



Speech by

Mr R. QUINN

MEMBER FOR MERRIMAC

Hansard 15 March 2000

LIFE EDUCATION CENTRES

Mr QUINN (Merrimac—LP) (Deputy Leader of the Liberal Party) (5.54 p.m.): I move—

"That this Parliament calls upon the ALP Government to reinstate the funding, as commenced by the coalition, to Life Education Centres."

Life Education Centres around Australia and indeed throughout the world have been widely accepted. They are now established in every State in Australia, the USA, New Zealand, Great Britain, South Africa and some Asian countries. This program has immense credibility amongst teachers and parents. It is funded in almost every State in Australia, including for some 20 years in New South Wales. Recently, in South Australia it received a fourfold increase in funding. Those are some of the reasons why in 1996 I, as Minister for Education, decided to fund Life Education Centres in this State to the tune of \$1.8m over three years. Interestingly, when that announcement was made, no Opposition members opposed that funding initiative. In fact, many said to me privately that it was a good move and it was about time that Life Education Centres in this State received Government recognition.

In fact, one member of the Labor Party even issued a press release congratulating the Government at the time and Life Education for their persistence in finally achieving Government funding. The press release of Merri Rose, the member for Currumbin, stated—

"It has been a hard struggle for Life Education committees and this funding will go a long way to help promote and deliver Life Education programs to Queensland kids."

Having two children of my own, I know how important it is to educate our children about the effects of drugs on the human body and I know how much they benefited from their many visits to Life Education Centres on the Gold Coast. Mrs Rose said that she had been pushing for a long time for the funding and congratulated Life Education on its persistence in obtaining Government assistance.

I am of the same view, and that is why as Minister I decided to fund Life Education Centres in this State. I also have children who went to Life Education Centres and I know of their tremendous assistance in getting across the anti-drug message to my youngster at the time. It is important to note that the Life Education program is not a stand-alone program; it is meant to be used in the context of an integrated approach at the school level. That is recognised by schools and principals across the State.

Of all the teachers whose students visit Life Education Centres, over 97% of them would recommend Life Education as a resource in a drug education strategy. Not only does this program have immense credibility amongst parents; it also has immense credibility amongst teachers at the local level. Is it any wonder that schools and teachers are concerned now that the State Government has abolished funding for Life Education Centres in Queensland? That will have a marked impact on the message that is delivered at schools about drug education.

What will it mean for our kids? Already we have seen mobile classrooms in Hervey Bay, Maryborough and north-west Queensland being mothballed, with the prospect that others will follow. Certainly there will be a reduction in trained staff employed by Life Education Centres around this State. That is because without Government funding local volunteer committees will be forced to raise more funds than ever before, just as they tried to prior to funding being available. It will mean increased fees charged to students attending Life Education programs.

The high cost of educating children at schools these days, both non-State and State schools, will mean that some students in our schools will miss out on receiving these important anti-drug messages. What we will have is some students who can afford to receive the program and other students who cannot. These students are not isolated to any particular pocket in the State; they are spread right across Queensland. All members of Parliament have in their electorates students, families and schools in the lower socioeconomic group. They cannot all afford to go to Life Education Centres, and that is the real impact of the cut in the funding for Life Education Centres. Some of the students at our schools will be unable to receive these very important messages.

What are the reasons given by the Government? They vary. First of all, the Premier labelled the program a failure. This is the only State in Australia where funding for Life Education Centres has been totally abolished. All of them are maintaining their funding, if not increasing it. So we are out on our own. We are the only ones. The Premier and this Government are the only people who believe that Life Education programs have failed in our schools. Ninety-seven per cent of the teachers surveyed who have seen children go through the program believe that it is valuable research. They do not believe what the Premier is saying.

The Drug and Alcohol Foundation is simply appalled at the Government's action in this case, leaving no recognised drug education program in our schools whatsoever—none whatsoever—being delivered. What did the Queensland branch of the AMA say? Let us go to their press release. It states—

"Too young to vote but old enough to fall prey to drugs, Queensland's teenagers will suffer the most, following Premier Peter Beattie's decision to cut the State's leading drug education program, doctors warned today.

Spokesperson ... has condemned the Premier's decision to abandon the State's drug education program as immoral.

"This is a shocking decision from government which will deprive our State's young from the education they need"—

and on and on it goes. There is another person who is really opposed to what is going on.

Principals are opposed to it. In a report in the Gold Coast Bulletin both non-State and State high school principals stated that they are appalled at the action. They recognise—and I suspect they speak for a large number of principals in the area, if not around the State—that these programs have been of immense value to their students. We have the QCPCA saying that the funding should be restored, that the cuts should not go ahead. We have other people in the general community appalled at the action of the Government.

What was the Minister's response to the question in relation to this asked in the House today? He simply said that these days everything needs to be done through the health and physical education syllabus that is being introduced into schools. What does the department say? For that we go to the report on drug education in Queensland compiled by the Department of Education to see the results. It says—

"The combination of a new syllabus, the requirement to plan teaching and learning from outcomes, a process unfamiliar to many teachers, and the lack of specific topic or content area related to drug education could provide difficulties for teachers in developing a comprehensive and sequential approach to addressing issues of drug use ..."

That is from page 10 of the Drug Education in Schools report of June 1999, signed off by the Director-General of Education in Queensland. It is saying that, whilst this new program is implemented, there needs to be ongoing drug education programs in our schools until our teachers become familiar with the syllabus, until they get the knowledge that they need to provide education in this specialist area. Whilst all that is going on, there is no dedicated drug education program available to our students in the schools.

The principals themselves are confirming that there will be some trouble in our schools in that respect. They are also confirming that no extra funds for drug education have been made available to them. So it is nonsense to say that schools can now provide the funds for drug education programs—Life Education Centres—out of their existing funds. They have no additional funds. The funds that are available for the implementation of the health and physical education syllabus are the same sorts of funds available if they were going to implement a science syllabus, a new maths syllabus or something of that nature. Nothing additional is going into our schools.

The report that was produced by Education Queensland highlighted the fact that drug education in Queensland receives, on a per capita basis, the lowest funding of any of the States of Australia. In Queensland the amount is 50c per student. We spend 50c per student on dedicated drug education programs in this State. Honourable members should compare that with other States: Victoria, \$10 per student; New South Wales, \$3.50 per student; and Western Australia, \$7.40 per student.

Other States are spending much more than we are, yet here we are cutting funding all together. What does the Minister say when someone puts his own departmental report in front of him? He says that the actual number is \$82 per person! How ridiculous can you get?

Time expired.
