



Speech by

**Mrs LIZ CUNNINGHAM**

**MEMBER FOR GLADSTONE**

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Hansard 11 September 2001

**EDUCATION [ACCREDITATION OF NON-STATE SCHOOLS] BILL**

**Mrs LIZ CUNNINGHAM** (Gladstone—Ind) (3.56 p.m.): In rising to speak to the Education (Accreditation of Non-State Schools) Bill, I pass on my appreciation to the minister for the briefing that her officers afforded and also for early access to amendments to ensure we had an opportunity to understand them. I thank the minister very much for that. One reason that non-state government school educational offerings has occurred is because parents have asked for choice. As previous speakers have said, they either make the choice to go to a non-state school because of their faith and their beliefs or because they have other reasons to choose that type of education. It is important not only to ensure that that choice continues but also to ensure that that choice continues in a sound and viable way.

The issue of distance education is one that is covered in this bill and is one of the first issues I want to touch on. For many parents, opportunities to choose the style of schooling for their child, that is, that it is appropriate to not only the child's make-up and personality but also the family belief system, includes a choice with regard to distance education. I again thank the minister, because the briefing I received from the officers yesterday in relation to my questions on distance education indicated that the matter of the definition of distance education may be reviewed at a subsequent time and that at this point in time the two peak bodies governing non-state schools have agreed with the bill in its current form.

As other speakers have said, I place on the record my appreciation to Alan Druery for the many times he visited my office to speak about educational matters, particularly Catholic educational matters. He was not only a very articulate man but also forthright in the views he held. He in no way said less or more than he needed to say in pursuing the goals and the best interests of the group he represented. I also put on the record my appreciation to Geoff Gay for the work that he does on behalf of independent schools. However, there is one issue in relation to distance education which is not covered in this bill but one which I want to put on the table. While the bill recognises that distance education is a facility in this bill, there are a couple of elements that still have not been dealt with but which need to be dealt with.

The definition of distance education that will apply to this particular piece of legislation has been lifted from the Education Act. It deals with the distance a person lives from an existing educational facility and the distance they are from transport to that educational facility. Whilst these definitions in themselves have stood the test of time, changes in family structure and changes in families' desire for educational choice have meant that for some families—it is not just a few; it is quite a number of families—those definitions do not serve to ensure that they get the best choice for their children.

There is a significant growth in home-schooling in Queensland. Home-schooling is done not just by families that are living a significant distance from an educational facility. Some families are choosing home-schooling as an option preferable for their children for a number of reasons—as I said, not only the health and psychology of their children but also that family's individual belief system.

Whilst the program that is offered to those children must be educationally sound—it must have all of the elements that are required for a rounded education for the child or children in that home—there must also be an opportunity for parents of children who home-school to access material already available through distance education providers.

Because of the nature of distance education, material is usually in modular form or in a form that is transportable and it is able to be learnt by a child in a sequential fashion. For parents who choose home-schooling, distance education material is often the preferred choice to ensure a sound education for their children in a way they can fairly and appropriately administer.

I highlight for the minister that small area of concern that remains. While this bill recognises distance education in the non-state school sector, parents who choose distance education as an option for their children, even though they are not covered by the criteria of living outside access to a school or outside access to transport to a school, still would like to be able to source their education material from a distance education facility.

As other speakers have done, I commend the minister for the accreditation criteria. In particular, officers of her department were very supportive and very positive in their explanation of the student welfare process, which is one of the subsets of the accreditation criteria. Whilst it is a new area of consideration for non-state schools and one that is certainly very necessary, I will put on the public record a couple of concerns I have which perhaps the minister could respond to.

There will be a requirement that non-state schools develop policies and processes to deal with inappropriate behaviour reported by a child and with battered children's syndrome, which is an observation by the teachers. An obligation will be placed on teachers and other staff of the school to report those suspicions to individuals outside the structure. I note from the explanation that there is no obligation on the school to report inappropriate behaviour that is reported by a child to either the teacher or some other person in that school set-up to a person or group external to the school. I may have misunderstood the explanation. I would be interested to know if I have misunderstood that. I understand that there is a requirement—it is a quantum leap in the obligations of the accreditation—on the school to develop policies and processes to deal with that report.

My concern with there being no obligation to report an allegation to someone outside the school structure is that over the last few years we have seen a number of incidents whereby a child has reported inappropriate behaviour by staff in a school to the school structure—the hierarchy—and the hierarchy, for whatever reasons, has chosen not to progress that report or allegation of inappropriate behaviour. I would be interested to know how the minister will ensure that that problem of the past is not replicated in the future if in non-government schools the behaviour that is reported by a child can remain internalised in that school structure. I am not for one minute casting aspersions on any of the existing private schools or future new schools, but historically it has occurred and I would be interested in the steps that the minister sees as appropriate to ensure that inappropriate behaviour is independently investigated.

I refer to funding from government sources. I know of a couple of small independent schools that started 17 or 18 years ago, and at the time and for quite a number of years they did not intend to seek government funding. In fact, the philosophy of the schools was that they wished to remain independent, not only in their teaching curriculum but also in their funding sources, to ensure that they remained completely independent in terms of the rules, regulations and governing conditions for their schools and their students. Their desire to do that was in no way inappropriate or unseemly. There was a very strong Christian basis for the school's formation and they wanted to ensure that that in no way would be undermined. The departmental officers did explain this to me, but I would be interested in having an explanation from the minister placed on the public record.

There are minimum attendance requirements for government funding for a school that is in operation. Those were cited as: for the primary department, 25; for years 8 to 10, 20 in each year; and for years 11 and 12, 10 in each year. The bill states that the ability to reach those thresholds is only one of the tests. It is not an obligatory test, but it is one of the things that has to be considered by the committee.

With some of the systems that are set up—I am most familiar with the ACE system—those schools can be established very quickly because the print material is available and they buy it per student. The schools can operate on quite small numbers with very close ratios of parents to students. Some of the schools that would have started under the ACE system may have had 25 students in total. I seek the minister's confirmation that the smaller schools will not be precluded from starting, providing they are financially viable and they provide a sound educational curriculum. As I said, a lot of them start without seeking government funding. I seek the minister's clarification on that point.

Another issue relates to the development time for the Non-State Schools Accreditation Board. There are lead times of, notionally, three years—one to two years for development and the third year for enrolment, and the third term of the third year is used for assessment. With those schools that I cited earlier, the developmental time line can be quite short, providing they meet the criteria for an appropriate learning centre and there are appropriate teaching qualifications and appropriate teacher-student ratios. I seek the minister's clarification in relation to whether those time lines can be shortened and shortened significantly if the other criteria are adhered to.

The only other issue I wish to raise—again, I thank the minister for circulating the amendments early enough for us to get some understanding of their impact—relates to the transitional provisions for the guidelines and the retrospectivity. I am assuming that the retrospectivity is curative in nature. Perhaps my question is almost superfluous, but I seek the minister's assurance that no schools will be disadvantaged in any way by the retrospectivity and that it is, as was explained to me, just a reinforcement of the head of power for the approval of schools in the past under the guidelines that are being, if you like, retrospectively updated. I seek the minister's clarification of that.

I think most people would agree that recognition of the non-state schools via the accreditation process is a positive step forward. I thank the minister for the opportunity to receive those briefings and for her attention to this legislation.

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