

**457 VISA HOLDERS — ENGLISH LANGUAGE COURSES**

*Grievance to Parliament*

**Thursday 4 December 2008**

**DR M.D. NAHAN (Riverton)** [10.02 am]: My grievance is to the Premier and Minister for State Development. I wish to bring to the Premier's attention, and to the attention of the house, a serious and growing gap in the Rudd government's so-called education revolution and in the funding of state schools.

The state schools in my electorate of Riverton are being put under increasing stress by the growing number of children of 457 visa holders who attend the schools without additional financial support to meet their English language training needs.

Because of the quality of schools in Riverton and local affordable housing, increasing numbers of 457 visa holders are deciding to live in Riverton, and, as is happening elsewhere in the state, primary 457 visa holders are increasingly deciding to bring their families with them, including school-aged children.

I and the schools of Riverton welcome these families to Australia and to Riverton. The state needs their skills and they are a valued source of future permanent migrants. They are welcomed and wanted.

The problem lies with the extra demands that these kids impose on the schools, and with the failure of the Rudd government to plan for and fund those needs.

Although most primary 457 visa holders have a good to passable command of English, their children often do not; indeed, an increasing number of visa holders come from non-English-speaking countries, and their children have a deficient command of English.

Across the state schools that I recently surveyed in my electorate, 205 children from 457 visa holding families had special English language needs. This represents five per cent of the total enrolment in these schools. The principals have indicated that the number of these children has been rising and continues to rise rapidly.

The issue is about not only the number of children with special needs, but also the diversity of their needs, ages and backgrounds.

The children range from preschool to year 11 and have language skills that range from weakness in English to no English at all.

They come from 10 different countries and speak 11 different languages. Naturally, the schools welcome these children; however, they lack the funding to teach English as a second language.

There is also a lack of planning. The schools are rightly required to take children from their catchment area, subject to capacity constraints. Although there is always a bit of uncertainty about the demand from local kids, the schools appear to have a good control over it.

However, there is no information, data or planning for 457 visa holders; moreover, the number of 457 visa holders can vary sharply and significantly. Last week, for instance, one school experienced four new 457 visa children arriving at its door, unannounced, with special English needs.

Teachers are not complaining. They are happy to do their best for these children, but it is testing them and increasing their level of frustration. The schools are not complaining, but they are feeling more stretched. Imagine how a teacher feels trying to teach a very bright and eager young child from China who does not speak a word of English, while at the same time trying to teach 30 other children.

The state is meeting its responsibility. It provides funding for the children of 457 visa holders in the same way as it does for all children, and it provides a good deal of TESL—teaching English as a second language—or special English language courses. The deficiency lies with the Commonwealth.

Holders of 457 visas are a Commonwealth responsibility. These migrants are in the country on a temporary work permit under work arrangements regulated and controlled by the Commonwealth. The Commonwealth has recognised the special English language needs of new permanent migrants and some classes of temporary migrants.

It provides funding to the schools of \$5 787 a child for permanent and some classes of temporary migrants, and \$11 572 a child from the migrant humanitarian stream. However, the Commonwealth fails to provide funding for the English language needs of children of 457 visa holders; nor does it require the primary 457 visa holder or his or her employer to meet the cost of these special educational needs.

The Commonwealth is also failing to provide information to the schools about the number of 457 visa holders. The Commonwealth does not provide up-to-date data, let alone indicative numbers, on 457 visa holders, the numbers and demands of their accompanying children or their probable state of residence. The Commonwealth does not even collect data from the schools about the number and demands of current 457 visa students.

This is a serious deficiency of the 457 visa program and the Commonwealth funding of schools. It is also a major gap in the Rudd Government's so-called education revolution.

The reported aim of the so-called education revolution is to improve the performance of schools, specifically in the area of English language skills.

The so-called education revolution has led to the imposition of a raft of new performance requirements on the state and state schools, and the provision of some funding to high-profile areas such as computers, yet the Rudd government has failed to focus on and fund this expanding area of Commonwealth responsibility.

In other words, it has closed its eyes and handballed its responsibility for these children to the states and the state schools. The golden rule of State-Federal relations should be for each jurisdiction to address first its own area of responsibility before interfering in the responsibilities of other jurisdictions.

The Rudd Government has once again failed to meet this rule in its interactions with the state and its involvement in education.

The schools in Riverton are not alone. My colleague the member for South Perth has told me that, of a student body of 270 children, Como Primary School has 50 children from 457 visa holding families with special English needs. That means nearly 20 per cent of the children in the school have unfunded special English needs.

I understand that many schools in the state are experiencing the impact of a sizeable number of children from 457 visa holding families and their related demands for additional educational needs.

I ask the Premier to raise this gap with the Rudd government and to seek funding for English language training for the children of 457 visa holders that is on a par with the funding provided for the children of permanent migrants and other classes of temporary migrants, and to do so as an issue of priority.

**MR C.J. BARNETT (Cottesloe — Premier)** [10.09 am]: I thank the member for Riverton for that grievance. It is an issue that comes to me under federal-state responsibilities, but it clearly is also primarily an education issue.

The member has raised an important issue, particularly for Western Australia. The 457 visa system has been effective in attracting skilled workers to Australia. Despite the current economic problems, one would expect that the number of 457 visa workers coming to Western Australia will continue to grow and that, therefore, the number of students in the school system will also continue to grow.

I think there are two broad issues. The first is the Commonwealth-state funding issue, which has been detailed by the member for Riverton. The second issue related to that is how schools deal with it within their school environment.

I will add a bit more information to the detailed information already provided by the member for Riverton.

The number of non-English-speaking students with temporary 457 visas entering public schools in this state has increased by 30 per cent a year, which is a massive increase, since 2001.

It is estimated that more than 800 students in the Western Australian school system fit into that category. Therefore, it is a significant number, and if that 30 per cent growth rate continues, it will be far larger.

In addition, to add to the complexity, the number of humanitarian refugees attending public schools is also increasing. They come principally from Sudan, Afghanistan, Kenya, the Congo, Burma and China.

In 2000, there were 500 of those students; today there are 969. So the number has virtually doubled in that seven-year period. Therefore, 457 and humanitarian migration, plus traditional migration, are adding to the problem.

I know that this is not the prime point of the member's grievance, but Western Australia has 102 English as a second language programs operating in our schools, and I am sure that all members have examples of that within their electorates.

My electorate might be the exception. At what is now Mount Claremont Primary School—it used to be Graylands Primary School—there was an ESL program. That was moved, I think, to around Balcatta or Nollamara on the basis that it would be closer to where many of those students lived.

The families concerned did not want to move. They wanted to stay at Mt Claremont, the school community wanted them to stay there, and I, as the local member, wanted them to stay there, but that did not happen. The reason is that it was a small school.

Those students formed a significant part of the school population. It did not lead to any overcrowding problems. Not only did the school deal with it very well, but also the broader community of Claremont and Mt Claremont was very supportive of those children and, indeed, their families.

They were perhaps in a position to help, and did help. There was a feeling that perhaps the total level of support around those children and their families was strong because it was a reasonably prosperous area where people were able to help. However, the counter factor was that the children had a fairly long trip to get to school. I think those programs are well catered for and well run.

The point the member for Riverton has made is that at schools that do not necessarily have special language programs, the number of these children is growing, particularly in the member's area south of the river.

It is particularly pronounced in that area and is, ironically, a consequence of the good schools in the area, in particular the high schools. We all know that there is a premium on real estate around Willagee Senior High School, in the former Premier's area, and Rossmoyne Senior High School.

**Mr A.J. Carpenter:** Willetton, I think.

**Mr C.J. BARNETT:** I am sorry, Willetton Senior High School. They are good schools; they are outstanding government schools. They attract new families to this country, and therefore have to face that issue.

I will certainly take up this issue with the Federal Government.

The member made a very valid point that, although extra funding is in place for humanitarian migration and ordinary migration, this category seems to have missed out. In my view, it should be treated consistently.

However, it is also the case that Western Australia, unlike the other states, does not make special discrete funding available to these students in those schools. That is our responsibility.

Therefore, I will ask the education minister to look at what is provided in this state compared with other states, and I will also take up the issue with the Commonwealth. Although the member for Riverton did not suggest it, it is an issue that is growing so strongly in this state that perhaps a parliamentary committee might look into it.

The member has raised an interesting point, and it has widespread implications, not only for these children and their families, but also for a large number of schools in our state. It will be a growing problem.

If the Parliament was of the view that there should be a committee inquiry, I would certainly be supportive of that. I believe it is an issue that should be looked at carefully. What has happened? Are we looking after these children as well as we can? Is it in any way having a damaging effect on schools or on other children's education, and can we do it better in the future, because it is a real and growing issue for our education system?

I thank the member for raising this important issue. As I said, I will speak to the education minister about it, and we will both take it up at a Federal-State level.