



Speech by

KAREN STRUTHERS

MEMBER FOR ALGESTER

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EDUCATION [ACCREDITATION OF NON-STATE SCHOOLS] BILL

Ms STRUTHERS (Algeria—ALP) (3.24 p.m.): Parents and guardians of children need to feel secure in the knowledge not only that their children are receiving the best standards of education at school but also that they are free from harm. In Queensland we enjoy a very high standard of teaching and support in our public schools and schools in the independent sector. There are many former teachers in the House and they can attest to that.

Public schools have been subject to a strong government regulatory system for many years. The non-state schooling sector has primarily been self-regulating and given that weaknesses have emerged in the accountability and accreditation systems for the non-government school sector, it is time to strengthen these processes.

I support this bill and commend the minister and officers, including those from the non-state school sector, who have been involved in its development. When passed, this bill will primarily establish new arrangements for the accreditation of non-state schools and access to and accountability for government funding.

There are more than 430 non-government schools in Queensland. A large sector of those are part of the Catholic system and there are many other smaller systems. It is important that all of those schools meet contemporary standards in teaching and care of students.

I am particularly encouraged to see that this bill sets up processes that will ensure greater protection of children from harm. Shocking abuses of teacher-student relationships have emerged in the past decade in both school sectors. It is simply not good enough to leave independent schools to deal with this themselves. The state has a responsibility to set guidelines for the screening of teaching and administration staff, to keep predators as far away as possible from kids and to set guidelines for the management of abuse in both school sectors.

This bill introduces strict provisions with respect to child protection—the most stringent of its kind in Australia. Last year, the Beattie government introduced mandatory screening in all schools of teachers and other staff by the Commissioner for Children and Young People. This bill widens the net to screen directors or prospective directors of non-state school governing bodies, as well as prospective assessors and auditors employed to assess school applications or compliance. This step is being taken because directors will have extensive contact with children. They are, in fact, influential in setting the standards within a school and ought to be subject to the same scrutiny as teachers and ancillary staff in order to minimise harm to children. The Commissioner for Children and Young People will conduct the screening process. She will then decide whether to issue positive suitability for child-related employment notices to members.

The Scrutiny of Legislation Committee has referred this matter to the parliament for a determination on whether the bill has sufficient regard to the rights of those directors and proposed authorised persons. I urge members to accept the importance of these screening provisions, particularly given that safeguards to protect the rights of individuals will be in place. These safeguards include providing that written notice of a rejection is accompanied by reasons and information provided about the person's right to a review; protecting the privacy of a person with a criminal history by not disclosing

the history to other members of the board; and requiring the commission to take into account the circumstances surrounding a person's criminal history in each case.

Non-government schools will be required to have written policies and processes that address inappropriate behaviour of staff towards students and the reporting of suspected or actual harm to a student to the appropriate authorities. They will also be required to show how they are implementing these policies. If they are not doing the right thing, they may be hit with a show-cause notice from the Non-State Schools Accreditation Board.

With the passing of this bill non-government schools will be more accountable for the government funds that they receive. Government funding to the non-state school sector has grown substantially in the past decade. On the issue of funding, I cannot miss this opportunity to again expose the blatant bias to elite private schools in the new federal government arrangements. In 1982, state and non-state schools shared a 50-50 split of federal government funding. In 1996 this share was a 43-57 split in favour of private schools. Now it has gone totally out of whack to a 35-65 split in favour of private schools. It is only fair and reasonable that non-government schools become more accountable for their share of state funds and the growing share of federal public funds that they are receiving. The state is taking the lead with this bill.

In the past in Queensland it has not mattered if one is rich or poor; one will have access to quality education. Sadly, through the actions of a mean-spirited federal government, personal wealth does matter. Personal wealth is increasingly becoming a positive determinant of educational outcomes. Over \$3.2 billion is spent on private schools. I do not have an issue with private schools. I have very good private schools in my area, such as the Forest Lake College—

Mr Mickel: Hear, hear!

Ms STRUTHERS:—which the children of the member for Logan, John Mickel, have attended. The issue is about lack of fairness in the system. It is more and more important as both state and federal funds are going to the independent sector that they are more accountable for those funds. Queensland is particularly a big loser out of the federal government's new funding formulas.

I am a proud advocate of our public education system, as a proud graduate of the former Salisbury High School. There are tremendous public schools in my area. The new Calamvale college will be coming on stream next year and also the new Forest Lake High School. I also, though, advocate choice in the right of parents to seek additional spiritual or educational support from the independent system. I do not, however, support a system of federal government funding that will render the public system a very poor cousin to the non-government system.

While speaking on this bill today, I want to say that it is hypocrisy of the highest order for the federal member in my local patch, the member for Moreton, Gary Hardgrave, to state publicly that as a parent with two children attending a local state school 'I appreciate how much a quality education means to local parents and teachers', when in his publicly funded promotional flyer defending the increased federal funding to private schools he states that if this funding were taken away 'parents would be forced to put their children back into the state school system'. Take note of the language Mr Hardgrave uses—parents would be forced to put their children 'back'. It is easy to assume that he believes that going to a state school is a backward step.

As elected members of parliament at state and federal levels, we have a duty to support both systems of schooling and make sure that the funding arrangements are fair. We also have a responsibility to make sure that both systems of schooling are as accountable as possible to ensure the best care and best educational outcomes for our children.
