



Speech by

**Hon. K. LINGARD**

**MEMBER FOR BEAUDESERT**

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Hansard 11 September 2001

**EDUCATION (ACCREDITATION OF NON-STATE SCHOOLS) BILL**

**Hon. K. R. LINGARD** (Beaudesert—NPA) (3.12 p.m.): I would like to indicate the opposition's support for the Education (Accreditation of Non-State Schools) Bill 2001. This bill has been a long time in coming and is much needed. It is vital that Queensland has a quality educational system that embraces diversity.

The National Party believes strongly that all children in Queensland should be entitled to quality education at the school of their parents' choice. Queensland has a very strong state school system that is and must continue to be the central core of the provision of education. We strongly believe in the integrity of public schools and support the state government's role of ensuring that they continue to be excellent educational institutions.

However, it must be recognised that parents are increasingly choosing to send their children to alternative education providers in the non-state school sector. There are as many reasons for this choice as there are children in non-state schools. We as the parliament must respect those choices by encouraging this diversity and not demonising the non-government sector. We must work together to ensure that there is a consistently high educational standard for all pupils. This bill is an important step in guaranteeing this aim.

Unfortunately, the present system does not always provide quality instruction for Queensland children. Under the present system, the funding and accreditation of schools are interdependent. Therefore, a non-funded school does not fall within the jurisdiction of the Department of Education. Schools can operate without accreditation from the government. The minister cannot close these schools and cannot carry out inspections into the quality of their instruction. It is dangerous for such a situation to be allowed to continue.

It is important that, just because a school does not receive government funding, it does not necessarily follow that the institution be prohibited from functioning. As long as the school meets a set of criteria that ensures that all schoolchildren receive a minimum level and quality of schooling, it should be able to operate. This issue was identified by the Webb review committee in its *Report of the review of accreditation and accountability arrangements for Queensland non-state schools*. The Webb review also identified other serious problems with the current system of accreditation. It found that the scheme had serious deficiencies.

The arrangement was originally designed to restrict the building of new schools and control their enrolment levels through funding. This meant that some schools, which met necessary quality standards, were not approved due to demographic and planning issues. Yet a school that was refused approval could still open without breaking the law. As a result, a series of schools that are beyond the reach and control of the Minister for Education have opened. As a result, there is no regulatory oversight of those schools. That is understandably worrying, as we cannot guarantee the pupils of those schools a quality educational environment or syllabus.

The Webb review also found that there are no automatic, ongoing checks, even of approved schools, to ensure that institutions deliver the standard expected and responsibly carry out proper financial practices. Owing to that, unless the minister ordered an inspection, there is no surety that the funds allocated to the school were being used suitably and in the manner for which they were granted.

Just as worrying is that, once a school is approved, there is no mechanism for cancelling its registration. There is clearly a need for this reform. Webb suggested that funding issues and quality issues be addressed separately. It is good to see that this bill addresses that issue.

Under this bill, accreditation is a formal quality process that all non-state schools must undertake on a five-year basis, thereby addressing the shortcomings of the present system that were identified by the Webb review. The National Party feels strongly that if a prospective school can meet the standards that are set, they should not be denied accreditation on the grounds of religious or philosophical convictions.

Under the proposed regulation, members of the governing body of the school will be subject to checks by the Children's Commissioner. I have always believed that the Children's Commissioner has had the ability to oversee any educational institution. We have argued about that before. I understand that the minister has disagreed, but I welcome and support the right to regulate and check governing body members. While it is worrying that an additional level of Big Brother oversight of personal lives is being proposed, the safety of children must be prioritised. It is important that these proposed checks be used properly and not mischievously abused. This system must be tightly controlled.

Other requirements will include financial capacity, a quality educational program, the provision of adequate resources and a commitment to renewing the school program. The opposition supports the implementation of these criteria. The accreditation of non-state schools is an important step towards quality education for our children and will be supported by the opposition.

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