



Speech by

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YOUTH PARTICIPATION IN EDUCATION AND TRAINING AND ANOTHER ACT AMENDMENT BILL

Miss SIMPSON (Maroochydore—NPA) (9.27 pm): I commend the initiative that was launched this week at the Resource Council with the Queensland Minerals and Energy Academy. This is a very positive aspect of getting a better interface between industry, schools and training opportunities. It is exactly the sort of initiative that we need if our training institutions and schools are to open up to the real world. We need to understand that training needs to be more flexible and open to the new jobs that are emerging. This initiative involved 19 gateway schools interfacing with the minerals and energy industry to expose young people to the opportunities in those industries, while giving them the opportunity to have workplace training. That is a step in the right direction. We should look to encourage similar initiatives in other areas. When the environment is rapidly changing, the challenge for our training institutions is to ensure that they remain relevant not only with core skills but also with emerging areas of need.

The other aspect of the legislation that I want to address deals with the ability to charge a fee for distance education. I understand that at one time that was thought to be a possibility, but it could not be applied under the previous legislation. I understand the principle that the government is trying to achieve, but I seek the minister's assurance that the exemptions from this fee will be reasonable. People who live in urban areas may find that it would be best for their child to receive schooling through a distance education option, perhaps for only a portion of their schooling. For example, a child may have been excluded from schools, and it has been mentioned that such children may have no other option but distance education to continue their education. There are a range of other issues, including health issues, that require exemptions. I do have some concerns that parents may find the thresholds set to participate without a fee unreasonable. I urge that some consideration be given to this issue.

There are issues to do with children, for example, with autistic spectrum disorder who, contrary to children who need to be socialised and who benefit from larger groups, may in fact not be able to cope well with larger groups. They still need to be socialised, they still need to have access to play and interact with other young people and children, but class sizes of 25 or 30 are, in fact, quite a threatening environment. I have had some contact in recent times with parents dealing with the challenges of this particular area of need and I use it as an example in the debate. It has been an eye-opener to realise that there are children who are bright and have tremendous ability to learn but do not cope well in large crowds and do not cope well in the traditional type of class arrangement.

The needs of the child must be foremost in any decision that is made as far as their access to education is concerned, whether that is in mainstream public education or whether it is through alternative delivery mechanisms such as publicly provided distance education. The needs of the child must be foremost. I understand that the challenges of a large bureaucracy, a large organisation such as Education Queensland, are that there will be policies that are set down but I ask that consideration be given to those policies having enough flexibility to consider the individual needs of the child. Children with autistic spectrum disorder really do need very tailored programs. While I understand that there are some innovations that are occurring in some regions of education, the needs of these children, just one example among the challenging behaviours, means that it can be very difficult to even fit them into a

special education program because they can be extremely bright. In some of the special education programs there is a mixture of levels of education that are required and cater for very different behaviours. That is the challenge with children who do not fit the mould of the majority of children. But they are still children of value and they still have a right to access to education.

The current program of determining additional needs for children with disabilities or special needs—I understand the previous terminology was ascertainment; I am not quite sure what the new terminology is—requires paediatricians to ascertain that the child needs certain levels of care. I know that that is the case in autistic spectrum disorder and it probably is in other disabilities. Going through the hoops of acquiring additional help does require quite a deal of medical expense. I seek the minister's assurance that the threshold in regard to access to publicly provided distance education does not exclude children who do have genuine and special needs in these areas. Schools may say that they have the programs but when it gets down to it the teacher aides, who may be well-meaning, may not in fact have training in that particular area of need; they may have training in another area of special needs but not in the example I have given of autistic spectrum. There are obviously other areas.

The parents will be seeking out the best form of education that they believe meets the needs of the child. As the education department responds to this issue, I would urge that it keep an open mind to the fact that some of the special education programs and mainstream programs are very difficult to tailor to those children who do not fit the box. Children are too precious to try to fit within a box, particularly when we are talking about education. There have been many people who have proven to be brilliant who did not fit the traditional education system. As much as we do seek to provide options and true choices within the public education system, first and foremost let us keep the needs of the child in front of us so that people do not find that they are penalised by having to pay for one of those options that may best meet the needs of their children.