



Speech by

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MEMBER FOR WARREGO

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EDUCATION [MISCELLANEOUS AMENDMENTS] BILL

Mr HOBBS (Warrego—NPA) (6.20 p.m.): I am pleased to rise to speak to the Education (Miscellaneous Amendments) Bill 2002. There are a number of issues that affect my electorate of Warrego and during the debate many members have been able to talk about issues affecting their electorates. Education is a very important area and it is terribly important that we get it right. One big issue in my electorate is the airconditioning of schools that are currently not airconditioned, and I hope that in the forthcoming budget the government looks to provide funding for airconditioning schools in those areas. There have been extremely hot conditions in the last few days particularly. Today has been an absolute stinker in the area and there is no doubt that children cannot learn in those conditions. One school that has been very active in this campaign to try to improve its lot is the St George Primary School. It has to raise about \$300,000 in order to aircondition the school, particularly C and B blocks. At this stage it has raised about \$130,000, so it has actually done extremely well. The Balonne Shire Council based at St George has been very helpful as well and provided funding to help the school, so that is a great effort by that council. It is interesting to note that it will cost the school \$100,000 to aircondition C block and it will have about \$30,000 to start on the next stage of introducing airconditioning.

With the government's scheme at the present moment, a subsidy is available for schools in north Queensland for airconditioning—the government pays \$4 for every \$1 raised. In other words, if it costs a school in north Queensland \$300,000 to aircondition the school that school only has to raise \$75,000 whereas the St George Primary School has had to raise \$100,000 and only a third of the school will be airconditioned. It has a long way to go and I do not think that is fair—that is, it has to raise all of the money to get airconditioning and then it is very hard to start the next stage of airconditioning. For example, if the school spent all the money airconditioning C block, it then has to raise the full quarter again should the government decide that it will come to the party. So it is a great cost to the school.

There has been great support from many people in the community, particularly various companies and many locals, in terms of fundraising. Chrissy Higgins from Higgins Manufacturing in Toowoomba and Brisbane has been very supportive and has provided a very competitive quote for C block. It might have been B block; it is either one of those blocks. We really appreciate that effort from that great company. I would recommend it to anyone if they need good work done. Great work was also done by the P&C, particularly Scott McWilliam and the head of the airconditioning committee, Helena McDonald. They have been a tower of strength in trying to raise the money.

I have to say that there are various ways and means to raise money. Two gentlemen in the area, Councillor Robert Buchan and Dr John Stone—Dr Stone was a councillor; he is now the mayor of the shire—while not giants of men, certainly cast a fair shadow. They decided to lose some weight and proposed that they would pay the school airconditioning committee \$100 for every kilogram that they lost. In fact, they lost 66 kilograms and therefore paid \$6,600 towards the fund. I was very supportive of their cause and offered to pay \$10 for every kilogram they lost. So that cost me \$660 as well. That was money well spent. Those gentlemen certainly slimmed down. While they still cast a shadow, it is certainly a little less than what it was before. It was great to see the community spirit urging those people to lose the weight and the great contribution that they made to the airconditioning fund.

I also want to mention an issue which is very important, and that is the position of executive director of schools in the Roma district office. There have been four acting district officers within the last couple of years, and that is not satisfactory. In an area as large as Roma, surely we can find a permanent person for that position. It is important for continuity of the region. I must say that the acting district executive directors have been very good, and I want to put that on the record. I think that they themselves would also recommend that the position be filled permanently so that there is more continuity in the region.

I also want to mention the Balonne Further Education and Training Group which has put together a skill centre which will be a great boost for the Balonne youth, particularly around the St George region. Those youths will now not have to leave home to further their education and training. Facilities and opportunities for vocational training are currently limited in the Balonne region and the Balonne Skill Centre will help fill the gap in the education and training area. The region is experiencing growth with new and successful industries now established in the region such as aviation, table grapes, vineyards, rockmelons and other fruit as well as the traditional industries of cotton, beef, sheep and grain. The drought has set the centre back at the moment, but down the track when it does rain again, which it will, these industries will be back in full swing. We certainly need to have the people skilled up to be able to work in those industries.

Due to the diversity of the region's industries, the Balonne Skill Centre will be able to offer training to students in a range of areas such as catering, gardening, administration, small business issues, tourism and hospitality related skills and various short courses. School based traineeships, apprenticeships, individual competency units or competencies for students at St George and Dirranbandi secondary schools and literacy and numeracy programs will also be on offer. The centre will also work cooperatively with other training providers to access courses outside those areas of registration. Roma TAFE has indicated it will use the facilities at the centre on a regular basis to deliver training to local students and also the Open Learning Institute.

It is expected that seasonal casual workers will also access the skill centre for specific training such as grapevine pruning skills, and that is a large industry developing in the St George region and a great product. I congratulate the Balonne Further Education and Training Group Management Committee which has done a tremendous job on the submissions, gathering needs analysis information to support the submission and for all the work done. It has been an enormous effort over a long time. The committee members include Barnaby Joyce, Rosie Jones, Paul Atkinson, Ron and Jennie Waters, Jeff Baker, Robert Buchan, Cassandra Taylor, Christine Himstedt-Anderson, Justin Washinton, Tracey Campbell and Jeff Fox. We certainly appreciate the support they have given. The government also appreciates the funding that has been provided at this stage. We were advised on 12 November that a further \$200,000 has been approved by the minister. That is great news for education in the St George region.

There is another important issue in the Miles area. The Miles preschool is a great preschool, but it has a waiting list. It has had one for years. There is too much demand for one unit. We really need two smaller preschool units rather than one oversubscribed unit. If we could run two classes of 15, that would certainly suffice. We probably need to get some up-to-date figures, but every year some children miss out. They cannot go to preschool because there is a waiting list. It is just not satisfactory in a town such as Miles, which has a population of probably 900 people. There is no transport to other centres. That just means that some of those young students miss out. We have the facility. All we need is the teaching staff and maybe some administrative staff. The facilities are there. All we need is a bit of help to make sure the rest of those students can get a proper start to school life.

The speech nights we have all been to represent a great opportunity to catch up with a lot of principals, students and teachers. I thank all of the teachers who have transferred out of the Warrego area. I will no doubt catch up with them in different areas around the state. I thank them for their contribution to the schools in the district. I wish them well for their futures. Most importantly, I thank those teachers who are staying. It is always very difficult when there is a lack of continuity in teaching staff. We see this on numerous occasions when there is a big turnover. It sometimes happens at various schools that there is quite a large turnover. That has happened in a few schools this year. That does create a bit of uncertainty for the parents. They wonder how things will turn out next year. Certainly, I thank all of those principals, teachers, parents and P&Cs who have worked so hard.

I will be attending the St George Primary School and Mungallala speech nights next week. I have been very fortunate to be able to get to a few. It is very difficult when parliament is sitting. We just cannot get to as many of those speech nights as we would like. I think it is very important that local members get out to see those people—to talk to them about the issues that are important. Education is one of the most important issues. We have to make sure we can provide that service. We have to make sure that education is the very best for the students in our electorates.