognising that people are spread right across the state.

Mr P. Papalia: Where will it be?

Dr E. CONSTABLE: We provide individual services to people living in country areas.

Mr P. Papalia: Where will the centre south of the river be?

Dr E. CONSTABLE: We are looking at that. It might be close to the current one; it might be in Cottesloe. It could be in Fremantle.

Dr A.D. Buti: Cottesloe?

Dr E. CONSTABLE: It is in Cottesloe now.

Mr P. Papalia: I know. Why are you shifting it?

Dr E. CONSTABLE: It is because we want an integrated service. The facilities currently at the WAIDE centre are not adequate for what we need. They are not purpose-built for children who are deaf.

Mr P. Papalia: They will be inadequate if no-one uses them because they are too far away.

Dr E. CONSTABLE: The member must recognise that people not only south of the river, but also north of the river have children who are deaf. There will be two —

Mr P. Papalia: There are 60 kids at the centre and 30 of them live south of the river.

Dr E. CONSTABLE: Yes. The member is not listening. He does not want to listen. He does not want to hear what I am saying. There will not be just one centre in Padbury.

Mr P. Papalia: Where is the other centre going to be?

Dr E. CONSTABLE: That is still to be determined. There are 18 months to go, and that will be determined in consultation —

Mr P. Papalia: When are you going to talk to the parents of children south of the river about this issue?

Dr E. CONSTABLE: I have been informed that meetings with parents at the centre have already been held during August.

Mr P. Papalia: When?

Dr E. CONSTABLE: During August there have been some meetings.

Mr D.A. Templeman: You should go and meet them.

Mr P. Papalia: You should; you should go and meet these people and ask them —

Dr E. CONSTABLE: I have been to WAIDE twice. I have met with parents at WAIDE already.

Mr P. Papalia: You should talk to people who are being deprived of this service.

The SPEAKER: Member for Warnbro, you are asking questions.

Mr P. Papalia: I am asking questions, but I want to get an answer rather than just fluff about how good the services are. I want to get an answer about —

Dr E. CONSTABLE: Member for Warnbro —

The SPEAKER: Member for Warnbro, you have asked some questions—I recognise that—and I think you are expecting some answers. If you continue to interject, the time will elapse and you will not get your answers. That is all I am suggesting to you.

Mr P. Papalia: Thank you.

Dr E. CONSTABLE: All I can say to the member for Warnbro is that if he stops interrupting, he will learn something. All he is doing is asking the same question.

Mr P. Papalia: I asked you a question in the upper house on Tuesday, so you knew this was coming. Why don't you know when the consultation was done and what consultation was undertaken?

Dr E. CONSTABLE: I have just told you that meetings were held in August.

Mr P. Papalia: You said before that you thought there might have been a meeting.

Dr E. CONSTABLE: No, I said that meetings were held in August.

Mr P. Papalia: With every single one of the parents who is going to be impacted upon?

Dr E. CONSTABLE: I do not know who attended, but meetings were called in August to discuss this with the parents. There are 16 months in which to consult parents.

Mr P. Papalia: Will you undertake now —

Dr E. CONSTABLE: Just stop interrupting and I will —

Mr P. Papalia: No, because there's one minute and —

Dr E. CONSTABLE: No; stop interrupting.

Dr K.D. Hames: Why don't you just settle down and finish the grievance, because that's not how grievances work.

Mr P. Papalia: I want to get a commitment from her that she is actually going to have a centre in the south of the river.

The SPEAKER: Members!

Mr P. Papalia: I want to get a commitment that she is going to provide a centre in the south of the river for the people who will be impacted.

The SPEAKER: Member for Warnbro, I do not want to formally call you during your grievance, and I am not going to do that. I think the best course of action would be to listen to what the minister has to say. If you are not convinced that you have the information you are seeking, might I suggest that you speak to the minister after this process. The process is for you to get information back, and continual interjecting is not going to enable that to happen.

Dr E. CONSTABLE: Member for Warnbro, there will be more services for people with young children who are deaf. We will have an integrated centre in Padbury, and there will be an early intervention service, very similar to what there is now, for people living south of the river so that it is easy for them to access it. We are increasing our offerings to people, not decreasing them. I can assure the member that there is plenty of time to select an ideal location for people living south of the river. But let me tell the member that people all over the state have deaf children, and we go out and visit and work one to one with those people. We are not going to diminish the services to people with deaf children. That will not happen.