



Speech by

JEFF SEENEY

MEMBER FOR CALLIDE

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EDUCATION [QUEENSLAND STUDIES AUTHORITY] BILL

Mr SEENEY (Callide—NPA) (2.41 p.m.): Today I am pleased to have the opportunity to make a brief contribution in the debate on the education legislation. As a number of honourable members have said, education is extremely important to all of our constituents. I take the opportunity to congratulate all of the professionals involved in providing education right across Queensland and in particular in the electorate of Callide.

Today I wish to bring to the attention of the House a problem being experienced by a small school within my electorate—a problem that is not atypical of similar situations faced by many such schools at this time of the year in previous years. It is something that causes a lot of angst, concern and worry for parents. The situation is caused by a departmental policy that I would suggest the minister needs to take a look at.

The school that I wish to speak about today is the Thangool State School. Thangool is a great little community just outside Biloela. This small community has been in somewhat of a decline over recent years. However, to their credit, the people there, in common with people in so many other small communities around the state, have a real spirit and are prepared to work for their community and fight to keep it viable and ensure that it remains a great place to live. They are particularly concerned when their school is threatened. The school is an integral part of such small communities. The level of involvement from parents and the community generally in their local school is much greater in those small communities than it is in the bigger centres. In those smaller communities the school is, if not the centre of the community, a very important part of it.

I have some 25-odd letters written to me by parents of the students of the Thangool State School about this issue. I have received these over the past couple of days and I know that a lot more are in the mail. I have received 25-odd letters and a large number of phone calls at my office. Today I wish to read from some of these letters, because I do not think that in the parliament I can get the message across any better than as expressed by these people who have written to me about their problem. I will quote initially from a letter by Wendy Peterson, Thangool. Her letter sets the scene. It states—

The enrolment for Thangool State School is 125 students—

so it is not a very small school; it is quite a reasonable size—

and the Pre-School is 30 students. Education Queensland were told the number of enrolments in November, 2001 and said this was okay. The staffing arrangements were worked out for 2002 and it has worked perfectly (all the children have settled in well this year with classes and teachers). 'If it ain't broke, don't fix it'. Now, however, we are told that the figures are wrong and we have to cut 0.4, or two working days from staff—

at this time of the year, after the classes and teachers have settled into their routines. It continues—

There are a few options:

Sack a Staff member who works two days a week—all the teachers are a valuable asset to our school,

Sack the Special Needs staff member—then what happens to the children that need the extra support, do we just forget about them or are they just a number?

Take the hours from administration—then who would do the paperwork,

Take all the support away from the Preschool & full day from the Primary—this is not acceptable,

Scrap the Music and Physical Education programs—what if my child is the next Cathy Freeman and hasn't had the opportunity to develop their talent because of missing out on vital lessons,

Take the Administration from the Principal and have him teach only, which would be more expensive to fund someone else to administer.

As a parent I am absolutely disgusted that the Department can treat the children as numbers not human beings. These children are our future and the Department is limiting the educational opportunities of my children. Queensland is supposed to be the 'Smart State' ... will someone start using their brains and think of the children and not the \$\$\$\$ value of education.

I have also a letter from Allison Ball, Thangool. She states—

It seems every year since my child has been attending Thangool School, the school goes through the problem of rearranging classes/ keeping staff/rearranging staff responsibilities because of some 'magical' enrolment number that has changed three times over the last three years. If it was now the year 2000, on current numbers, another 0.5 teacher would be appointed. But because the 'magic' number has been changed yet again (upwards), we are to lose 0.5 of teacher time—the enrolment numbers are the same—

as they were last year. She goes on to say—

A quality education is best provided with the current staffing level at our school and our school should not be 'downgraded' any further with the removal of more teacher time. There appears to be more concern about numbers and budgetary constraints than about the children involved and the quality of their education.

Our children are not numbers but young people who deserve the best of educational opportunities.

How true that is. Queensland children should not be considered to be just numbers. These hard and fast cut-offs cause an enormous amount of angst and concern for parents and children and there has to be a better system. I have also a letter from Mr and Mrs Marlow from Kariboe Springs, Thangool. They state in part—

Forgive me if I lack the understanding of how to spend millions of dollars on hundreds of departments, but it seems to me that our children stand to lose something significantly important, for such a tiny amount of government money.

How tiny and insignificant is the amount of money we are talking about in terms of the education budget? It is 0.4 of a teacher's salary to keep Thangool State School operating in the way it has.

I have also a letter from Sandra Grummitt, Thangool. To illustrate the circumstances that parents find themselves in, she states—

I have a boy in year 6 that does need the support of the Special Needs teacher, he has had support in past years and that is the only thing that is keeping him 'up there' with the others. Without that extra support, even though I know the teachers will do everything to help him, he will eventually go downhill and that cannot happen.

...

Some of the parents including us will seriously have to consider relocating our children to another school which is around 30 kms from where we personally live ...

She goes on to state—

We are a community school, with most of the children including ours coming from farms. This is the Year of the Outback—and I know politicians have already made the most of the Year of the Outback—

where different communities and people like yourself get behind the people and the children from the outback, by showing some support to know we are remembered when it comes to the crunch. But when something like this can happen to a little outback school, we really think that we are just figures on a computer screen, especially to the Education Department, and we are not looked at as individuals. To think that 3 children can make such a difference—

to a school.

Another letter from Clint and Bernadette Wedemeyer says—

We recently moved back here—

to Thangool—

from Brisbane, hoping for a better education in the Country for our children. We will have to move them to a private school in town, if the opportunities are not going to be available, although we would prefer to stay—

in Thangool.

The last letter from Joanne Grummitt from Thangool says—

My child attends Thangool State School. It is a great school with 125 students. This week ... Our school has decided to cut the services of visiting specialist teachers. This will mean that my child Darcy will no longer be taught Physical Education or have a music lesson.

...

Does this mean in order for my child to receive a full education we must by-pass our local school and send him to the bigger state schools or Private schools in the nearby towns.

...

Our small country towns will die unless people support them and this support begins in our local schools.

I could not put the message across to this parliament better than those local Thangool people have done in those letters. Those are their words, those are their concerns, and this parliament should note them well.

When a local school has to deal with a problem like this, it is a problem that the whole community has to deal with. As I said at the beginning of this speech, this is not a problem that is

atypical at this time of the year, but it is a problem that must be fixed. It is an issue that must be resolved in a much better way than the department is addressing it at the moment. I do not want any more of the schools in my electorate having to face this in the second or third week of term next year. I do not want to see any school anywhere in Queensland having to face this problem for the sake of one, two or three students.

There has to be a better system than this. There has to be a way to ensure that the staffing numbers are organised in such a way that the students and parents and the school communities are not put through this angst and this level of concern that is obviously being generated in the Thangool community at the moment. I urge the parliament to take on board the message from the Thangool school. I have written formally to the minister, and the minister will be receiving from me formal representations on their behalf. I urge the minister to look at this situation, particularly in relation to the Thangool school in this instance but also as an across-the-board issue which has impacted on many Queensland schools in the past. Unless it is fixed it will continue to impact on community schools throughout Queensland, and that just should not happen.
