



EDUCATION, EMPLOYMENT AND TRAINING COMMITTEE

Members present:

Ms KE Richards MP—Chair
Mr JP Lister MP
Mr MA Boothman MP
Mr N Dametto MP
Mr BL O'Rourke MP
Mr JA Sullivan MP

Staff present:

Mr R Hansen—Committee Secretary

PUBLIC BRIEFING—INQUIRY INTO THE EDUCATION (GENERAL PROVISIONS) (EXTENSION OF PRIMARY SCHOOLS IN REMOTE AREAS) AMENDMENT BILL 2023

TRANSCRIPT OF PROCEEDINGS

Monday, 27 November 2023

Brisbane

MONDAY, 27 NOVEMBER 2023

The committee met at 10.01 am.

CHAIR: Good morning. I declare this public briefing open. I am Kim Richards, the member for Redlands and chair of the committee. I would like to respectfully acknowledge that we are meeting today on the traditional lands of the Yagara and Turrbal people and pay my respects to elders past, present and emerging. We are very fortunate in this country to live with two of the world's oldest continuing living cultures in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

Welcome, and thank you for supporting the committee's work here today. With me I have: the deputy chair Mr James Lister, the member for Southern Downs; Mr Mark Boothman, the member for Theodore; Mr Nick Dametto, the member for Hinchinbrook; Mr Barry O'Rourke, the member for Rockhampton; and Mr Jimmy Sullivan, the member for Stafford.

Today's briefing forms part of the committee's consideration of the Education (General Provisions) (Extension of Primary Schools in Remote Areas) Amendment Bill 2023. Mr Robbie Katter MP, the member for Traeger, introduced this bill in the Legislative Assembly on 25 October 2023. The bill was then referred to this committee for its consideration. This meeting of the committee is a proceeding of the Queensland parliament and is subject to the parliament's standing rules and orders. Witnesses are not required to give evidence under oath or affirmation, but I remind witnesses that intentionally misleading the committee is a serious offence.

KATTER, Mr Robbie, member for Traeger, Parliament of Queensland

CHAIR: I now welcome the member for Traeger, Mr Robbie Katter. Before we ask you questions, would you like to make an opening statement?

Mr Katter: Thank you, Madam Chair. I am always reluctant to read through the explanatory notes. Hopefully, everyone has had a bit of a look at those. I think it is probably best value for me to just say where this has come from—the genesis of the bill. It really came from my first term in this place back in 2012 and the announcement of the year 7 transition into high school. It exacerbated what was already a difficult situation in towns where high school does not exist, and a lot of parents were upset about having to send their kids away a year early.

Whilst Thargomindah had already been proactive in that space, at that time Julia Creek, which is in my electorate, was very proactive as a council and community and they put together—with some assistance from the government at the time—a package and formulated their own solution so they could keep some kids in town for a bit longer offering the school of the air curriculum. I had informal discussions with school of the air teachers at the time who said, 'These kids will lack for nothing. They won't be disadvantaged doing that.' They were doing the school of the air curriculum with a teacher's aide.

Unfortunately, not every council is going to be as proactive or does not have the financial means or wherewithal. The same thing happened at Charters Towers, to name one of a number of examples where this keeps coming up over the years. In Ravenswood a number of constituents were pretty cranky about the fact they had to send their kids away and there was nothing offered at Ravenswood. They were calling for some solution to that and something to be delivered there. It came up again when a lady who was in a bit of distress came and said, 'It's just too early to send my kids away.' It has come up again and again.

To get back to what I was saying about Ravenswood, Charters Towers was not prepared to go through that process at the time so they all lost out. It is pretty onerous on schools. Education is not in the portfolio of local government; it is in the realm of the state government. You could very well sit there when you are critiquing this bill and say, 'There's clearly a pathway there if Julia Creek and Thargomindah are doing this. Why do we need any legislation?' I think that is a pretty fair approach, and I think that is based on the premise that local authorities should be taking matters into their own hands, which is not true. It is very much in the remit of the state government to ensure everyone has equity and accessibility to education.

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Those battlers in towns like Julia Creek and Ravenswood who do not have the means to send their children to expensive boarding schools, do not really want to see them being taught school of the air curriculum at home and would see great benefit in having that done on a school campus with a teacher's aide should be afforded that. You are not looking at a significant cost here. There will be some cost somewhere, but I would implore the committee and the government, when looking at this, to not focus on the negatives. I understand it is a private member's bill and it is always pretty tricky to get support for a private member's bill. It is more about pulling it apart and pointing out all the flaws, but this is about helping those parents who are stuck and crying out for help.

A cursory glance at the projected population for all of the rural shires shows: Croydon, minus 13 per cent; Diamantina, minus 18 per cent; Richmond, minus 10 per cent; McKinlay, minus 25 per cent; and Etheridge Shire, minus 13 per cent. They are not very nice numbers for a state representative of parliament to look at—seeing all these populations projected to decline throughout your electorate. This is one of the spokes in the wheel to keep people in those towns. Quite literally, in Ravenswood the mine manager, who was interested in where the conversation went, piped up at the public meeting and said, 'I'm interested in this because some of the families who applied to us were thinking of moving their families from Townsville to Ravenswood, and when they found out there's no high school in town they thought, "We're not going to move the whole family from Townsville to set up for three years, and then when the kids have to go to high school we'll think about moving back again. What's the point of us moving?"' It even plays into that whole FIFO mining debate as well because there are often no services. It is a very real issue in terms of keeping parents and people in town. They do move, and have moved, because they cannot get it.

Eventually, yes, kids do not stay there forever, but another three or four years is really big. It might not seem much to people here or legislators who think, 'What's another few years?' but it is really big for parents in those towns. If they can attract a CEO, they can attract a grader driver to the council and he can bring his family. In an informal discussion with the ICPA they said, 'Do you think we don't understand this as well?' They look after boarding school kids who will go off to boarding school in the city, but there are a lot of people in towns whose parents cannot afford boarding school. They need some decent options for their kids, and if they do not exist they might just float. Worse still, kids just get lost in the system. I want to focus on schools like Camooweal and Dajarra, where it is over 90 per cent Indigenous kids. A lot of those kids just do not re-engage in the school system again. They are not going to move from Camooweal to Mount Isa just to go to school. Some do, but it is not a really stable environment. Parents are not going to move from Camooweal to Mount Isa just so the kids can go to school. It is very disruptive. What is the cost to the state to allow those same kids to stay there for another three or four years and mature that bit more, learning the school of the air curriculum with a teacher's aide?

I might also offer that there are some schools on occasions that have been doing this anyway. It is not endorsed, but they feel sorry for some kids who are struggling at home in a small town just doing school of the air as their only option. They say, 'Just come down to the school and work from here.' It is a much better environment. I find it pretty tricky to see where the disadvantages would outweigh the benefits.

In closing, I just hope you are able to engage with some of the parents who are directly affected by this and see the emotion in their face. We are not talking about a lot of people or a lot of kids, which consequently is good in terms of cost, but the emotional impact and the more discrete impact on towns which fail to grow in population or decline in population because you fail to address this issue is very real and very significant to electorates like the one I represent—really all of Western Queensland. With that, I appreciate your time, Madam Chair, and welcome any questions.

Mr LISTER: Thanks, Mr Katter, for coming in. In terms of the learning facilities in Thargomindah and Julia Creek, are there students there who are doing School of Distance Education courses and they are effectively supervised and assisted by a teacher aide? Are the courses they do online for the most part? Is that your experience in dealing with them?

Mr Katter: Yes. You could sit back and say, 'You're not really changing too much,' because those same kids are entitled to be funded to do school of the air in Julia Creek, let's say, 300 metres down the road at their house. Instead of doing that online in their house they are supervised by a teacher's aide, which would ensure some assistance at points, but it is just a more purpose-built environment for them to operate in. I should also add that most of these schools have declined over the years, so it is reasonable to expect there is a surplus of accommodation and space in a lot of these areas. It is not likely you are going to have to build a new building or huge new facilities here.

Mr BOOTHMAN: Thank you, Mr Katter, for coming in today and sharing your passion about this. It is an issue that is very dear to your heart. My question is around STEM subjects. How do they do proper experiments? How does it work in Julia Creek when you have a specialist teacher who is on the end of an internet phone call? What workload does that place on the teacher aide? How does that work when they are doing scientific experiments et cetera? I am just interested to know your thoughts on that matter.

Mr Katter: That is a good question. I cannot give you a technical response, but it would be the same way they would if they are at home doing the same STEM subject 300 metres up the road in their house. It is probably worth noting again that there has been massive growth in distance education. In fact, a problem for the government right now is the number of people swapping over, whether it is to homeschooling or distance education, and teaching from home. Obviously a lot of other people outside of what has been proposed here have to deal with the same problem. I am sure it has limitations and it is not a perfect scenario, but it is the same for every other kid doing distance education in the state except they would have a bit more assistance from a teacher's aide.

Mr DAMETTO: Thank you very much, Mr Katter, for addressing the committee today and putting the passion behind this bill that it deserves. I completely understand what you are saying about the regions bleeding its best asset: its children. One of the schools affected if this legislation were to pass is Mount Fox State School. We have a situation right now where a young girl is about to go into grade 7 next year, and her parents are trying to decide whether or not they move all the way down to Ingham or they do distance education. This young lady loves the idea of being with her school friends. She is not ready to leave Mount Fox State School just yet. My question is: if this bill is passed, what would the learning benefits be to those students who are able to stick with that small school cohort of kids in contrast to them having to choose to sit at home and do distance education on their own?

Mr Katter: That is a good point. It is probably a bit of an oblique answer, but I will come back to the question. One thing I would compliment the government on is that schools in those rural areas are generally resourced pretty well. If you go to Mount Fox or Homestead, you will find that they are resourced pretty well. I was at Homestead State School a few months back having a chat with a bloke from Charters Towers, which is 50 kilometres up the road, and said to him, 'Mate, this would be a good option for parents from Townsville or single parents who want their kids to get a good schooling' because they have a teacher and a teacher's aide for two kids at the Homestead State School. I thought, 'That is a good education for that kid.' He said, 'No kidding.' He said, 'My brother went to that school and I went to Charters Towers and he went to uni. He really thrived at school because he had that personal contact or that focus from the teachers who are really invested. He was not in a class of 20 or 30; he was in a class of two or five.' In terms of that question, there is an opportunity for kids to actually power ahead.

Kids from Julia Creek could be sent to the Spinifex State College campus in Mount Isa, but kids from Julia Creek do not want to live in Mount Isa. I went to a boarding school in Charters Towers and some of the bush kids did not want to be there. They never worked hard or applied themselves at school because it was somewhere they did not want to be. Perhaps if they had stayed in Winton, Hughenden or Richmond they might have made a fist of things and applied themselves a bit better at school. You are not breaking up the family unit, either. It could make things better. It is not for everyone. There are a lot of kids who are a bit fragile and those towns work well for them. If you take them out of there they really struggle. This bill does not force them to do anything, but it gives parents that option in terms of the year 7 transition. Probably the main comment I get is: 'My kids are just too young to send away, Rob.' They say, 'It is just wrong sending a kid that young away, particularly boys'. That is another dimension.

Mr DAMETTO: This question is more about technical support and resourcing. A lot of these small schools are quite well resourced. They have a good internet connection and have the ability to connect with the outside world. They have been able to do that through the primary school years. Could you talk about the benefits of someone doing school of the air or distance education in a well-equipped environment as opposed to in their home in a rural area that may not have the same internet connection or technical facilities?

Mr Katter: That is another good point. You could be out of town. They have improved some of the internet. What is the Elon Musk one?

Mr DAMETTO: Starlink.

Mr Katter: With Starlink it improved. I am told that that could have some problems in the future too. Before that I heard nightmare stories from people. You could be 10 kilometres out of Richmond and have your kid on school of the air, but have nightmares with the data. They would exceed the Brisbane

data download just trying to get the school of the air material for the kids every month. I would have parents crying on the phone to me. Starlink has improved that. A lot of these people are not that well set-up at home. They are probably basic set-ups. Like I said earlier, those schools are pretty well resourced. I do not see how it is much of a burden on them to create a space—some desks in the library or something like that—for people to work. It is not too big a draw on the resource that already exists. It is a good resource that is generally provided by the government. I think it is good legislation. We are drawing on a pre-existing resource to enhance education outcomes for kids. The curriculum for school of the air is already there. We are not creating anything new there. In that way, I think it is good legislation as we are drawing on pre-existing resources that are of a very good standard. That could be a much better outcome for most of those kids working from home on what often can be substandard equipment and facilities.

Mr O'ROURKE: Thank you for your presentation, Mr Katter. Having worked in regional Queensland and as a parent myself, one of the things I am concerned about is the social interaction and things like that that kids gain at boarding school. Has the social wellbeing of students been raised very much with you in terms of the importance of getting out of some of those small towns? We were talking about how they are declining in population and things like that.

Mr Katter: Yes. I am probably drawing on my own experience again. It is horses for courses. This legislation does not force anyone to do anything. In the case of Ravenswood, there is a family with four kids and I think two other families were really interested in this for their kids. We have to hope and work off the premise that everyone is trying to do the best for their kids. I am probably the sort of person who would want my kids to go and expand their horizons at some point, but a lot of kids—and I am not going to psychoanalyse it too much—do better with the security of a small town. I do not think that limits them too much later in life. Again, I can only draw on my personal experience of some kids who stayed at school in the area until grade 10 and then came to the boarding school. It is a good point to raise, but I would answer it best by saying it is horses for courses and it is the choice of the parents what they think is best for the kids. I am going through that myself at the moment for my kids: do we want to send them to a small school? Even homeschooling has come up in the conversation. What is best for this kid? Part of the conversation is that you want them to interact, but the best way I can answer it is that it is horses for courses.

Mr SULLIVAN: Following on from the member for Rockhampton's comments in terms of interaction, in the reverse, do you think there are any issues in terms of safety or awkwardness with effectively high school students being co-located with younger kids? How would you manage that sort of interaction?

Mr Katter: I was thinking of answering that by saying, 'Yes, because there are risks everywhere,' but I do not think there would be much of a risk because most of these schools are so small. It is pretty hard to get lost in the crowd. I just find that the teachers and principals have a pretty good handle on everything. There is risk with anything, but, in terms of what we are proposing here, I think the likelihood of mitigating that is much better than what people would normally assume because you are in remote and rural towns mostly that—

Mr SULLIVAN: Where everyone knows everyone?

Mr Katter: Yes. There are not as many places for people to hide if they play up.

Mr SULLIVAN: I should say that I have a few friends who have been teachers with school of the air out your way, too. As you referenced before, there were good resources and very good people who do it. In terms of your model of trying to have support from teacher aides, have you turned your mind to how you could recruit and keep staff to deliver that model?

Mr Katter: No, I think that is probably the most legitimate question in terms of the whole legislation. It is the same question that the police and everyone else confront. In my view, it is whether the government has a will to enhance or optimise the opportunities for kids in remote areas? I think this bill can help optimise those opportunity. The only thing I would add is if something were available, say, in Forsythe, Karumba or Camooweal, there often are—I do not know why—ex-school teachers, mums or people in those towns who would be prepared to fill those roles. If something like a teacher's aide were required, I think we would be pleasantly surprised that people, even if it were an inconvenience to themselves, would take up the role just to make sure the whole project worked and that service could be offered to the town. I think there could be some underutilised resources sitting out there already that could fill those roles that otherwise would not. If they saw the community benefit that would come with going back into the workforce, I think they would take it up. I could not really back that up with any data or evidence.

Mr SULLIVAN: Just anecdotally though?

Mr Katter: Yes.

Mr SULLIVAN: Member for Traeger, in terms of your constituent engagement and your discussions with parents about their kids being too young to move, the move to year 7 in high school was also paralleled with the introduction of prep so kids are actually the same age as you would have been when you went off to boarding school. How does that parallel movement relate in terms of parents' concern for their kids? I am not sure they are well intentioned, but is it not effectively the same?

Mr Katter: It may well be. Your point is valid, but I would argue that the point could have been just as relevant before the year 7 transition. Whether or not they are too young to go is a subjective assessment of the parents. Whether schools changed their position or not, like they did, is perhaps inconsequential to some of them. They look at their kid and say, 'He is too young to go.' I guess it is easy to blame it on the change with year 7. For the record, I did not board either; I was a day kid.

Mr SULLIVAN: Forgive me, sorry. We certainly do not have the sort of British model of sending kids off to boarding school at age four and saying 'goodbye'. I am not suggesting that. Sorry for verballing you, mate.

Mr LISTER: In my electorate, Border Rivers Christian College in Goondiwindi stood up around the time I was first elected. Before they had fully matured and expanded into the year 11 and 12 format they had a little demountable building where there was a handful of senior students doing School of Distance Education courses under the supervision of the school, and that appeared to work quite well. What is the reason you have not proposed the learning facility option through years 11 and 12 as well?

Mr Katter: That is a really good question. I thought it was 'learn to crawl before you can walk'. I really think that should be considered in the long term. If you believe that some people are not suited to moving away and that model, I cannot not see how it would be any different for them in grade 11 and 12 either. That is a really good point. Thargomindah, as I understand, it goes to grade 12. I should double back a little bit. It is not in the explanatory notes, but an important point to make is that pro rata—it is a bit of a sloppy number—investment is about \$20,000 a kid in state schools in Queensland, as I understand it. The LAFHAS subsidy has been lifted quite generously. I think it is \$8,000 to \$10,000 a year that kids get now. I think for Julia Creek in the McKinlay shire it cost about \$70,000 to operate and it had about five kids. I know we have not talked about costs much. I do not think anyone will go to too much effort for one kid, unless three kids dropped off midyear or something.

Five was a good number to work off because when you have five kids the economies of scale work better for you. It seems a little immaterial talking about that because it does not seem like big numbers. I do not think every town is going to come out of the woodwork here. I think it will be where it is fit for purpose and where parents get together and say we really want this. It is strange that in some of these towns you would just have a spurt where there are a number of young families in town for that period and for the next 10 years they work really hard on that and it works well. There could be somewhere where there is a deficit of young kids in the town and they will not see the benefit of this, and they will not take it up.

Mr BOOTHMAN: My next question is more to do with the economic aspect in these more remote areas. Obviously there has been a lot more emphasis on tourism in Outback Queensland. Do you get many concerns from your local businesses, like your IGAs and your FoodWorks, about employment opportunities for young people? If they are not there in the town what type of ramification does that have for those businesses and especially for the tourism industry?

Mr Katter: If I am being honest, it is a really good point. It is perfect logic. They certainly are a big part of employment. If you go to Kronosaurus Korner at Richmond or the cafes in Julia Creek or the grocery store there will be kids working there. That is a big part of it. When you do not have that it is a hidden cost. When the kids are not in town it is very hard to operate things. That is a really good point that I had not thoroughly considered. I had considered the link where the council is chasing a grader driver and the kid in town has been raised on diesel engines and he is going to end up driving diesel engines because he loves them. If he goes to Townsville and ends up studying something else at uni and does not come back—gets a taste of the city life—you lose a grader driver. Everyone thinks it is a great thing if they go to university, but I there is a lot of virtue in doing those jobs out there as well. They can have a great lifestyle doing that. We forego that because we lose the kids too early and they get a taste of living somewhere else and that is it. If they go to Charters Towers, all their friends are from Townsville, Burdekin, wherever else, and they never really come back. That is part of the reason the population statistics look so bad on.

Mr DAMETTO: A lot of people might say that this would be an expensive exercise—having to expand classrooms, those sorts of things. My experience of my small schools is some of them at some stages had upward of 50 to 100 students and now they are catering for between 10 and 20 or 25. Could you speak to the point that some of these small schools are well equipped for this transition?

Mr Katter: The other side of the argument is it is 20 grand a year to educate a student in Queensland on a pro rata basis. If you force the family to move from Einasleigh to Townsville that is cheap for the government. They have another kid in a grade level of 50—I do not know what the class size has to be now. I would imagine that would be the cheapest solution for the government. It is not very cheap for the lady who had to move from Einasleigh or the Etheridge shire and for the town that loses the mum who was working in whatever role she was in in the town. That is a huge cost—immeasurable.

To go the other way, the other option, that kid was getting a LAFHAS allowance of 10 grand a year, we picked a number here of about five, you have five kids that you would be otherwise paying 50 grand in LAFHAS to a year. I am not sure what it is costing now, but that is a relatively minor cost to employ a teacher's aide. I think it complements the other school activities as well if you have that extra person on the ground in, say, Julia Creek State School. I am sure they appreciate having that extra teacher's aide there. I said in the explanatory notes they are employed by the Mount Isa School of the Air in partnership with the local state school. That teacher aide goes in there to assist with the learning that they would otherwise be doing at home. It is a pretty discreet way of intervening and assisting, but I think the benefit that would come from that little bit of assistance is almost immeasurable.

Mr DAMETTO: What you are saying is a small investment, such as the Department of Education employing a teacher's aide to assist these students going through the school of the air or distance education in their high school years, could actually save a number of jobs locally because parents are not having to move away?

Mr Katter: My word. A lot of times they are government jobs like in the DPI. They are the ones who move away and the government has to find someone to replace them. It is getting increasingly difficult for the government to find anyone to man a lot of their jobs. We have been waiting six months for a biosecurity officer in Cloncurry. That was the only one west of Hughenden in the entire gulf region. It is remarkable. To be fair, they just cannot find people. If I go back to the Ravenswood example of the miners, if you could put in place an option for the parents who are looking to move there and take up a job in DPI at Cloncurry and their kids could stay there until grade 10, which they could at the Catholic school in Cloncurry, those parents would say, 'That's great, we'll stay there. We will make a commitment for five to seven years. We do not have to go there just for two years until the kid has to move. We will make that commitment.' That is a big saving to the government that would be difficult to quantify. From my perspective, there would be an enormous benefit to the government—filling all those roles and keeping people in some of those jobs that they struggle to fill.

CHAIR: In regard to the remote classifications, was that selected from the federal mapping of that index? I notice that Oodgeroo was in there; I am assuming North Stradbroke Island and the Dunwich Primary School.

Mr Katter: I will have to take that on notice. It is off the federal mapping, I am pretty sure.

CHAIR: It is off the federal mapping?

Mr Katter: Yes.

Mr BOOTHMAN: I go back to my previous question where we were talking about retaining people in more remote areas—and that is something that you were speaking about at length—and also go back to the point made by of the member for Southern Downs around year 10 to 12 education. I know you spoke briefly about potentially looking into that in the future. To retain a young workforce in these more regional areas and therefore to also make it less attractive for fly-in fly-out workers, especially in the mining area, is that something that you are interested in looking when expanding this to the year 10 to 12 group?

Mr Katter: I have to be honest, it has really only entered my consciousness after being brought up here today. There might be something in that insofar as discussions have typically been around if we can get the kids to grade 10. Perhaps I have been guided in that area and not noticed it. That is something for us to strongly consider and take back and see whether or not it should be expanded. It certainly has merit in terms of what we were trying to achieve with this legislation. The best I could say is it is something for us to take back and consider.

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CHAIR: Thank you for attending here today. We note that one question has been taken on notice in regards to the classification of the regions on remoteness—confirming that that is the federal government’s mapping.

Mr Katter: I will look that up. Are you giving us an answer on the bill now?

CHAIR: Are you trying it on, Mr Katter? Thank you very much for appearing before us here today. The time for this briefing has now expired. Thank you to our Hansard reporters and parliamentary broadcast staff for their assistance today. A transcript of these proceedings will be available in due course. Thank you.

The committee adjourned at 10.39 am.