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EDUCATION, EMPLOYMENT, TRAINING AND SKILLS COMMITTEE

Members present:

Hon. MC Bailey MP—Chair
Mr JP Lister MP
Mr N Dametto MP
Mr JP Kelly MP
Mr BA Mickelberg MP
Mr BL O'Rourke MP

Staff present:

Ms M Telford—Committee Secretary
Dr K Kowol—Assistant Committee Secretary

PUBLIC BRIEFING—INQUIRY INTO THE EDUCATION (GENERAL PROVISIONS) (HELPING FAMILIES WITH SCHOOL COSTS) AMENDMENT BILL 2023

TRANSCRIPT OF PROCEEDINGS

Monday, 18 March 2024

Brisbane

MONDAY, 18 MARCH 2024

The committee met at 11.30 am.

CHAIR: I declare open this public briefing for the committee's inquiry into the Education (General Provisions) (Helping Families with School Costs) Amendment Bill 2023. My name is Mark Bailey. I am the member for Miller and chair of this committee. I would like to respectfully acknowledge the Turrbal people—the traditional custodians of the land on which we gather today, of whom there are over 3,000 generations—and offer my respects to traditional elders past and present. We are very fortunate to live in a country with two of the oldest continuing cultures in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, whose lands, winds and waters we all now share.

I welcome everyone and thank you for supporting the committee's work. With me here today are: James Lister, member for Southern Downs and the deputy chair; Nick Dametto, member for Hinchinbrook; Joe Kelly, member for Greenslopes; Brent Mickelberg, member for Buderim; and Barry O'Rourke, member for Rockhampton.

This briefing is a proceeding of the Queensland parliament and is subject to the parliament's standing rules and orders. Only the committee and invited witnesses may participate in the proceedings. Witnesses are not required to give evidence under oath or affirmation, but I remind witnesses that intentionally misleading the committee is a serious offence.

These proceedings are being recorded and broadcast live on the parliament's website. Media may be present and are subject to the committee's media rules and my direction at all times. You may be filmed or photographed during the proceedings and images may also appear on the parliament's website or social media pages. I ask everyone present to please turn off your mobiles phones or switch them to silent mode for obvious reasons.

ANSON, Mr Duncan, Assistant Director-General and Chief Financial Officer, Finance, Procurement and Facilities, Department of Education

FORRESTER, Ms Kathleen, Deputy Director-General, Policy, Performance, International and Intergovernmental, Department of Education

HANSEL, Ms Stacie, Deputy Director-General, Schools and Student Support, Department of Education

CHAIR: Welcome. I invite you to make a short opening statement, after which committee members will have some questions for you.

Ms Forrester: I begin by respectfully acknowledging the traditional custodians of the land on which this hearing is taking place—the Yagara and Turrbal peoples—and pay respects to their elders past and present. I extend that respect to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples here today. I would like to thank the committee for providing the Department of Education with the opportunity to contribute to its inquiry into the Education (General Provisions) (Helping Families with School Costs) Amendment Bill 2023.

Education has a profound influence on children and young people. Queensland state schools are responsible for delivering high-quality public education to approximately 570,000 students in our 1,264 state schools. In Queensland, section 50(2) of the Education (General Provisions) Act 2006 states—

The cost of providing instruction, administration and facilities for the education of the person at the school must be met by the State.

Section 52 then states that the chief executive may charge a person mentioned in section 50(1) a fee for providing an educational service to the person not met by the state under section 50(2).

The department makes significant investments to assist with education related costs. Its total budget for 2023-24 was \$18.3 billion, which included \$17.3 billion for school education. The department is keenly aware of the cost-of-living pressures being experienced by Queensland families and has a range of system-wide initiatives in place to support families. These initiatives contribute to

supporting every student in a Queensland state school to realise they have potential by assisting with out-of-pocket expenses—for example, \$106.7 million over three years for the Student Wellbeing Package; \$49.5 million in 2023-24 for the Textbook and Resource Allowance for high school students; and approximately \$211 million in 2022-23 to provide assistance with transport for eligible students through the School Transport Assistance Scheme, delivered in partnership with the Department of Transport and Main Roads.

There has been \$30 million in investments since 2020 to enable access to free and subsidised digital devices for learning; \$33 million over four years from 2023-24 to install stock and maintain dignity vending machines at all Queensland state schools that want one; approximately \$3.5 million to eligible state schools in 2022-23 for learn-to-swim funding; targeted government investment of more than \$4.5 million by 2025 to deliver and expand the School Breakfast Program; and \$10.2 million to support families whose homes are geographically isolated through the Living Away from Home Allowance Scheme.

Schools may offer additional assistance to families for out-of-pocket costs, but the value of this support is not captured in central data systems. Principals also regularly assess cost-of-living pressures being experienced in their school communities and have flexibility and prioritisation of available resourcing to address these as appropriate—for example, waiving fees, offering payment plans or allowing a student to participate in optional activities where a parent is experiencing financial hardship.

Beyond such system and local supports, the department's user-charging procedure sets the parameters for principals in determining departmental fees and charges. This procedure is under review to ensure its currency and relevance. The department also supports our school leaders through capability building and ongoing advice about how to appropriately manage school fees and charges.

From a broader funding perspective, state and Commonwealth governments provide funding for state schools in accordance with the relevant legislation and national and bilateral agreements. The majority of federal funding for Queensland schools is currently linked to the Schooling Resource Standard and the National School Reform Agreement. This year the Queensland and Australian governments are negotiating new policy and funding arrangements for school education from 2025. This will include setting national reforms and state and federal funding shares with a view to all state schools being on a path to reach 100 per cent of the Schooling Resource Standard. It is important for the committee to be aware that, as these negotiations are still underway, there may be some answers that my colleagues or I cannot give today as these matters are subject to government consideration.

I would like to once again thank the committee for the opportunity to support their consideration of the Education (General Provisions) (Helping Families with School Costs) Amendment Bill 2023. We are happy to respond to your questions.

CHAIR: Thank you very much. Do we have any questions from the committee?

Mr LISTER: The department offers a range of support at the moment for out-of-pocket costs associated with digital devices, books, bursaries and so forth. What data and research underpins the department's allocation of funding and its decisions on how that will be presented to those in need?

Ms Forrester: That sounds like a question for our CFO.

Mr Anson: In terms of the broader allocation methodology for our funding, I think there was reference earlier in the opening statement and from Ms Richardson in the previous hearing around the Gonski methodology. Queensland has its own needs-based methodology, where we take into account factors such as rural and remote and the number of students with disability. In fact, we are in the process at the moment of moving towards a full NCCD model, which is around reasonable adjustments for students with disability in different categories. We have loadings for students who are Indigenous. We have loadings for things like English as an additional language and low ICSEA communities. The quantum of funding that each school gets is relative to those factors. We have over 300 schools that we regard as small schools—fewer than 100 students. Traditionally those schools will receive a lot more funding on a per student basis because they have fixed costs such as a principal. They might have a deputy and a groundskeeper—those sorts of things.

On some of those items that you mentioned earlier, such as digital devices, we have spent a lot of money. Kathleen outlined in her opening statement that the legislation is very clear about the funding that we receive from government. That is about instruction facilities and administration. Anything that sits outside of that is on a user-pays basis. As a department, we recognise that it is not always easy for parents to provide all of those resources. What our IT department has done in working

with Stacie's area in state schools is allocate a number of those devices to those low ICSEA and rural and remote areas. That has been done on an applications basis and then considering the factors that are involved in those different applications. We have had some schools, for example in those low ICSEA areas, that have received in excess of 1,000 devices since 2020. That was largely in response to things such as COVID and remote learning but in recent times it is cost-of-living concerns. We are acutely aware of those factors in our schools.

CHAIR: I welcome students from All Hallows' School from the state seat of McConnel, Minister Grace Grace's electorate. What you are seeing here is the parliamentary Education, Employment, Training and Skills Committee examining, appropriately, an education bill that has been proposed for parliament. We are scrutinising that in detail. That is what you are witnessing here. Welcome to the parliament.

Mr KELLY: In my community I see very clearly schools that have high ICSEA data and others that have low ICSEA data. Generally speaking, those that have low ICSEA data have great challenges forming a P&C. They certainly have no capacity around fundraising. Particularly some of the bigger high schools in my electorate draw a significant number, if not up to 70 per cent, of their students from other areas around Brisbane where the ICSEA data would be very low in comparison so consequently have an extremely wealthy P&C. How does the department address those sorts of inequities? If we are relying on school P&Cs to provide that support to schools and we effectively allow principals to take people from other areas to enrich their own P&Cs, how do we address that imbalance?

Mr Anson: There are a few parts to that question. As far as donations to schools from P&Cs are concerned, they make up a tiny percentage of the overall funding. Funding for state schools in this year's budget, in the 2023-24 budget, is in excess of \$12 billion. As you will see from our annual report for 2022-23, cash donations in total—which are mainly from P&Cs but from other sources as well—were about \$11 million. It is the tiniest of a tiny fraction.

In direct answer to your question about any adjustments that we make because of the capacity of a P&C to raise funding or not raise funding, that is not one of the current factors that we have within our resourcing model. Having said that, we do have a school resourcing review project that is underway. That is looking at a wide source of issues to make sure we have an equitable model moving forward. I will hand over to Stacie to talk about the other part of the question.

Ms Hansel: To add to that, our schools have enrolment management plans. While we might draw from other catchment areas, there are some parameters in relation to how and where kids come from in terms of those enrolment management plans. Schools should not be reliant upon their P&Cs to be able to fundraise for them. We have a strong, healthy relationship with P&Cs Qld and we support our communities to have an active involvement. We do acknowledge that all schools, regardless of where they are across the state, have some challenges in terms of time and space that parents now have to volunteer and to be able to contribute to P&Cs and outside volunteering events. It is not something that we need to rely upon in terms of that, but certainly the inequities that you mentioned are very high on our agenda.

Our school principals make great choices in terms of how they support families based on the needs that they have every day that many of us are not aware of. As a former principal myself, the decisions that you made on a daily basis were really about individual student needs and that family. From an individual school's perspective, we see our principals do this every day, and do it well. A lot of times it goes unnoticed—probably out of respect for the family and the student—which we applaud. We do not want our school principals to call out some of that support they are providing individual students because we do not want those kids to feel different. So our principals and our teachers do this regularly and we applaud them for that great individual support that they offer. Principals have the discretion to make those choices every day around that, and they do that well.

Ms Forrester: If it is of interest to the committee, Stacie has referred to the excellent decision-making that occurs on a day-to-day basis by principals. As Duncan mentioned, our current school model for funding individual schools is under review, so I am certainly happy to provide the committee with a little bit of information about what we are doing from a system level perspective to make sure that the resourcing that is available goes to schools in the way that it is needed. We are currently reviewing our existing arrangements about how we provide resources to Queensland state schools.

Our current needs-based resourcing arrangements have served us well, but they have been in place over many years. The review is considering how the department's available resources might be shared across all state schools to better meet current and emerging needs in a way that is simple, fair, transparent and predictable. We are looking at how resources are allocated and distributed to

state schools as well as the systems, processes and procedures for managing resource use. Consultations have recently occurred with principals across the state on a new resourcing approach to simplify arrangements and bring Queensland closer in line with the methods used by other jurisdictions to distribute available school funding.

The approach that we are consulting on would provide a base funding allocation per student, with additional funding for priority cohort needs, costs driven by the characteristics of the school and deliberately targeted system initiatives. Key stakeholders, including unions, principals and parent groups, are being engaged extensively in the review process and their feedback is helping us to guide that process. We expect the review to be completed by 31 December this year.

Mr KELLY: Ms Forrester, you were here when P&Cs Queensland gave their presentation, I think.

Ms Forrester: I was.

Mr KELLY: I may be misquoting but I think they indicated that Queensland had the lowest SRS in Australia. Could you comment on that please?

Ms Forrester: Yes. That is not true this year. I think Mr Wiseman was referring to two things. One is that there was a recent statement of intent signed by the Northern Territory government and the Australian government, which is part of the ongoing negotiation around the NSRA. That is a statement of intent; it does not shift the current contribution being made to the SRS in the Northern Territory. This year the Northern Territory is certainly contributing the lowest percentage of that Schooling Resource Standard. This year Queensland is contributing 70.5 per cent of the SRS against our target of 75 per cent that we are required to provide under the Australian Education Act. That means that we are sitting just above Victoria, as well, in terms of contributions to the SRS. We are certainly not the lowest contributor in terms of the SRS this year.

Mr MICKELBERG: I have a question with respect to excursions. Your response to the submission talks about extracurricular activities. I note your comments about principals having a discretion to waive and support. I have young kids at a state primary school. If my daughter in prep, for example, has an excursion, it then forms part of the curriculum and it is inextricably part of the teaching for her entire class. I presume some individuals, at times, may not be able to meet the small cost that is associated. Does the department consider those sorts of activities to be extracurricular or a core part of the curriculum?

Ms Hansel: You have hit the nail on the head with your first comment. If it is core to the curriculum, absolutely, the department would consider it as a part of the curriculum's core delivery and would support those schools in funding those children. In the case of the All Hallows' School that was here, their cost was probably more around the bus rather than coming into the facility. It would depend on what the costs were for, but we certainly encourage schools—if there were families that were not able to fund the bus cost, for example—to cover that for them.

Mr MICKELBERG: Thank you.

Mr DAMETTO: There seems to be a link between youth crime and truancy in schools. Can the department give us an update on what the department is doing to increase school attendance across Queensland schools?

Ms Forrester: I am happy to start with the figures. Attendance rates are increasing after the last few years—disruptions due to COVID, influenza and extreme wet weather. In 2023, the overall attendance rate for semester 1 was 87.1 per cent, up from 85.6 per cent in 2022. The attendance rates have increased across all year levels, with an increase of 1.8 percentage points to 89.1 in primary year levels and an increase of one percentage point to 84.2 per cent in secondary levels. The attendance of First Nations students increased by 2.2 percentage points. I give you that data to indicate that attendance levels are on the way up.

Ms Hansel: To add to that, I will touch on one initiative in particular that you mentioned. As part of the \$288 million youth reform package in that prevention area, one of the most significant investments is a \$29 million investment targeting our First Nations learners to promote NGO organisations that do a great job in supporting our students in that space of attendance and engagement. That is a 50 per cent expansion of that program with a real area of focus on our young girls. We see that our girls at the moment are currently probably not at fifty-fifty parity in terms of that investment around attendance. This investment will ensure our girls and young boys—our First Nations learners—receive equity in funding resources. Those programs will be rolled out across the state in targeted areas of need and the majority of those who will be the first cabs off the rank are in rural and remote locations across Queensland.

Mr KELLY: Many years ago, before I was elected, I was actively an executive member of a P&C and I saw that process you outlined of principals in action of targeting assistance for students who needed it without stigmatising the family or the student. P&Cs were actively engaged in supporting and assisting with that. I note that you mentioned the negotiations that are going on with the federal government at the present time. You may not be able to answer this part of the question, but hopefully you can answer the second part of the question. Are those negotiations looking at empowering principals to be able to target the assistance where it is actually needed and, secondly, is this bill jumping the gun before those negotiations are concluded?

Ms Forrester: Certainly the negotiations are underway. In terms of the points that you are raising, I will give you the context. We expect that the negotiation will be happening this year and concluded this year. The negotiation needs to consider both the policy and the funding arrangements for school education from 2025. You have asked about two things: the principals and, is it too early? I would say in terms of the principals, in the federation states are responsible for school education and so it will remain the responsibility of Queensland, the Queensland minister and the department to continue to support principals.

We should not be seeking the federal government's involvement in terms of the direct support that they provide. However, we do need to negotiate an agreement that does work with Queensland and the processes, procedures, policies and strategies that we have in place. There are probably two things to say there. One is that as we negotiate the policy aspects of the agreement, we are very keen to make sure those things that we have invested in that are achieving things an increase in attendance rates are supported and that the next agreement helps us to build momentum for those things that are working well now to keep going.

However, the Commonwealth government will require us to do certain things as part of the agreement. So, absolutely, a bill proceeding at this stage would be very problematic in terms of being able to commit to providing for certain things ahead of the Commonwealth and the state negotiating both the policy and the funding arrangements that will be in place from 2025.

Mr KELLY: The problem this bill is trying to solve is acknowledged by both the state and federal governments—it sounds like all state and federal governments—and the solution that this bill is proposing would create obstacles for solving the problem into the long-term?

Ms Forrester: I would say we have a very broad range of considerations underway in the negotiation. All of those considerations need to be fully considered and agreed at both the Commonwealth and state level, and not forgetting that the agreement needs to be a multilateral one, so it also includes all other states and territories. For example, ministers collectively have agreed on the three policy directions for the new agreement. They are: to support workforce; to support equity and excellence in terms of outcomes; and to support wellbeing for learning. Those are the national directions that education is expected to go in under the next five-year agreement.

Mr O'ROURKE: My question is in regard to the ICSEA data. I do not understand how it is formulated, but one of the concerns that I have is that I have a few private schools that are within a few hundred metres of a public school. Would that impact on their funding?

Ms Forrester: No. The location of the school does not impact on their funding, but I can certainly share with you that some of the matters that do. It is probably fair to acknowledge that over a third of all Queensland school students attend non-government schools, so it is a significant number, and that the Queensland government pays recurrent and capital funding to non-government schools in recognition of the contribution that they make. Non-government schools generally receive less total government funding per student than government schools but may have higher overall revenue depending on parental fees and other private income.

So unlike the recurrent funding calculations for government schools, the base amount of the SRS for most non-government schools is discounted to reflect their community's capacity to contribute. In addition to the recurrent funding for school operations, the Australian government provides non-government schools with annual capital grants and a 10-year Choice and Affordability Fund. There are no equivalent federal funding arrangements for those last two items for government schools.

Under ACARA's latest published data, the latest data for 2022 shows that government schools received an average public recurrent funding of \$16,709 per student and non-government schools received an average public recurrent funding of \$14,249 per student. I might add that currently the Queensland government provides 20 per cent of the Schooling Resource Standard in recurrent funding to non-government schools. We have completed our transition so that was sitting a bit higher than 20 per cent in 2018.

You might hear about the overfunding of non-government schools. That overfunding is a consequence of the Australian government transition arrangements being slower. It will continue to contribute funding above 80 per cent of the SRS until 2029. Location is not a factor that determines the funding for non-state schools but the SRS arrangements certainly are and those arrangements do take account of the priority cohorts in the same way they do for state schools. The proportion of students with disability, for example, tend to be lower, as does the proportion of First Nations students. They also take account of the parents' capacity to pay, so they do have their SRS discounted for that. I hope that has answered your question.

Mr O'ROURKE: Yes, thank you.

Mr KELLY: You mentioned the Share the Dignity funding that is out there. It seems to me that schools are providing a really broad range of support across a range of areas. I mention the contribution around before- and after-school care and vacation care. As a parent who relied on that to look after our kids while we were able to continue to do our professional jobs, we found that it was essential. Often we focus on the books and the pens, but there is a whole broad range of support services that schools are providing for families. Is that a fair assessment, and are there other ones that I have not outlined?

Ms Hansel: Absolutely. In terms of Share the Dignity, we are able to provide period products for young girls in communities where they need it the most. We have heard from those students in those communities that it has been life-changing for some of them. In 2024 you would not think that would be something of need, but it certainly has changed their lives in so many communities in such a positive way. The young girls have reported to us of feeling a little more empowered in being able to make some choices themselves around that. It is a great initiative.

The other one would be GPs in Schools. We had over 9,000 GP appointments in 2023 for our students in those 50 schools across Queensland where we have piloted that program. That has provided those students with the ability to access mental health plans that maybe they were not accessing before. Some of our students—and, again, in 2024, this surprises me—had never visited a medical practitioner before in terms of some of the health needs they had. We have been able to diagnose epilepsy and diabetes. Those initial appointments for some of those students have been life-changing, in particular in some of our most complex and vulnerable communities.

Another great initiative around that is obviously our wellbeing workforce, which is similar again. We are providing that mental health support—whether that is through a case manager, a psychologist in schools or a support worker—to support some of our most vulnerable young people in their learning in those really diverse communities, whether that is through face-to-face interactions or telehealth. These are great outside-of-the-box initiatives that are supported.

The last one I will mention is the partnership with Queensland Health where we opened our complex mental health facility at Jacaranda Place based at Prince Charles Hospital. It is a fantastic facility for those young people who need that service and support. Again, when they are transitioning into their homes and back into their communities, we are now offering a virtual service for those young people. It is the virtual delivery of their learning when they need it the most. This is innovative, out-of-the-box thinking in terms of the support that those young people may need.

Mr KELLY: Thank you.

CHAIR: Thank you for presenting and answering the committee's questions. It is much appreciated. That concludes this briefing. Thank you to our Hansard reporters, our staff behind the scenes and our committee secretariat here. A transcript of these proceedings will be available on the committee's webpage in due course. I declare this public briefing closed. Thanks to all members of the committee.

The committee adjourned at 12.03 pm.