



Speech by

Hon. ANNA BLIGH

MEMBER FOR SOUTH BRISBANE

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EDUCATION (ACCREDITATION OF NON-STATE SCHOOLS) BILL

Hon. A. M. BLIGH (South Brisbane—ALP) (Minister for Education) (12.29 a.m.): I move—

That the bill be now read a second time.

Even before Queensland was recognised as a separate colony, church-run schools provided for the general and religious education of young people, funded from fees and, in many cases, supported by facilities and services contributed by sponsoring organisations. While the state government has significantly developed its own role in the provision of education since the 1860s, non-state schools had limited interaction with the state government until the 1970s, when both Commonwealth and state governments accepted a commitment to provide funds to non-state schools. While it is common to refer to these non-state schools as a sector, there is considerable diversity in the educational philosophies and religious and other organisational affiliations of these schools. This diversity is growing as the cultural diversity of the Queensland population grows and individual groups seek to maintain their cultural or religious identity through the provision of particular forms of education for their children.

Under current arrangements, non-state schools now attract funding from both levels of government, with the balance derived from private sources, mainly fees. The actual mix of funding for schools varies considerably, but schools on average derive 70 per cent of their funding from government sources. Of the 653,000 young people attending school in Queensland in 2001, 183,000, or 28 per cent, attend non-state schools. The state government has an obligation to ensure that all young Queenslanders have access to education of an appropriate standard during the compulsory years of schooling regardless of the setting in which students are enrolled. As Minister for Education, I have a duty to the community to seek to promote the overall quality of education in the state and ensure accountability for public funding. Young people spend their formative years engaged in structured educational activities. Much of their intellectual, social and personal development and their wellbeing, health and safety are shaped by schools during these years. There is a clear public interest in a regulatory framework which enables the public to have confidence in the organisations undertaking this role.

Successive state governments have recognised for some time that approval processes to establish new non-state schools needed to be made clearer and more transparent and that accountability measures for the expenditure of state funds by non-state schools needed to be improved. With a view to solving these issues, a review of accreditation and accountability arrangements for non-state schools was conducted in 1999. The review committee was led by Professor Roy Webb and, after extensive consultation, published its recommendations for regulating the non-state school sector. These recommendations formed the foundation of this bill. The Beattie government made a commitment to the community during this year's state election that the passage of this bill would be a priority.

I wish to acknowledge that the vast majority of non-state schools provide a high quality education for young Queenslanders. The introduction of this bill is not intended to cast any doubt over the long tradition of excellence and service that these schools have provided to our community. The main objective of this bill is to create for the first time a comprehensive and transparent regulatory regime applying to all non-state schools. The bill will also establish a system of accountability that aims to ensure that funding of non-state schools is based on accurate data and that non-state schools

formally certify that state funds were expended in accordance with the purposes for which they were granted. These objectives are to be achieved by establishing a Non-State Schools Accreditation Board that will assess applications against accreditation criteria prescribed in regulation and continue to monitor an accredited school's compliance with those criteria. The Eligibility for Government Funding Committee as a subcommittee of the board will assess applications and make recommendations to the Minister for Education as to whether a proposed school should be eligible to receive government funding based on transparent criteria set out in the bill. The establishment of the accreditation board and funding committee will be the subject of further consultation with the non-state school sector.

Transition provisions in the bill have been designed to ensure that existing approved schools will be automatically deemed to be accredited and eligible for government funding under this legislation. These schools will be subject to review within five years. The criteria for accreditation will cover all relevant issues and will ensure that non-state schools are able to offer a consistent, stable and high-quality educational program. A regulation is to be made to elaborate on these criteria and will be developed in consultation with representatives of the non-state schools sector.

Under the new regime, the primary focus of regulation of entry to the industry is to ensure that all schools meet acceptable minimum standards. Proponents of new schools who may be well able to add to the range of schooling options in the state who are not dependent on state funding will not be prevented from operating. A virtual or distance education provider of high quality would be able to establish an operation in Queensland, as might a prestigious non-state school from an interstate or overseas system. Schools which meet the required quality standards will be able to apply for government funding. The minister is not bound by recommendations of the funding committee. The final decision as to whether a school is to be considered eligible for government funding will remain, rightly, with the government. By separating the decision on accreditation from the decision on funding, in a climate of limited resources the state is able to give greater focus in funding new schools to those which address the needs of rapidly growing or under-served communities or groups or meet specific community needs.

The bill makes it illegal to operate, or to purport to operate, a school that does not satisfy the criteria for accreditation or provisional accreditation. Stiff penalties are provided for offenders and the board has power to make public notifications in these situations. The bill specifies procedures for provisional accreditation, assessment of a provisionally accredited school for accreditation, and accreditation of major changes to the school's profile, such as the addition of further years of schooling, new locations or new modes of delivery. If reasonable grounds exist, all decisions taken by the board or the minister can be reviewed. The board will have the power to revoke a school's accreditation on a number of grounds, including non-compliance with the criteria. Under the bill, accredited non-state schools will be required to demonstrate to the board once every five years that they continue to meet the standards contained in the accreditation criteria. A school that fails to provide this evidence may, after due process, have its accreditation revoked.

In developing a process to meet the obligations under which I must report to the parliament on the use of state recurrent funds for non-state schools, there are two key issues that the bill addresses. One is the reliability of census data reported by schools which forms the basis of the allocation of state funds, and the other is the process for certifying that funds allocated are used for the purpose for which they are intended. In its considerations of these issues, the bill has been developed to make sure that any processes do not increase unreasonably the additional administrative burden placed on schools while still meeting adequate public reporting standards. The Non-State School Accreditation Board will manage the accountability process for state government funds.

The bill provides for the screening of members or prospective members of non-state school governing bodies, as well as prospective assessors and auditors employed by the board. The Commissioner for Children and Young People will conduct the screening process and will decide whether to issue positive suitability notices to members. The accreditation criteria include provisions that address two aspects of child protection; that is, inappropriate behaviour of staff towards students and the reporting of suspected or actual harm to a student to the appropriate authorities. Schools are required to have written policies and processes that address these issues. The bill also includes amendments to the Education (Work Experience) Act 1996 to bring into line the insurance indemnity for personal injury or property damage for students undertaking work experience required under this act, with the indemnity specified in the Training and Employment Act 2000.

While this bill signals groundbreaking public policy in upholding the standards of education of non-state schools in this state and maintaining public confidence in the operation of those schools, it is the culmination of a substantial period of hard work for many people. This is a significant bill before the House today. I thank all those who have contributed in some way. In particular, I cannot let this opportunity pass without expressing my thanks to Professor Roy Webb for his original contribution to the policy framework which underpins the bill, to the former Minister for Education, Dean Wells, who oversaw that work, and to those representatives of the non-state schooling sector who have worked

tirelessly on assisting the policy framework for this bill. I have given stakeholders my commitment to continue to work with them in a consultative way and to ensure that the implementation is effective. I will be happy to take any recommendations for review into account. I commend the bill to the House.
