



Speech by

KAREN STRUTHERS

MEMBER FOR ALGESTER

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EDUCATION AND OTHER LEGISLATION [STUDENT PROTECTION] AMENDMENT BILL

Ms STRUTHERS (Algester—ALP) (12.38 p.m.): The overwhelming majority of teachers working in schools throughout Queensland are committed to improving the learning and lives of students. I am continually impressed with the time and energy, well beyond the call of duty, that many teachers put into the local schools in my area. Greg Burns and staff at Watson Road, which is a small school—it is like a country school in the city—give the kids in this high-need area every opportunity to get on in life. Sister Annette and her team at Our Lady of Fatima know each of the kids personally and treat them with great care and admiration. I see this kind of commitment throughout all of my local schools.

In my own school life I benefited from this kind of attention that teachers gave to students. They were after-hours sports coaches, mentors and supporters. These teachers worked well beyond the call of duty, even at the time that I was going to school. That has continued. It is a long-standing tradition for teachers.

Mr Lawlor: That would be a while ago.

Ms STRUTHERS: Not that long ago, member for Southport. I want to make special mention of Don Whitehouse, who is the principal at Marsden State High School in the electorate of Logan and well known to the member for Logan, John Mickel. Don Whitehouse was a teacher of mine, a great mentor and athletics coach, who put in a lot of energy to support students, and he continues to do that. It is important to state that teachers should not stop providing the after-hours support because of these issues that we are talking about today and because of the need to be more vigilant about inappropriate behaviours. My message to teachers is: continue doing that good work, use commonsense, do not overstep the mark, you have nothing to be afraid of with these sorts of provisions.

The tragic reality, however, is that children are at greatest risk of physical or sexual harm from someone close to them. That is the tragic reality that we are well aware of. The inquiries and exposures that have occurred in the last decade or more have shattered our faith and trust in people who are in positions of authority. The old 'stranger danger' teachings when we were kids have not hit the mark. Whilst we have got to be cautious and encourage kids to be cautious about strangers, in fact the greatest education work has been the protective behaviours work which has encouraged children to be cautious and aware of unwanted touching; to be aware of people around them who they care about, who may be doing things to them that seem to be done in a caring way, but which are not the sorts of touching that kids should be subjected to.

They are the sorts of educative strategies that have improved in the last decade or more. The silence has now been shattered on the reality that intolerable abuse is happening at the hands of church leaders, youth group leaders, scout leaders and some teachers. It is important that the provisions in this bill are supported widely. It is great to see that the stakeholders who have had a say in the provisions of this bill—the relevant unions, the QTU, the Queensland Independent Education Union—have realised that these issues have to be faced responsibly and carefully.

The provisions of this bill include giving greater powers to the Board of Teacher Registration to establish that teachers are of good character and to check more extensively their criminal history backgrounds. It includes powers to suspend a teacher's registration, if required, for the duration of any inquiry into allegations against them. It provides more extensive powers to cancel registration where a person has been convicted of a serious offence.

The relevant unions and others will be concerned about the privacy and the rights of teachers given that these provisions are powerful and hard hitting, but in the main the information I have received from my local teachers and others involved in the development of this bill has been that people realise that the paramount consideration is the safety of students. That has won out in this debate, and very importantly so.

I commend the cooperative way in which all the education stakeholders have contributed to this legislation. I commend the minister. She has had a big agenda this year with the education training reform agenda. She has no doubt put her staff, both in the ministerial office and the department, under a fair bit of pressure over the year given the range of the reforms on the agenda.

Mr Reeves interjected.

Ms STRUTHERS: The member for Mansfield tells me they can handle it. There are many skilled people working on these provisions and the education reform agenda. It is certainly important that these issues are seen as core education issues. Sometimes teachers are heard to say that dealing with these sorts of issues is not their core issue; I cannot think of anything more core in schools than making sure kids are safe. I commend the bill to the House.