



Speech by

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EDUCATION [ACCREDITATION OF NON-STATE SCHOOLS] BILL

Ms NOLAN (Ipswich—ALP) (4.25 p.m.): I am happy to speak in support of the Education (Accreditation of Non-State Schools) Bill, because it is a good bill and because it gives me an opportunity to talk about some of the excellent non-state schools in my electorate of Ipswich. Over the past year or so I have been very disappointed to see an increasingly divisive debate about the private-public school divide being fanned by one of the Howard government's foremost Right Wing ideologues, the Education Minister, David Kemp. In inciting a debate between the private and the public school systems, the federal government has quite deliberately hit on an historical sore spot in the Australian community. They have done so just as they have quite deliberately hit on sore spots when trumpeting issues regarding refugees, single mothers and work, and Aboriginal people and practical as opposed to spiritual reconciliation.

In those cases, just as with the debate concerning funding for private and public schools, there are legitimate policy issues, but the federal government's approach has been to ramp up the rhetoric, to swing by the polls, and to revel in the politics at the expense of responsibly dealing with the policy issues. This approach belies any claim of decency on part of the Howard government.

The fact is that both private and state schools are doing a very good job. This bill moves to further protect the foundation of private schools and to ensure that public faith in those schools is maintained.

I want to speak about the accreditation provisions of the bill and particularly the changes from provisional to permanent accreditation. The bill supports a comprehensive regulatory environment that applies to all non-state schools. Under this bill, it is proposed that assessment and accreditation provisions will be enhanced. The Non-State Schools Accreditation Board must assess a provisionally accredited school to determine whether or not it should be fully accredited. This has to take place within six months of the expiry of the school's provisional accreditation.

The bill proposes that provisional accreditation can be extended for 12 months provided the board is satisfied that the school will be assessed as compliant within that term. Under the present provisions, once a school is accredited, there is no requirement to demonstrate compliance with accreditation criteria. The bill proposes that the board be empowered to request documents from a school once every five years for the purpose of assisting the board to decide whether the school is complying with the accreditation criteria. That is, once a school is accredited, the board can check to make sure that it qualifies to stay that way. The governing body of the school must supply the requested documents within six months of the request.

The bill establishes a system of accountability that addresses the verification of data on which funding levels are based and certification by the school that the expenditure of state government funds are in accordance with the purpose for which they were granted. Under the present legislation, schools that fail to get authorisation could reapply in another location or establish themselves without authorisation or without state funds. Previously, the minister had no power to close or take action against an operator who chose to operate outside government regulations. This bill quite rightly proposes that it be illegal for a school to operate unless accredited or provisionally accredited under the legislation.

This bill protects against shonky private schools. The bill ensures that the community can have confidence that all non-state schools have minimum standards of operation. It protects the public interests in the standard of schooling and safety of children whilst being minimally intrusive.

The private schools in Ipswich are doing an excellent job. With a strong accreditation system, they will be protected from the damage that could be done to public faith in the system by unregulated shonky operators. I believe that they will strongly support the bill.

Ipswich has a leading reputation of providing quality private education. The state's first secondary school was established in Ipswich in 1863. The Ipswich Grammar School led the way for excellent private schools, including Ipswich Girls Grammar, which was established in 1892; St Mary's College; St Edmund's and the three private primary schools of St Mary's; Sacred Heart; and Bethany Lutheran. Each school operates on a different ethos, but all are well established and provide a high quality of education and a loving community environment for their students.

Ipswich's biggest private school, Ipswich Grammar, has a reputation for achieving excellent results from its boys. Last year, 30 per cent of IGS students achieved an OP of between 1 and 7. The boys are given opportunities to find their talents in a range of fields. The school is excellent at GPS sport and runs a regular and successful arts festival, Grammar Arts. While Ipswich Grammar certainly competes with the most elite private schools in Queensland, it is very much a part of the Ipswich community.

My old school, the Ipswich Girls Grammar School, was established in 1892 when it came to the attention of the Queensland pioneers that it could be appropriate to actually educate their daughters. I am a believer in single-sex education, especially for girls. I believe that my education at Ipswich Girls Grammar nurtured me, encouraged me to do my best and gave me the confidence to make my own way in the world, both through the years of independent travel I took on after school and even now representing the people of Ipswich.

I believe that, during the formative years when girls are developing their opinions, the encouragement that I was given to believe that I could do or be whatever I wanted to be was tremendously important. In a way, I was fortunate that it was not until well after I left school and was working that, for the first time, I encountered what I identified as sexism, and I nearly died! For girls to be able to grow up and grow their confidence in an environment where there is no sexism and where they can be whoever they want to be provides them with a tremendous opportunity. That confidence and opportunity is something for which I am extremely thankful. I am happy that the Ipswich Girls Grammar School continues to provide those opportunities for young women.

I also have close relationships with the two Catholic high schools in Ipswich, St Mary's and St Edmund's. My father is a St Edmund's old boy and my mother is the deputy principal at St Mary's. Both are school communities of which I feel a part. St Mary's and St Edmund's provide an excellent quality education and instil a strong ethos of tolerance and social justice in their students, which I believe is a tremendously important part of education. The schools develop rounded individuals and prepare them for a range of opportunities in life. Whilst St Mary's and St Edmund's students have certainly gone on to excel in professions and sport, each student is equally valued regardless of their measurable abilities.

St Mary's and St Edmund's cooperate in an excellent vocational education program called Ipswich Youth Enterprises, which gives students real-life work enterprises. Recently, IYE organised a major Centenary of Federation program that brought all Ipswich schools together to publish a supplement in the local paper, the *Queensland Times*. IYE runs a retail shop in conjunction with St Vincent de Paul and is currently planning to move into hospitality.

St Mary's and St Edmund's provide a healthy and balanced environment for their students. When I spoke to St Edmund's Principal Jim Lucey earlier today, he talked about the lengths that the school was going to provide good IT infrastructure. However, he pointed out that while the technology was good, the school environment was better because, at school, knowledge is encouraged not just information and it is at school that there are real relationships. I strongly agree.

Ipswich also has three excellent private primary schools, Bethany Lutheran, Sacred Heart and St Mary's. I recently attended the Bethany fete, which was a huge occasion with events happening all day, a number of stalls and a lot of happy kids. For a school of only a couple of hundred students, to organise such a comprehensive event says volumes about the level of school spirit and community support. One parent told me about the strong support that there is for kids at Bethany. There are opportunities for kids to play sport, achieve academically and to get into art. More than that, being a small school, there is real individual attention given to the students.

The Sacred Heart School is another school with a big and active community. Recently, Sacred Heart finished a major project to build a new administration block and substantially do up the grounds to really improve the appearance of the school. The project was a success because of the huge effort of Tony Skipington and the active P&F.

St Mary's is also a lovely school with a caring atmosphere for its 550 kids. In recent years, St Mary's Primary, along with St Edmund's, has been developing links with China. Any opportunities to expand kids' horizons by teaching them about another country, teaching them another language—Chinese is the language other than English at St Edmund's—and bringing foreign people to a school are very positive moves. To alert children to the rest of the world and to have them think about being in someone's shoes are really healthy things. I strongly support what St Mary's is doing.

The private schools in Ipswich are all unique environments with strong traditions and progressive ideas. They are a very important part of the Ipswich community. It saddens me that the Howard government is, for its own political and ideological reasons, emphasising the differences between state and private schools. It is clear that both state and private schools need to be properly funded. I want the Ipswich private schools to understand my strong support for them and for the excellent work that they do.
