



Speech by

Liz Cunningham

MEMBER FOR GLADSTONE

Hansard Tuesday, 9 November 2004

EDUCATION LEGISLATION AMENDMENT BILL

Mrs LIZ CUNNINGHAM (Gladstone—Ind) (5.54 p.m.): I rise to support this legislation and perhaps in some ways to reiterate what has already been said by previous speakers. My electorate has a wonderful combination of state schools, Catholic schools and independent schools, each of which provide wonderful education for the students who attend them. The Star of the Sea, St John's, Chanel and a new Catholic primary school at Boyne Island are the Catholic schools in my electorate which provide a wonderful education to Catholic families and to families who are not of the Catholic faith. Many of the students go to Chanel from Trinity College which is an independent school which does not have a high school. The parents very much value that education. St Stephens is a Lutheran school and Faith Baptist is an independent Baptist school. All of them provide a very important stream of education and importantly, too, a reinforcement of faith of those who choose to send their children there.

Tannum State High School, Gladstone State High School and Toolooa State High School are all in the process of having their awards nights. As the member for Whitsunday said, those of us who live some distance from Brisbane find that we often miss the awards nights or the presentation evenings because of parliamentary commitments. When we do go, it is a delight to see not only the calibre of the students in their academic fields but also the calibre of the students in terms of their social skills and their ability to organise, chair and run functions such as speech nights, presentation evenings and awards nights. It is one of my regrets that the local paper—and I am sure that this does not happen only in my electorate—will happily print a story on the front page about a teenager who has done the wrong thing, but they are conspicuously absent at these awards nights when young adults excel. As a result, the small percentage of young people who do the wrong thing get maximum coverage. Even the primary schools in my electorate—and there are quite a number of them—have year 7 graduations for students going into high school. In most instances, those graduations are run by the year 7 school captains, and they do a brilliant job. Young people are being exposed to those roles and responsibilities, and they are rising to the occasion and then some.

I also want to congratulate the primary schools in the electorate—that is, South State School, West State School, Central, Clinton Park, Kin Kora, High Top at Mount Larcom, the Calliope State School and the two schools in the Boyne Valley at Ubobo and Many Peaks. All of the staff, the principals, the P&Cs and the students contribute in no small measure to those schools succeeding. In fact, quite a number in my electorate figured well in the minister's awards recently. As an electorate, we have been blessed with teachers and principals, P&Cs and parents who in the main contribute greatly to the education of the students. In that list I left out Benaraby State School, which has a wonderful curriculum.

This legislation introduces a number of elements into the system. As has been said before, one of the main ones is the criminal history checks of mature students who choose to go back and complete their high school education, often with the intention to go on to tertiary education. One of the hallmarks of more recent education is the opportunity for people who have left school for a variety of reasons to go back to get an education. They may have been disengaged from education because economics may have played a part where, because of family circumstances, they have been required to finish school and get work. People in my parents' generation—and my parents are in their 80s—were lucky to finish primary school.

Most of them would say that they left school at grade 5 or grade 6, and they did that almost without exception because of economics. They had an obligation to contribute to the family income.

They were not afforded the same opportunities to go back and re-engage in educational streams. I think it is one of the things that young people need to be thankful for in a very positive way. Nowadays, there are great opportunities for people to re-engage in education and to further their tertiary studies. One of the initiatives in my electorate that I have supported wholeheartedly—and it is a tremendous program at the universities—is the STEPS program where mature age students are able to do what I would call a bridging course from their high school education in preparation for tertiary studies. The STEPS graduates range in age from 18 right through to their early 70s. Some of the more mature ones in their late 60s and 70s have actually completed tertiary qualifications and have graduated. They have contributed very positively to our community. I commend those at the university and those in Rockhampton who have contributed to the success of the STEPS course.

Because of the breadth of that opportunity, it is important that these amendments in relation to criminal history checks pass successfully through this House. On the whole, I believe that the majority of mature age students would have no problems with the requirements. There may be some who have committed offences in the past and have genuinely changed direction. I hope that in the vetting process, particularly with the opportunity to respond to a potential refusal by the department, those people who can show genuinely that their behaviour has changed would be able to put their case forward clearly and receive an approval to attend. For those who cannot show genuine remorse and a change in direction in terms of their behaviours and their values, they do not belong among our vulnerable students. This measure in this legislation is intended to protect young and vulnerable people from those who would use an opportunity as mature age students to prey on those who would be easily used. I commend the minister for those changes.

I also commend the minister for the clarification in relation to the capital assistance grants—the fifty-fifty funding for external infrastructure required by local authorities—to learning institutions. Both sides of the argument have merit. Coming from a local government background, I can understand the need for local authorities to be able to place on educational facilities an obligation to provide things such as bus stops and appropriate and safe parking areas. But it is an enormous impost on both state and private schools, and the fifty-fifty funding arrangement with the state government certainly makes the achievement of those obligations possible. So I commend the minister for that. I also recognise the contribution of the state government to the Cooler Schools and the ITC programs.

In relation to the new educational opportunities provided by the prep year, I would like to bring to the attention of this House the concerns of some of the state schools in my electorate, in particular Tannum Sands State School. That school has predicted that next year it will lose approximately 50 students to a private school in the electorate because Tannum Sands State School has not been chosen as a school to provide the prep year. Concerns have been expressed to me that the school will lose that number of students. It is obvious that, if a parent chooses to send a young child to a school, there is a real risk that, if they have older children in the school, they could be withdrawn and sent to the private school so that all of their children are attending school in the one place. That is the only downside that I have heard about the selection of a number of schools to roll out that extended education program.

I also commend two large industries in my electorate for their involvement with schools and students in terms of extended education. NRG has a skills centre. That company had a workshop that had not been used for a considerable period. Funding from the state government and DEETYA ensured that the fit-out of the new centre could go ahead. Students who are undertaking school based apprenticeships can go there and acquire technical, hands-on experience that is directly related to their apprenticeship on state-of-the-art industrial machinery. So when those students are later accepted into a full apprenticeship, the new equipment that they have been working on, which is state of the art, has prepared them well to be a contributor to their employer from day one—whether that be as a second-year apprentice or third-year apprentice. The equipment at the NRG centre is excellent. I know that Minister Bligh came and opened the centre.

In the IT area, a similar scheme is being developed between Tannum Sands High School and the Boyne Smelter. I congratulate both NRG and Boyne Smelters Ltd for their willingness to be engaged in the educational stream for what are their future employees. But I also commend Toolooa State High School and Gladstone State School. In the 2005 school year, the other high schools in my electorate will be involved with NRG—that is those in Gladstone and Tannum Sands in particular—but other high schools can be involved in the Boyne Smelter's IT skills centre. It is a partnership that has worked well in the electorate. Raylene Fisher has been a leader in vocational education and has really set the electorate on a very wise path in terms of school based apprenticeships and traineeships.

I would have to say that there has been some concern expressed to me in relation to the financial data that is to be required by this legislation. None of the independent schools that I have talked to, both in my electorate and externally, have indicated any concern about accountability. They are not worried about being accountable. They do not have a problem with that. I think that they would seek from the minister an

assurance that the data would not be used to their detriment either now or in the future. I will reiterate that. I have not heard one school say that they do not want to be accountable. Often the school has been established in response to a community need. The schools are accountable to their students and the parents. The schools want to be accountable to both the federal government and the state government, which administer significant capital funds for educational facilities. The schools just want an assurance that, in the future, the data that is collected will not be used to their detriment.

I would also like to thank the minister for the briefing that was made available this morning. There was a briefing on Thursday, which was difficult for us all to get to. So I thank the minister and her officers for the time that they made available. The only other issue that I wish to raise—and it was one that I raised in the briefing—in relation to mature age students is the liaison between Education Queensland and the Department of Immigration and Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs in relation to overseas students. We have seen instances in relation to the Department of Primary Industries where there was a disconnection between that department and the federal quarantine agency. Because of that breakdown, the canker infection in central Queensland probably should have been detected earlier, but it was not. The regime that has been instituted for overseas students on visas, et cetera, will require liaison and some interdependence between the Department of Education and the Department of Immigration and Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs. I seek some clarification from the minister as to the protocols that are going to be put in place to ensure that people on visas, who perhaps are inappropriate persons to be at our state schools for extended education, will not slip through the net because of that need for liaison.

The current minister and previous ministers have shown a real concern for students in the implementation of the blue card system and the implementation of protocols and the protection of students against undesirable people who prey on young people who are vulnerable and who are in relationships of trust, whether that be with teachers, employees at schools, P&Cs or other volunteers. None of those protocols have been intended to cast aspersions on anyone who volunteers or works in the schools, but it has been a recognition that there are those who will prey on the young and the defenceless. This legislation is similar. It certainly has my support and I commend the minister for the measures introduced.