



Speech by

**GARY FENLON**

**MEMBER FOR GREENSLOPES**

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Hansard 26 May 1999

### **XAVIER SPECIAL SCHOOL**

**Mr FENLON** (Greenslopes—ALP) (6.37 p.m.): I rise to inform the House of a place where miracles happen every day. It is a place where those miracles take the form of a word, a smile, a step. I refer to the Xavier Special School in Coorparoo, which is in the Greenslopes electorate. This institution holds great significance at a national and State level because of the particular philosophical and methodological foundations upon which it rests.

I have recently had the pleasure of meeting with Ms Judit Szathmary, who is currently working at the school. Judit is a specialist in the practice and principles of Conductive Education upon which the Xavier Special School is founded. A British-based consultant with 19 years' experience, Judit is on her second visit to the school, having initially been engaged by the Department of Education in late 1995. The staff and families of children at Xavier valued her input highly enough to invite her back this year, at considerable expense to the P & C association.

First and foremost, this is a significant index of the belief of parents in the service offered by the school. The determination of Xavier to hone educational practices is commendable and consistent with the school's long commitment to professional development. It is this commitment which I think has served to distinguish the Xavier Special School as such a highly recognised facility—a facility that is much sought after by the parents of children with neurological-based motor disorders.

The educational model utilised at the school has been developed using the principles of Conductive Education, a Hungarian system for the education of children with motor disorders. Underpinning the system is a paramount adherence to the belief in every child's ability and a commitment to active learning. The founder of Conductive Education, the Hungarian specialist Dr Andras Peto, elaborated a simple distinction that I think is integral to understanding the model and provides an insight into its presuppositions. Peto used the terms "dysfunction" and "orthofunction"—the former with respect to improper coordination and socially unacceptable behaviour and the latter to refer to a maximum level of functioning obtained by a child at any given time. It is between the two that Conductive Education is located.

It also signals the progressiveness of the model which accedes to a notion of responsibility and care that aims at preparing the children for a lifetime of learning and potentiation of capacity. It is perhaps worth noting here that in Hungary the job of conductor is identified as a profession in its own right and is held in great esteem. In the practice of Conductive Education, there is nonetheless a total reliance on the work of a transdisciplinary ensemble of specialists—teachers and therapists—working closely together to share knowledge and expertise. It emphasises the priority of early intervention and of continuous and consistent input into the children's education.

Attention to maximising the efficiency of its practices is one of the most admirable elements of Xavier. Proceeding from its early holistic outlook, the school aims to create a high degree of integration in its physical and interpersonal environment, its curriculum and specialised development of motor skills. It is the level of care and commitment that has ensured the school is not only highly sought after by parents, but has become a State and national focus for and stimulus to the development of Conductive Education. With respect to the parent demand, I will quote from the history of the school compiled by one of its founding teachers, the current principal, Ms Beth McDonnell. She said—

"Families have moved to Brisbane from the Gold Coast, Melbourne, Townsville, Ballarat, Taree and Coffs Harbour, while families moving from overseas ... have chosen Brisbane because of the availability of the educational program of their choice."

The level of parent involvement encouraged by the school is one of the school's mainstays—an involvement that is integral to the school's model of consistent and ongoing input. Indeed, the school aims, as one of its priorities, to avoid the discontinuity between the children's home and school lives.

In the late 1980s the Queensland branch of the National Association for Conductive Education was formed and the staff from Xavier have remained active and integral members of that association. It has long been the intention of the school to ensure that the work at the school will spread to other centres and that more children with motor disorders will be beneficiaries of the work pioneered there.

I am going to take the liberty of calling on Ms McDonnell's history to make reference to Xavier's endurance through these seismic shifts in educational trends, curricula and policy in approaches to education for all students with impairments in the development of early intervention strategies in resource provision. What has sustained the school community and nourished the dedication of the staff is an unshakeable belief in the right of children to receive the best possible education and in providing them with the skills and self-belief to make the most of the rest of their lives.

Time expired.

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