



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) (6.36 p.m.): This bill is a significant milestone in education in Queensland. As has been noted by members during this debate, it sets new standards and establishes an accreditation framework to ensure the quality of education in Queensland's non-government schools. It establishes an independent statutory authority to consider and accredit non-government schools.

As has been noted by a number of members, this bill has been a very long time coming. It is the result of extensive consultation and the commitment of a great number of people. It has required the willingness of the diverse sector of non-government schools to submit themselves to a regime of government regulation—not an easy or simple matter, nor one to be taken for granted. I pay tribute to all in the non-government sector for their willingness to participate in the process and to accept this new legislative framework.

This legislation is motivated by the desire to maintain the high standards already established by our non-government schools to ensure that all newcomers to the sector meet high-quality expectations and, ultimately, to ensure that Queensland's children receive the best education possible in every classroom and in every school in this state. I will address some of the issues raised by some honourable members. I start by thanking the shadow minister for his support of the bill. It is pleasing to see that, on these sorts of occasions, we can achieve bipartisanship. I am delighted that, after all of the efforts of so many people, there will be cross-parliamentary support for what I believe is a very important bill.

I note, however, once again the comments by the member for Beaudesert about the Children's Commission legislation. As I recall it, he stated that he has always believed that the Children's Commission had the ability to oversee schools. In this business it is not a matter of belief but a matter of law, and the member has always been wrong on that one.

The member for Robina, Mr Quinn, acknowledged the length of time taken in the preparation of this bill. I also recognise the work that he put in during the early stages of deliberations.

The member for Gladstone has raised a number of questions which I will address briefly. Firstly, she raised the issue of whether or not the bill would have an effect on the ability of non-government providers to provide a program of distance education. At present, access to distance education is regulated under the Education (General Provisions) Act, sections 114 to 117. This bill does not deal with that matter specifically, but it does open a new opportunity for the establishment of new non-state schools of distance education, which I know is welcomed by a number of players in the sector.

The member raised the issue of the importance of requiring that inappropriate behaviour between staff and students is reported to an authority external to the school. I share the member's concerns in this regard. That is why I was so keen to ensure that these sorts of provisions were put into this regulatory framework.

To clarify for the member and for other members, the requirements in relation to the protection of children will be contained in the regulation to the act. At this stage, that regulation is available in draft form, and that is the form in which the member was briefed. It is the very clear intention that where a child has been harmed, or the staff member suspects that there has been harm, there will be a process

in place that puts an obligation on the principal of the school to report that harm or suspected harm to the relevant external authorities; for example, the police or the Department of Families. I will undertake to the member for Gladstone to ensure, when the drafting is finalised, that that is as clear as it can be.

The member raised some concerns about minimum enrolments. Can I allay those concerns and say that the size of a school is not a criteria for accreditation. Quality is the only issue that requires assessment. However, size is a criteria for the assessment in relation to eligibility for government funding. Minimum enrolments are only one of the factors that will be considered when assessment for eligibility for government funding is being undertaken. The criteria are flexible and can take account of the particular needs of small schools. Just to put it beyond doubt for the member, a small school that is financially viable and meets the accreditation criteria is in no danger from this legislation.

The member was concerned about whether it was possible to accelerate the process. In relation to the lead time for accreditation to take place, it is open to a school to nominate its own student intake day and to achieve a shorter lead time to its final approval if it is able to do so—provided, of course, there is time for the board to make a decision. There is no formal impediment to this happening in the bill. But the member for Gladstone, along with others, will surely appreciate that it often takes some time for this process to be properly and rigorously assessed. As well, post the decision being made, a school may well have significant capital works, et cetera, that have to be undertaken before they will be open to students.

The member sought some clarification in relation to the retrospective provisions in some foreshadowed amendments. I will speak to those later, but I am happy to take the opportunity now to assure the member that no school will be disadvantaged by the confirmation of the validity of decisions made in the past. For schools with applications affected by the transitional provisions, they will be assessed using exactly the same guidelines as would have applied if this amendment had not been necessary. So in my view the question of any disadvantage does not arise.

The member for Gregory raised a number of concerns in relation to education in some of the most remote parts of Queensland, which the member for Gregory represents. He has a very good understanding of some of the difficulties. He alluded to the difficulty faced by at least one school in his electorate in relation to the retention of quality teachers of English. I say to the member that the issue of recruitment and retention in the remote parts of Queensland is an ongoing issue of which I am very well aware. I share his concerns and share his commitment to working with the relevant schools, communities and the unions that represent staff to continually improve our ability in this area.

The member also spoke about the upcoming conference on rural and isolated children, at which, unfortunately, I will not be able to be present but will be represented by the director-general. I am pleased to hear in advance that the member for Gregory will be supporting some of the proposals that I intend having discussed at that conference and look forward to talking to him in more detail about them. He sought for me to take a personal interest in this area of education. I assure the member for Gregory that I have a deep personal commitment and interest to education in every part of Queensland, whether it is the remote part of Cape York, his electorate, or one of the inner urban schools of Brisbane.

The member for Toowoomba North, along with many other members, talked about the very high quality education that is occurring in the schools in his electorate. One that I particularly wanted to mention was the Toowoomba State High School Special Education Unit, which I had the pleasure of visiting along with the member for Toowoomba North a couple of weeks ago. Most members probably will not be able to see the earrings that I am wearing tonight, but they are a very fine piece of jewellery that was made by the students of the Toowoomba North State High School Special Education Unit. This program is providing real-life employment skills for these young people. They have been producing very high-quality jewellery, which they have been selling in the local area, and have raised literally thousands of dollars on behalf of their school. That has given those young people a real interest, real work skills and real-life experiences. It is clear that this school is absolutely committed to ensuring that the students of its special education unit have the ability to move from school to work. I commend them for that. I am very pleased to report to the member for Toowoomba North that I have had a number of compliments on the jewellery. I encourage other members to talk to him about that project.

Finally, as I said at the outset, this bill has been the culmination of work undertaken by a great many people over a number of years. Like every significant shift in policy, it is one that has required dedication and rigour. Tonight, I would like to take the opportunity to put on record my thanks and recognition for the work of a number of people. Firstly, I recognise the work of a number of senior officers of Education Queensland: the director-general, Jim Varghese, and his predecessors in that role, and Mr Brian Rout, Laurie Vogler and Leigh Tabrett from the Office of Non-State Schooling and the other staff of that unit. I also recognise the work of Bronwyn Storey, the cabinet legislation and liaison officer and the legal advice of Catherine Mahoney, Jo Hughes and Patrick McDermott, who have been the drafting officers on this along with Parliamentary Counsel.

Representatives of non-state schools have been active players in this process. I would like to again place on record my thanks for the work of Alan Druery when he was Director of the Queensland Catholic Education Commission; to Joe McCorley, who has now taken over that role and played an active role subsequent to Alan's work; and to Dianne Goose and Vic Lorenz, who represented the commission on the Webb review. I recognise the work of John Ralston, the Director of the Association of Independent Schools of Queensland, and representatives of that organisation, Barry Arnison, President Murray Evans and Geoff Gay, who represents Christian schools as part of AISQ.

Can I also thank Professor Roy Webb. This has been an area that has attracted a lot of work for a number of years, but it was really the work of Professor Roy Webb that drew together a lot of disparate strands of thinking and really focused a number of players on the task ahead of us and got us moving to the position where we are now. I thank Professor Webb for the wisdom and rigour that he brought to the process of the review and the policy development in what has been a very complex area of work.

Finally, I thank officers of my own ministerial office, particularly my senior policy adviser, Bronwen Griffiths and John Graham, who is acting in her position while she is currently on leave. This bill has taxed all of us at times, as all bills do, and I would like to thank all of those people for the work that they have put in.

I think that this bill is a very significant step forward for the quality of education in Queensland. As I said earlier, it ensures that the current high standards are maintained, but, most importantly, it ensures that all newcomers to this growing field of employment and education will see the same high standards applied. I commend the bill to the House.
