

MOORA RESIDENTIAL COLLEGE — CLOSURE

Grievance

MR R.S. LOVE (Moore) [9.08 am]: My grievance today is to the minister representing the Minister for Education and Training and is about the Moora Residential College, located in the town of Moora, 170 kilometres north of Perth. The college provides a residential boarding facility for students attending Central Midlands Senior High School, which is the only senior high school in the 72 000 square kilometre Moore electorate. On Wednesday, 13 December 2017, the minister announced that Moora Residential College would close at the end of 2018, and despite reasoned and strident opposition to that decision it has not been reversed. I presented a grievance on 14 September 2017 regarding the shelving of an \$8.7 million royalties for regions upgrade to the college. I now know from a briefing note prepared by the Department of Education for Minister Ellery that was released on 13 June 2017—some three months before the decision was made to shelve investment in the college and the subsequent grievance—which I received under a freedom of information request, that the government had already considered that the closure of the college was inevitable following the shelving of that royalties for regions upgrade. The briefing note is stark and it presents only two options: do the upgrade or close the college. We now know that the government in effect had already decided to close the college sometime in mid-2017. Yet Minister Papalia, representing the Minister for Education and Training, said in response to that grievance of 14 September 2017 —

Nevertheless, the college provides a high level of support and service to its students. As indicated, the maintenance program will proceed and its scale and the allocation of funds are being determined. I can confirm that the advice I am provided with by the minister in the other place is that the services will be continued.

That statement was contrary to the advice the minister was already in possession of, and was misleading. Further to that, a petition calling for the reinstatement of the royalties for regions upgrade—petition 29—was presented to the Legislative Council Standing Committee on Environment and Public Affairs. The chair wrote to the minister on 30 November 2017 seeking her comment on the request in the petition. In her letter of response to the chair, Minister Ellery outlined her reasons for the decision and concluded by stating, “It is my intention to work with Hon Alannah MacTiernan, MLC, Minister for Regional Development, and the families of the students who board at Moora Residential College to identify alternative options to enable the students to continue their education at Central Midlands Senior High School.” Indeed, further advice to the minister obtained under a freedom of information request refers to a meeting between the minister and the acting director general of the Department of Education on 15 January 2018 that discussed boarding options in Moora and indicated that the department considered that there were viable boarding options such as homestays, private boarding, and group homes. Yet despite the feasibility of this being discussed positively by the department and despite the assurances to the committee, the experience and treatment of boarding students wanting to stay in Moora is completely different. Indeed, they have been told that no assistance will be given to them to find alternative boarding in Moora. An email communication from Allison Ramm, the head of education in the wheatbelt, to Karakin parent Debbie Richards states, “If you choose to access private board in Moora for River”—Debbie’s son—“this is, unfortunately, something that I am not able to assist with. I am unable to enter into private boarding arrangements.”

This is in direct contradiction to the advice given to the minister and contradicts assurances from the minister to the Legislative Council committee. It is a damning indictment of the lack of honesty and transparency and the lack of due process in the conduct of the decision around the closure and the subsequent treatment of the families of Moora Residential College. “So what?” members might say. These kids and their families are real people; they are not pawns in some silly political game.

They are people such as Mandy Grieger, who is the mother of Jack van Voorst, a 13-year-old student in year 8. Jack has autism and does not adapt readily to change, nor does he like big groups of people. Routine and consistency are extremely important to Jack. It took Jack almost four terms in 2017 to make a successful transition to high school in Moora from his home in Eneabba. Jack was upset and he was not coping. He would lock himself in the car and refuse to go home. He threatened to take his life. He likened school to jail and, understandably, this affected Mandy’s mental health. It should be noted that Jack lost his father to suicide some years ago. Staff at both Moora Residential College and Central Midlands Senior High School were professional. They embraced Jack and his condition and worked extremely hard to make him feel comfortable and welcome. Nothing was too much trouble for the college staff. Over the course of 2017, Jack adjusted to the change. He matured and by term 4 became settled in his new environment. He survived his first year away from home and, in fact, thrived. Jack now feels secure and enjoys his time at high school and Moora. Minister Ellery has suggested that Jack attend Geraldton Senior High School, with nearly 800 students, or Northam Senior High School, with a student population in excess of 600. Knowing the difficulties Jack had adjusting to a relatively small high school of fewer than 200 students and

a boarding community of about 30, Mandy cannot contemplate sending him to either of these schools as it would totally overwhelm him. Mandy and Jack want Jack to remain in Moora.

Another parent is Brett Woods of north east Badgingarra, who writes —

I am a single Father to my daughters, Aleesha (Year 11) and Megan (Year 9). The girls lost their mother in tragic circumstances 10 years ago and since then I have been their sole carer. The three of us share a very close bond and Megan, in particular, needs to be near to me.

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Boarding my daughters at Moora Residential College was a great and an obvious option. Aleesha has resided at Moora College for four years and Megan has been there for three years. Under the circumstances, boarding has been a good experience as the girls have female guidance in their everyday lives. Both girls enjoy the boarding experience but also have the option to come home at weekends, given the proximity to our home.

The staff at the hostel work really hard to make Moora College a second home for the students and ensure they are supported in their studies. Megan and Aleesha appreciate the extra tutoring on offer by staff and Aleesha has selected ATAR subjects and is very focused with a view to studying nursing.

... I will not move Aleesha to another school for Year 12 when she is half way through her ATAR studies. This would be too disruptive and would threaten her studies. The logistics of having Megan board at Northam ... do not stack up. I am not prepared to move from our home in Badgingarra—it is the only home my daughters have known and one they associate with their late Mother.

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The Department of Education contacted me in February and offered to help with school bus services but I have heard nothing more from them. The uncertainty around these future arrangements is causing us all a great deal of stress.

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I resent my children being treated as second class citizens and their choice of school being threatened. They feel secure and are settled at Moora College which is important to me as a sole parent. Country students face a great deal of disadvantage and I do not understand why my daughters must spend a ridiculous number of hours travelling to school in the future when there is a perfectly good hostel in operation at present.

I ask that the minister either keep this residential facility open for a number of years to allow current students to transition through, or, as his minister said she would do earlier, work constructively with families to provide other viable options such as homestay, private boarding or group housing for students who wish to remain at Moora and remain at Central Midlands Senior High School.

MR P. PAPALIA (Warnbro — Minister for Tourism) [9.15 am]: At the outset I reaffirm that I am representing the Minister for Education and Training in this place. I will quote the member for Moore. In his speech, the member said that these kids and their families are real people and not some pawns in a silly political game. The issues of Mandy Grieger and Brett Woods sound quite confronting and challenging. I suggest to the member that if he wanted, on their behalf, to seek a reasonable, responsible and adult response, he should have talked to the minister directly before coming into this place and making a speech to someone who is representing that minister and has no knowledge of the individuals or the department's engagement with these families. All the member is doing is engaging in a silly political game. It is embarrassing and he should be ashamed of himself!

Several members interjected.

The ACTING SPEAKER: Members!

Mr P. PAPALIA: The member is engaging in exactly what he has accused the minister of. He is engaging in a silly political game and it is embarrassing. I have a response to the —

Ms M.J. Davies interjected.

The ACTING SPEAKER: Member for Central Wheatbelt!

Mr P. PAPALIA: I have a response that has been provided by the minister. Doubtless, it is in response to the extent of the information that the member provided in advance about the grievance. I doubt very much that he mentioned Mandy Grieger or Brett Woods. I doubt very much that he did because he came into this place with the obvious intent —

Mr R.S. Love interjected.

The ACTING SPEAKER: Member for Moore, you have had your seven minutes. Listen to the answer. It is too bad if you do not like it.

Mr P. PAPALIA: He had the obvious intent of playing a silly political game. It is really cold of him to do that and it is embarrassing.

I am responding today on behalf of the Minister for Education and Training. The Department of Education completed a line-by-line review of the operations and programs when making decisions about contributing to budget repair measures. The decision to close Moora Residential College from 2019 demonstrates responsible financial management. It will not compromise access to quality regional secondary education. It was a decision that was not taken lightly. Moora Residential College has a current enrolment of 25 students and a capacity of 50 students so the occupancy rate is 50 per cent. In 2017 there were 32 students, which is still only 64 per cent. For each of the past 12 years, 40 students or fewer have lived at Moora Residential College. The majority of students came from the regional towns of Lancelin, Ledge Point or Seabird. Others come from Jurien Bay, Cervantes, Badgingarra, Cataby, Cooljarloo, Dandaragan, Hill River, Regans Ford and Wedge Island.

It is now well documented that the previous government, very late in its last term, allocated \$8.7 million from the royalties for regions fund to upgrade Moora Residential College. Many figures have been used in media commentary about the cost of upgrading Moora Residential College, specifically the amounts of \$500 000 and \$1.3 million. There is no evidence or reports available to support these claims.

Point of Order

Mr R.S. LOVE: I cannot hear the minister and I cannot see the minister.

The ACTING SPEAKER: Minister, there seems to be a scrum in the middle of the chamber.

Grievance Resumed

Mr P. PAPALIA: I am not going to go through the minister's whole response about cost because the member is clearly aware of it and it is all on the public record. A detailed report regarding the independent analysis of the cost to restore the college to safe use has been tabled in the other place. The member for Moore knows how much that will cost; it is between \$7.2 million and \$11.2 million. It is not \$150 000 or whatever figure has been bandied around. The member for Moore mentioned two individual cases.

Mr R.S. Love: It was three cases.

Mr P. PAPALIA: It was three children, but two families.

Mr R.S. Love: No, it was three families.

Mr P. PAPALIA: Who was the other one?

Mr R.S. Love: Debbie Richards.

Mr P. PAPALIA: Okay—Debbie Richards as well, sorry.

With respect to the three families, because it is nearing the end of semester 1 and decisions need to be made about education options for 2019, I urge the member to work with the families and the department to ensure that their needs are met, and that the families are able to plan for next year. Coming in here, grandstanding and trying to provoke the minister, in her absence—she is not even able to give the member a response, because she is not here—outlining specific cases and asking me to give a response achieves nothing. If the member had raised those specific cases with the minister, she would be responding to him directly, because that is what she does; she is a good minister. All the member has done here is bring this grievance so that he can get his name in the paper in the local area. It is actually embarrassing. He should have some degree of responsibility. I know he is a member of the opposition, and he is campaigning on behalf of the community. That is fine, but it is near the end of semester 1.

Mr R.S. Love interjected.

The ACTING SPEAKER (Ms M.M. Quirk): Member for Moore, I call you to order for the first time.

Mr P. PAPALIA: These children are confronting a change at the end of the year. They should be given every support available from the agency. They cannot get that unless they are engaged with the agency. If there has not been adequate engagement by the department, the member should bring it to the attention of the minister.

Mr R.S. Love: That's what I'm doing.

Mr P. PAPALIA: No, you are not. Coming into the chamber here —

Mr R.S. Love: That is what the grievance process is about.

The ACTING SPEAKER: Minister, can you sit down for a moment? Member for Moore, you mentioned the grievance process, and you will also know that grievances are heard in silence. As unsatisfied as you are with the answer, please let the minister finish.

Mr P. PAPALIA: It is just normal process for any member of Parliament. The member knows the best way to get a response from the department is to talk directly to the minister. She is just up at the other end of the building. She will meet with the member and talk to him if he goes to her and raises those specific matters—not on the floor of the Parliament to a minister representing the minister, but to the actual minister, who is human and a very good minister and cares about children in our education system right across the state. She has been compelled to deal with a difficult situation, partly because the Nationals have intentionally blocked hundreds of millions of dollars of revenue that might have enabled things like this to actually be funded.

Mr R.S. Love interjected.

Mr P. PAPALIA: Just go and talk to her.