



Speech by

**JULIE ATTWOOD**

**MEMBER FOR MOUNT OMMANEY**

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Hansard 25 August 1999

### SCHOOL UNIFORM BILL

**Mrs ATTWOOD** (Mount Ommaney—ALP) (8.30 p.m.): I wish to comment on this proposed private member's Bill, the School Uniform Bill 1999, introduced by the shadow Minister for Education on 4 March this year. I refer to the proposed amendments in relation to schools in the electorate of Mount Ommaney.

A few weeks ago, I visited the Monday morning parade of the Centenary State High School. The principal, Mick Mickelburgh, praised students for their immaculate dress that morning. Schools have a reputation to uphold, and if the public perceives that, generally, students are sloppily dressed, they will either alert the school principal or make a mental note that the standards of that school are quite poor and then spread the bad news. I think the issue is not whether a student wears a uniform but how well they wear it.

In the Mount Ommaney electorate, the school principals to whom I have spoken about this issue have not had a problem with students refusing to wear a uniform. Schools ensure that no matter what their socioeconomic circumstances, students are provided with assistance to acquire a uniform. Behavioural problems exist in all schools, and how a student wears a uniform is also a behavioural problem, a bad habit or simply bad dress sense.

**Mr BAUMANN:** I rise to a point of order. Madam Deputy Speaker, I draw your attention to the state of the House.

Quorum formed.

**Mrs ATTWOOD:** The standards required by principals varies across the school spectrum. Some believe that academic performance is more important than how students are dressed and do not place great emphasis on dress standards, as long as they are neat and presentable.

It is not possible to set standards across all schools for the wearing of uniforms, because each school is different. A lot depends upon the perceptions of the local school community and the expectations of the surrounding community near the school. Students must feel comfortable in their school, because this definitely affects their performance. If a student is made to feel uncomfortable or restricted or regimented, their performance will decline.

What is an acceptable dress standard to one person may not be acceptable to another. It is difficult to be objective about this matter. That is why it is not wise to legislate on this matter. What about individualism? We are trying to promote a sense of responsibility to students in our schools. Students, particularly at high school age, must be given the opportunity to exercise this responsibility. Parents know what is best for their children. This includes knowing under what conditions they perform the best, what are their likes and dislikes and how they respond to various situations. That is why it is vital that parents and their school communities are the best judges when determining dress standards for their children. Students or young people have a tendency to rebel and react negatively when legal enforcement occurs, particularly in an area where they see no obvious benefit or reason to do so.

The Minister for Education, Dean Wells, has given schools the means to overcome the problem of students not abiding by uniform standards. The school communities and principals to whom I have spoken about this are more than happy with this outcome. The Opposition is still fumbling with a tortuous regulatory process which would tie schools in knots. I congratulate the Minister for Education,

who identified a simple strategy by using the current Education (General Provisions) Act 1989, which gives a power to school communities, through their P & C associations, to decide whether their schools should have a dress code and what the dress code should be. When a dress code is written into their school behaviour management plan under section 27 of the Education (General Provisions) Act 1989, the capacity to sanction non-compliance is activated. This is a much better way to deal with the concerns identified by the Ombudsman, who found that schools had no teeth to deal with students not wearing uniforms.

The legislation proposed by the shadow Minister would prove burdensome on our schools by imposing a blunt, heavy instrument of further legislation accompanied by the inevitable delays in implementation. I am sure that principals have more important objectives for their students than to be overcome by a cumbersome administrative burden which will distract them rather than assist them.

Let us get back to what is important in our schools. Each school student's priority is to maximise their educational potential so that they can move on to their chosen career. It is a minuscule percentage of students who want to stir the pot by not conforming with school uniform standards. Those who do not wish to conform can be dealt with appropriately under the current Act, within the objectives of the school's behaviour management plan.

The more we use legislation to regulate every detail of people's lives, the more we erode the capacity of people to invest in social capital in their community. This is not the best solution to the school uniform problem or the most beneficial to the schools. I condemn the shadow Minister's proposed Bill.

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