



Speech by

Mrs D. PRATT

MEMBER FOR NANANGO

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EDUCATION [GENERAL PROVISIONS] AMENDMENT BILL

Mrs PRATT (Nanango—Ind) (9.50 p.m.): I rise to wholeheartedly support the Education (General Provisions) Amendment Bill 2003. In doing so, I recognise that the bill has two primary policy objectives aimed at bolstering school security and ensuring the day-to-day operation and the good management of schools, namely, providing clear statutory powers under the Education (General Provisions) Act 1989 to assist the principals, the Department of Education and the non-state school sector to deal with individuals who disrupt the good order and management of schools or who threaten the safety of staff or students at school premises, and by increasing the penalties relating to wilful disturbance of and trespass on state educational institutions.

The explanatory notes state that this will be achieved by providing principals with new powers allowing them to require persons on school premises to provide their name and address, to issue directions to persons to refrain from certain conduct on school premises, to order a person to leave the school premises and not return for a maximum of 24 hours, to allow the chief executive of the Department of Education and the governing body of non-state schools to order a person not to attend school premises for up to 60 days, and to allow the chief executive of the Department of Education to apply to the Magistrates Court for prohibition orders for a period of 60 days but not exceeding 12 months. It also allows the Department of Education to apply to the Magistrates Court for orders preventing persons from attending all state educational institutions and non-state schools for up to 12 months. The second policy objective will be achieved by amending sections 47 and 48 of the EGPA to increase the maximum penalties for the breach of current sections to 20 penalty units, which is \$1,500.

What happens at schools today is quite surprising. It is very different from when I was at school. Usually we were dropped off at the gate and that was it. Many parents now bring their children into the school and accompany them into their classrooms. They often assist in the classroom, but that does not mean that they can behave in a disruptive manner. In my area a few parents actually go to school and sit in the classroom because their child is being bullied all the time and they feel that is the only way they can protect them. Sometimes, unfortunately, they retaliate. That does not bode well for the classroom, the other children who attend or the school. Other parents may find their particular behaviour offensive. It often reflects in their decision as to whether or not they will keep the child in the school and whether they will allow other children to come to the school. In that sense it affects the numbers and the future of the school. For those reasons that practice really needs to be discouraged.

If a person's behaviour is such that it does disrupt the school and the order of things, threatens the safety and welfare of students, staff and other visitors to that school, or if they are wilfully damaging property, which can happen when people are not able to control their tempers and throw things, I believe it is an extremely important function of the principal—and perhaps even his right—to be able to use any power to have those persons removed or banned. One of the most important things is that the principal has to feel that the government is supportive of those actions, that he or she has the right to ask those people to leave and not come back, and this bill allows for that. I think most people will welcome that.

That does not mean, however, that people cannot appeal such a decision. The explanatory notes state that a person to whom a direction applies may seek a review of the direction by the principal's supervisor, that is, the executive director of schools, and have it tested. It is not as if they are just being thrown out; they can go through this review period. If most of these people do go through a

review period or even if they just step back for a bit of breathing space, they may come to their senses and realise that perhaps their behaviour was non-productive and extremely antisocial.

I have also heard of a case where because of bullying in the school the parents have gone into the playground and used a similar force upon the child who has perpetrated the bullying. Then a teacher has intervened and the teacher has received criticism from the parent who, quite justifiably in their own mind, believes it is their job to protect their own child and will often overreact because of the emotions involved, whereas with a bit of mediation and proper talking through of things it could probably be settled quite smoothly.

We hear a lot about teachers being attacked by children in their classes. I do not think that is a common thing, although it happened even when I was at school—more so in the high schools rather than the primary schools—when a student would stand up to a teacher. I have actually seen teachers in tears. As a young 13-year-old I thought it was quite interesting to see the power play between the teachers and the students. It happened. It is not right that teachers should be threatened in this way, whether it be from a child within the school, a parent who comes onto the playground or anyone else who might enter.

That raises another problem—and I cannot speak for city schools but in the case of country schools the school is often the heart of the town. It usually has the biggest hall, the biggest sports facilities, the cricket pitch—it has everything that the town relies on. So every function is held there and they open the doors to anybody and everybody. There is no process where people are vetted. Therefore, the school ends up with strangers coming onto the grounds. The inherent danger there is drugs, abductions, abuse—all manner of things come into play.

Then again there are times when many people—adults and children alike—use the playground as a short cut. A student, a young adult, a teenager or somebody who has just left school might actually believe that the school is theirs as they attended it from kindergarten and it has been like a second home to them. They may believe it is theirs and so they can be on the premises any time they like. They may not realise that perhaps that is not the case, or that fact does not sink in. So all those people are there and mixing. Anything can happen. It is a volatile mix of personalities. There can be an argument about whether or not they are permitted to be on the grounds and so a little aggression comes about and there ends up being some sort of conflict, a teacher steps in the middle and they get hurt. It can escalate quite rapidly and be quite scary for a lot of people.

In my area skateboarding, which was mentioned earlier, is one activity that is very rife in our schools. They damage the handrails—I think it is amazing how they can even get up on the rails. Their skills are very well developed and they should be encouraged, but in the proper places. Even though Kingaroy and other towns in the electorate have skate parks, many people find they are a little bit overcrowded or they do not want to be there. Perhaps it is not challenging enough for their skills. So they will go to the school and ride their skateboards here there and everywhere, down the rails and down the stairs. It is quite amazing where they take them. They endanger other people. They cause the railings, et cetera, to become loose and other kids swing on them. The next minute someone is hurt. So there is damage done. Even though that is not the intention, damage is still done.

Also, there is the problem of teenage gangs. They often meet at the ovals to have a bit of a rough and tumble. As I said, those teenagers grew up at the school. They have been in the school for all of those years. They still believe that it is their turf. It is only right that all of these issues come up, because the school is regarded as the community's facility. The school is not perceived as being the Department of Education's facility; it is a community facility, and this school, which is regarded as these teenagers' backyard or second home, is going to be fought over.

I also note that a lot of security firms patrol our schools. They cannot be there every minute of the day and they cannot be there all night, simply because the cost is too prohibitive. The police do an excellent job. As I am coming home from some function or other late at night I often see the police wandering around the schools. But it becomes a bit of a game for those kids who are wandering around and who are technically breaking the law. They play hide-and-seek. As soon as the police disappear, these teenagers are back and continuing to do what they were doing, believing that they have won the game. Actually, these teenagers are quite proud of themselves. I have seen them hide behind bushes or scoot down to the other end of the building. As soon as the police leave they come out. You can see them do high fives and whatnot.

I do not believe that those children should be there. It was very late one night when I saw them—about two in the morning when I got home. I have to ask: where are their parents? Why do they let their children wander around at that time of night? Who is taking responsibility for those children? I have to ask: who is going to make those parents take responsibility for their children? To a degree, this responsibility should not be thrust onto the principals. The school system should not have to forever cover for the lack of responsibility of parents. Every day we see more responsibility being taken away from individuals—students, teenagers, parents—and handed back to the school. Many people may question whether this bill infringes on their civil liberties. I think that is for many people a real concern.

Many people would also want the minister to review how this legislation has affected the school community and the general community within a couple of years. The legislation may work really well—and I hope that it does work very well—but I also have concerns that it could be open to abuse if a mother or a father comes to the school quite often voicing their negative reaction to something that has been done to their child. Those parents are actually just questioning whether that action has impacted on the rights of their child, how far the school should take disciplinary action or some of the compulsory aspects of the schooling system. So I ask the minister: when will she review this legislation to ensure that its provisions are not being abused and that it is working correctly?

When reading this bill I noticed that training is to be undertaken. One of the members who spoke previously said that the minister was not willing to implement this legislation until she was satisfied that the proper and necessary training was undertaken. I ask the minister if that is the case.

In general I support this bill. It concerns me in some minor ways. If there is a review of the whole legislation, I would be very appreciative. I think that most people would be very appreciative of that. Other than that, I do not have any real problem with the bill at all. So I support the bill.