



Speech by

Mr D. BRISKEY

MEMBER FOR CLEVELAND

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CHALLENGES FACED BY STUDENTS

Mr BRISKEY (Cleveland—ALP) (4.58 p.m.): The challenges facing our students have rarely been greater. The pressure to excel academically continues to grow as employers look for a range of qualifications from potential employees. Peer pressure has always been an issue. Adolescence has always been a time of difficulty and conflict for many young people. In common with all members of the community, students are affected by a range of contemporary social problems resulting from rapid social change.

The pace of change as we commence this new century is immense. Technological change has brought about societal change. Access to information has changed the shape of the society in which we live. Our young people have a range of choices—career choices, life choices—that those of our generation and previous generations could not imagine. It all leads to great opportunity for our young people but also uncertainty. Eating disorders and suicide in young people are constant reminders of an adolescence that for many is far from the idyllic one that some of us remember. These problems are unrestrained by geographical and cultural boundaries.

Few of us have not been touched by the pain of families who have suffered as a result of youth suicide and eating disorders. Just two weeks ago in my electorate I attended a funeral of a young man who took his own life. He was a former student of mine in my teaching days and a young man who had a bright future and much to look forward to. His parents are highly regarded and highly respected in our Redlands community. He had plenty of friends, he had his health and he had a career. I would often see him on the water taxi to and from North Stradbroke Island, yet he took his own life. The funeral was obviously an occasion of sadness for all—for his family, for his friends—as was the wake afterwards. It was a very sad experience for us all. What I want to raise today is not how he took his life, because it was not as a result of an eating disorder, but the fact that there are many students in our schools who do suffer from eating disorders and others problems relating to body image.

I want to advise the House of an excellent program that Education Queensland has developed to fight that challenge that many students are facing. Students of all cultural and linguistic backgrounds are vulnerable to eating disorders. As a community we have a responsibility to act, and Education Queensland has risen to that challenge. I commend and congratulate the Minister for Education, the Honourable Dean Wells, for the part that he has played in this challenge and the way that Education Queensland has met that challenge. I was, therefore, honoured last month to be asked to launch the package Risky Business at the Yeppoon State High School. Risky Business is a professional development package for school communities about body image, gender, eating and exercising issues.

The launch was an occasion tinged by sadness because the Yeppoon State High School community was touched by a tragedy in 1998. Nick Gallagher, then a 15-year-old student at the school, died from anorexia-related complications. I met Nick's mum at the launch. She is a lovely woman. We spoke of the bright future that Nick had before him. He was a sportsman of some repute. Up until about six months before his death, he was actively involved in sport. But the pressures to conform with an ideal image were, sadly, all too much.

This history for this close-knit school community brought a real poignancy to the performances of the students of the Yeppoon State High School on that Monday morning. Twenty or so Yeppoon State High School students participated in a dramatic interpretation of the issues surrounding anorexia nervosa and bulimia nervosa. Their performance was inspirational. The students designed the set, they scripted the hour-long performance, they choreographed routines and they handled all the sound and lighting. Their performance was notable for its sensitivity. In fact, it touched everybody in that audience. The depth of understanding that these young people clearly have of the pressures to conform to a particular body image is nothing short of remarkable. Their performance, consisting of a series of short scenes involving the classroom, the home and the school, went right to the heart of why it is that too many of our young people succumb to the ravages of these cruel illnesses.

Our schools and our teachers are uniquely placed to identify problems of this nature for our teenagers. As professionals with a wealth of educational experience, they are uniquely skilled to provide support and education to troubled youngsters. It is sometimes more difficult for parents, particularly those among us faced with nurturing and supporting an adolescent child for the first time, to recognise the early signs of anorexia or bulimia. By comparison teachers, many of whom have spent vast numbers of years in the classroom observing many hundreds of teenagers, are ideally placed to intervene at an early stage, and Risky Business would help these dedicated professionals in that task.

One to two young women in every 100 will develop anorexia nervosa, a disorder that has the highest mortality rate of all psychiatric illnesses. Five per cent to 10% of young women will develop bulimia nervosa. A much higher percentage of young people will experience the painful feelings and harmful behaviours associated with eating disorders. There is an alarming increase in the incidence of eating disorders in Australia, and adolescent girls are most at risk.

But these problems are not unique to girls. Approximately one in every 10 diagnosed cases of eating disorders occurs in males. As the role of women in our society has changed, some social commentators have argued that our adolescent males have been left unsure of the role of men in the modern community. This is taking a toll on the self-confidence of adolescent males. Young men are also at risk from the body building images that are often promoted—overexercising and steroid abuse are all linked to a highly muscled ideal male image.

Even more disturbing is the emergence of eating disorders in primary school aged children. How sad that right when we are expecting very young children to be focusing their energies on developing literacy and numeracy skills they are instead concerned not with their futures but with their body image. Children as young as seven have required admission to Queensland hospitals. It is important that schools are equipped to cope with these issues. It is important that teachers, parents and students are able to support those affected by these problems. The ability of students to learn can be grossly affected by disordered eating. Also, undernutrition impacts on students' behaviour, on their school performance and on their overall cognitive development. Serious emotional and social consequences can stem from a preoccupation with weight, food and body shape. All of these things can reduce a child's willingness and ability to actively participate in school life.

For those of our young people who survive these shocking illnesses, a life of diminished aspirations often follows because of the impact of the problem on their schooling and consequent lack of access to job opportunities. That is a tragedy being played out every day in our schools. These are serious issues, and the Beattie Labor Government is taking serious action to deal with them.

Risky Business, the package which I launched in Yeppoon last month, was developed in cooperation with a range of community and Government organisations in response to the growing number of young people affected by these issues. The package contains a range of resources for staff and students to explore ways that schools can promote a positive body image and value the diversity of body shape and size for all students. It also looks at ways that schools can help students build resilience and learn coping skills and seek help. Risky Business is about challenging the messages which promote narrow or unrealistic body shape or appearance. Above all, it is about providing support and training to teachers. It is about giving those at the chalkface—the teachers—the tools they need to support vulnerable students and those with disordered eating and exercising problems.

In conjunction with the activities of Education Queensland, the Office of Women's Policy is funding workshops on body image, eating and exercising issues for school staff across Queensland. With the project Integrated Response to Eating Issues, the Office of Women's Policy is developing links between schools and support services through training of youth, health and welfare staff. The Queensland Arts Council has also taken up the challenge. It is a multipronged attack by the Beattie Labor Government on this dreadful scourge.

Young people often talk about feeling alone or disconnected. All alone, many of them plunge headfirst into this nightmare stemming from issues of image and self-esteem. As a community, we need to remain ever vigilant and join school communities in providing a supportive and trusting environment for all children.

Time expired.
