



Speech by

Mike Horan

MEMBER FOR TOOWOOMBA SOUTH

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APPROPRIATION BILL; ESTIMATES COMMITTEE C

Mr HORAN (Toowoomba South—NPA) (3.46 p.m.): In this debate on the appropriation to the Education Department I want to address an important education issue for Toowoomba, that is, the future of the Toowoomba South State School. This school has a long and proud history. It is one of the oldest schools in Toowoomba and originally was the South Girls School. Kath Dickson, after whom the Kath Dickson Centre was named, was the first female principal in Queensland when appointed to this school. The Toowoomba South Boys School, on the corner of James and Neil streets, was closed many years ago due to demographic change and the South Girls School then became a coeducation primary school called Toowoomba South.

Since then numbers have declined continuously. In recent years numbers have dropped from 160 to now just 70, only 29 of whom come from the catchment area. The school is located on the busiest intersection in the city at the corner of James Street, which is the Warrego Highway, and Ruthven Street, which is the New England Highway. Traffic levels and literally thousands of semitrailers per day force students and parents to use the side street entrance at Lawrence Street, which is between the south school and St Saviour's primary school convent, for safety reasons. It is a big, brick, three-level school in the style of its era, but it is now surrounded almost entirely by commercial areas of the CBD of Toowoomba. It is dying through demographic change. I know that the future of the school, and particularly the future of the students, is of concern to the education system, particularly with the small class numbers necessitating multigrade classes, Aboriginal students having to access special programs at other schools and students not having advantages in sport and other activities through a lack of numbers that are available in the other larger Toowoomba schools. The students are fond of their school through the wonderful commitment that is provided by their teachers.

I have discussed this with the Mayor of Toowoomba, Councillor Di Thorley, who agrees with me that if the Education Department decided to close this school there would be expanded opportunities for the students at the larger schools. Any closure would not include the special education unit and preschool, which exist on separate land at Peardon Street. Any closures would only concern the primary school at the corner of Ruthven Street and James Street. Those other two units I mentioned must remain.

There is an opportunity in this process to keep this valuable site as an education campus for Toowoomba. Adjoining the south school in Ruthven Street is a parish school, St Saviour's Primary, which has grown to 450 students and is landlocked and bursting at the seams. It has been a real success story as a CBD or corridor school for parents working in the city area. Likewise, St Saviour's Secondary School, with 560 students, adjoins St Saviour's Primary School and is also highly successful but landlocked and is also bursting at the seams. Toowoomba is a diverse and outstanding education city. It would be good for education in our city if the department could provide every opportunity for Catholic Education to be included in discussions on the future of the south school site.

Of course, it would be a matter entirely for Catholic Education as to whether it wanted to or could buy this site, but both myself and the mayor believe this is a once-in-a-lifetime chance to retain this site for education in our city and provide a practical way for these highly successful inner-city schools of St Saviour's Primary and St Saviour's Secondary to cater for the ever-increasing demand that they face.

If the purchase of the site of St Saviour's was possible I would also hope that students at south school could be offered places at St Saviour's if that happened to be more convenient to their families than attending a state school in the Toowoomba area.

Most importantly, this whole process would provide a caring and practical way for the existing students of south Toowoomba school to continue to receive a quality education and start to their life. I would seek assurances of this, and I am certain that Education Queensland would be committed to this anyway. In my capacity as the local member, I offer the minister every help to achieve these aims. It is never an easy decision to close a school, but in this case there is a once-in-a-lifetime chance to turn a historical demographic decline into a new education opportunity for all.