



Speech by

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MEMBER FOR CAIRNS

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EDUCATION [QUEENSLAND STUDIES AUTHORITY] BILL

Ms BOYLE (Cairns—ALP) (5.27 p.m.): I am pleased to join other honourable members of the House in supporting the Education (Queensland Studies Authority) Bill 2001. I pay compliments to the minister, Anna Bligh, and her staff who have clearly done an excellent job. It is arguable whether the provision of health or education services is the most important responsibility of government. Certainly the priority for education is in the top two. To bring into the House, therefore, a bill that is as important as this and to have it supported by all members of the House is indeed an achievement, and I give recognition to all involved.

I would like to recognise particularly the important objectives of the bill that will hopefully be well accomplished through the bill. The first of these is to contribute to high levels of completion of year 12 or equivalent. Surely there can be nothing more important as a goal for us to work on in education at the moment. Members of the House would be aware of the not wonderful figures that we have in terms of high school completion, yet they would also be aware of the sheer importance of high school completion. I know that the high schools in Cairns have done wonders in terms of innovative ways of keeping those at risk of leaving school interested in their studies and motivated towards staying at school and that they are having some degree of success, but further work needs to be done. I must say that there are some parents who need to participate more than they already do in this process of promoting to their children the importance of completing high school.

I draw to the attention of members of the House, in case they had missed it in one of the discussion papers prepared under the leadership of the former Minister for Education, Dean Wells, a really important imperative as to why our children should stay in high school. Leaving school early means that young people are more likely to be unemployed and results in considerable financial costs for the nation and the individual. The discussion paper recognises that it has been estimated that by the time individuals have reached 24 years of age completion of year 12 reduces their odds of unemployment by 58 per cent. The lifetime cost to Australia of each early school leaver is estimated at \$74,000, with the overall cost to the country of one year's early school-leaving cohort in the vicinity of \$2.6 billion. Early school leaving also increases costs to government in terms of higher rates of criminal activity and increased demands on the health system. For all these reasons, that top priority of increasing levels of completion of year 12 is essential.

The objective of increasing retention, improving the social cohesion and the social and human capital of Queensland, is also important. That is about a smart future and hope for the future for the young people of Queensland in recognising that education is part of their drive towards finding a life that is fulfilling for them as well as a contribution to the betterment of the state of Queensland and the lifestyle of all Queenslanders.

Another of the objectives is to provide seamless development of syllabus across the compulsory years of schooling and into the post-compulsory years. This is very different from schooling in those years when I was young. There was such a rigidity then about year 1 or year 4, about passing all levels of achievement required before being able to move on and about ages for being in year 4, year 7 or whatever. In retrospect, that rigidity looks ridiculous. It is, therefore, an objective in this bill to be supported.

Another of the objectives of the bill is to provide a supported transition from formal schooling to post-school options. In these days where we no longer have the formality of 'I'm a school student and

now I'm not', as though they are two very distinct and separate stages of our lives, this is indeed appropriate. As we move to lifelong learning—for all of us, whatever our age—flexibility to transit between schooling in a formal sense and subsequent years and in the transition to other school options is essential.

I recognise the importance of the bill in providing a statutory arrangement that will allow schooling sectors—independent, state and Catholic—and individual schools to achieve their common and specific objectives to meet the needs of their clients. I think the words of that objective are very well crafted to indicate the importance of setting standards for education that are common across all sectors and, at the same time, to allow for individuality and for the additional, special goals that different sectors within education may have. For example, I am pleased to inform honourable members that recently in Cairns we opened the first of the Montessori schools. I know that enrolment has been good, and I have no doubt that that school will be successful. We have a range of excellent Christian schools in Cairns offering a variety of education with that special extra of the religious education that underlies their school structure.

Another goal of this fine bill is to support the effective transitions between stages of schooling, formal and informal learning environments and to post-school work or further study and active citizenship. I am pleased to see the words 'active citizenship' included. It had seemed to me in my middle years that the goal of forming our children into active citizens had fallen from favour within the school system, with the pressures there have been towards higher standards and broader learning in terms of globalisation, computers and the like. I recall citizenship activities from my school years—participating in important events such as on Anzac Day and in the local celebrations that we regarded as essential. In some schools, time devoted to citizenship activities and the development of citizenship skills has not been as great as it perhaps could have been in recent years, though I am pleased to say that in several of our Cairns schools it has been highlighted in recent years—with wonderful benefits, I have no doubt, not only for the organisations in the community who are benefiting from these citizenship activities but also for those students as individuals who will likely be the leaders of Queensland in years to come.

One of the innovations in the bill is a new authority to advise the Minister for Employment, Training and Youth on relevant vocational and educational matters. It provides for a facilitation of the involvement of the two ministers. However, it sends a clear message that the government is determined to ensure that every possible opportunity is provided to young Queenslanders to complete their 12 years of schooling. It is appropriate—obvious, even—for the Minister for Education and the Minister for Employment, Training and Youth to work together. It is nonetheless innovative to recognise in the bill the integration of government across several departments and portfolios. I recognise the importance of that and that sign of a smart government.

I note that there was broad consultation and that the minister received over 200 written submissions. That is indeed a large number, yet I wonder whether very many of those came from parents of students in schools in Cairns. I looked at and was interested in the discussion papers, yet I suspect that for many parents with busy lives—with commitments to all of their children, to families, to jobs and to other things—taking the time to really go through those discussion papers and to respond would have been too hard. I suspect, too, that some of the language and honesty that we use in the discussion papers is easier to understand for those who are familiar with education as a profession than it might be for the consumer and the consumer's parents, as it were.

I know from all of those activities in which I am engaged with parents, teachers and students in schools in Cairns that the standards by which they measure the performance of their schools may be in different words to the words used in this bill. I know, for example, that they really value a school that can cater for the diversity of students—students who are bright and forward and other students who may need a little help along the way; students who come from different cultures, some of whom do not have English as their first language; and students who are skilled in sports or performing arts but maybe not so good in science or maths. Parents look these days for a school that can take account of people's different talents and yet manage all needs.

All of the public high schools in Cairns are excellent in this regard. I recognise in particular the changes made by Richard Huelin and other teachers at Woree High School in Cairns over these last several years. The tremendous cultural diversity of the school has become one of its key focuses and one of its outstanding successes, rather than, as maybe had been regarded in many years past, a nuisance or difficulty. The pride the students are taking in that diversity, particularly their cultural diversity, is wonderful to behold. That showed particularly in the awards presentation evenings held at the end of last year. The talents on display were wonderful in academia, wonderful in sports, wonderful in dancing and in the performing arts and wonderful in the organisation of the event by the students and in the citizenship skills that showed.

I must recognise also the importance to a lot of parents of the special focuses that are developing particularly in our high schools. An example of this in Cairns is the development of particular

focus in two areas at Trinity Bay State High School. Under the principalship of Stephen Savvakis, that school is excelling in science and in visual arts. I must admit that on the latter topic I share some frustration with the principal, the teachers and the students of Trinity Bay State High School at the slow progress there has been to date in the building of the arts block, which was long overdue and recognised by the previous minister and confirmed by this minister as a priority project. Nonetheless, difficulties with the nitty-gritty of the tender papers and detailed design have held up the project. I hope that project will start shortly and it will indeed be welcomed by all in that school community when it is completed.

In terms of increased facilities that will allow the development of new areas of focus, I give recognition to Cairns State High School and the tremendous boost that it has received under the Secondary Schools Renewal Program. As it is the oldest high school in Cairns, unsurprisingly it has buildings and facilities that are not designed for the education focus of today. We have opened one of the new buildings at that school, which has allowed the development of a new sports centre which the community is invited to use. This has allowed a new development, particularly in basketball, for the high school and other sports will follow suit. At the same time, work is being carried out on the refurbishment of what was previously a sports centre but which will now become part of the network of performing arts facilities at this high school.

I am also pleased to say that parents in Cairns expect much better communication directly with them from their schools these days, whether it is about a particular problem or even a success that their child is having at school, whether it is about events within the school and ways that they can participate or whether it is about changes in the way education is being delivered. There are some primary schools in the electorate that are making excellent inroads into a dialogue with their local communities.

I give particular recognition to Kath Johnston, the Principal of Cairns West State School for the excellent leadership she has shown in this regard and in other regards. We all hear that Kath is getting close to retirement. She mentioned it to me, not in the context of looking for us to pat her on the back and put the dates in the diary for a celebration to recognise her sterling career but more because she wants to ensure that there is a smooth transition from her leadership. She wants to ensure that there is a period where she can hand over the excellent initiatives that the school has undertaken under her leadership whilst allowing for the development of leadership of others in the school who will remain there when she has moved on. The numbers of parents who have participated in all kinds of exercises, events, training and just sheer good times at Cairns West State School over recent years has been tremendous. There are others on the staff of that school who also deserve commendation for this happening.

I must give recognition also, as have previous speakers, to the P&C associations, and what a vibrant and important set of organisations they can be in furthering facilities and other events at their schools. I am pleased to say that I have been working closely with the P&C Association at the Balaclava State School and also at several of our Catholic primary schools such as Our Lady Help of Christians and St Francis Xavier.

One important area of concern in a growing city like Cairns is that many of our schools now find themselves in areas where traffic has increased dramatically around the perimeters of the schools. This therefore means that the P&Cs and the school staff are engaged in looking strategically at how best to keep their students safe and allow for easy and smooth pick up and delivery to the school while at the same time manage the increasing traffic loads on nearby roads. In this regard, the Minister for Transport and Minister for Main Roads should be congratulated on the SafeST Program where expertise from the Department of Transport and Department of Main Roads is lent to school committees to assist them in planning improved ways of ensuring access to the school that is safe for those arriving by foot, bicycles, cars or buses.

I also give recognition to the importance of setting high standards in education, and that of course is mentioned in this bill through and through. The New Basics curriculum is part of ensuring that we go back to what in the old days were regarded as the three Rs—that is, reading, 'riting and the so-called 'rithmetic. Of course, we need our students to have that underlying quality of core educational skills. I must say that one of the core skills needed these days in my view is the ability to use computer systems to access information and to search and learn for oneself. While we as a government can be very proud of the roll out of computers to our public schools in particular, I must say that it concerns me that there is a great discrepancy, particularly by the time students reach high school, in the number of students who are able to access computers in their own homes. The familiarity, the ease and the advantage given to students who have home computers is showing. It is an issue that, while peripheral to education, is important to education.

There is no doubt that there is more work to be done. Unfortunately, the retention rate figure at high school through to the completion of year 12 of our indigenous students is nowhere near as high as we would wish it to be. There is considerable effort put in by the Department of Education and considerable funds put in by government to work on this problem, but it has not been very successful to

date. There are also problems with the education of our boys. Their motivation, particularly by high school, to engage in academic tasks and to compete in areas where our girls are excelling seems to have flagged. Finding ways to attract male teachers to the system, to keep them there and to raise the profile and importance of teaching as a career choice in our society is important. For all of these reasons and yet with the challenges still ahead, I am indeed pleased to support the Education (Queensland Studies Authority) Bill 2001.
