



Speech by

Fiona Simpson

MEMBER FOR MAROOCHYDORE

Hansard Tuesday, 8 August 2006

EDUCATION (GENERAL PROVISIONS) BILL

Miss SIMPSON (Maroochydore—NPA) (5.35 pm): I am delighted to speak on this education bill and, in particular, matters concerning the prep year. The state coalition has strongly supported the introduction of prep throughout the state, although we have raised concerns about the resourcing and the planning that has been done for this initiative. A National Party led government introduced preschool into Queensland because we believed that it was important for the early development of young children. Prep is an extension of that. While prep will incorporate a play based curriculum, studies show that it is a very worthy part of the overall educational curriculum and something that can add to the overall development of the child.

With regard to appropriate planning for the introduction of prep, we know that many schools in Queensland still do not have the physical facilities to deal safely with prep children, and that continues to be a matter of concern. For example, there may not be toilet blocks in close proximity to prep classes and in some cases demountable buildings and composite classrooms will be used for prep. The issue that is most often raised with me is the lack of adequate teacher aide time.

Prep children are still very young. They can be about four and a half years of age. Children in this age bracket still need quite a lot of hands-on care. Early childhood teachers will say that engaging with younger children can be very demanding, as can ensuring that the activities that they undertake are suitable, particularly when considering the curriculum that is used in the preparatory year.

In an institution as large as the education department, sometimes people lose sight of the fact that it is not enough to develop programs for young children; we must also ensure that the resources are there to meet the needs of those young children in all ways. Teachers and parents tell us that teacher aides are an extremely valuable and practical assistance, both in the classroom and when doing preparation work for the classroom.

Good early childhood teachers are those who run literally from the start of the day to the end. They keep children engaged, busy and active. They ensure that there is a very fulsome approach to developing a child. However, they need somebody to help them with their preparation and also with practical issues such as toileting. At this age, a number of young children still require assistance to go to the toilet. Real problems can arise if there is no teacher aide to assist the teacher. Developmentally, young children can be at very different stages. Indeed, that can be most pronounced in the younger years. A child with a special need may not qualify for additional assistance, and a teacher aide can certainly provide that level of additional assistance.

We are greatly concerned that prep children will need additional teacher aide time. Preschools receive quite considerable teacher aide time and prep children are in a very similar age bracket. We need to provide that additional assistance to ensure that this is not just a policy of early education; it is a practical education that meets the children's needs.

To enhance the effective introduction of the preparatory year throughout Queensland, the coalition has raised the need for greater flexibility in relation to the starting age of children. My colleague the member for Cunningham has raised this issue publicly. He has proposed amendments to the legislation so that a headmaster and a child's parents will be able to assess the needs of the child and have more

flexibility in deciding whether that child should go into prep or, in fact, stay in prep rather than continue to year 1. I implore the minister to accept the amendments of the coalition, because they are in the interests of the child. These amendments do not propose resource intensive changes. This is about assessing the real needs of the child and ensuring the best outcome for that child through collaboration between the parent and the school. I certainly commend the amendments that are before the House.

There has been a lot of controversy about one other aspect of the legislation, that is, the proposed change to religious education provisions which were fundamentally different provisions even though the government tried to play them down. However, I understand that the government has heeded the concerns that we raised and has agreed not to present those provisions in this legislation. It is proposed that they will be pulled out of this legislation.

Initially when I raised concerns about the consequences of the government's provisions, I said it would be possible for Satanism, humanism or witchcraft to come in the door. The government's reaction was to say that that was not going to happen and that it was an hysterical view. I had no idea there were so many witches in Queensland until the next day when I received a lot of emails from them. They are entitled to their beliefs. The Pagan Awareness Network, which I was not aware existed, confirmed that it did want to use the legislation for such purposes. Its representatives confirmed that they wanted to have access to schools. Despite the government's attempt at soothing us by saying 'Don't you worry about that', we found some unusual belief systems outside of the mainstream denominations and religions that did propose to access state schools. The education minister has said that at this time he has no intention to pursue his intended amendments. Certainly we will be keeping an eye on what he proposes, because I do not trust him not to try again.

The current provisions are more balanced. I believe that they allow parents the right to exercise their choice if they do not want their children to participate in religious education in schools. It is possible to achieve a balanced approach to this issue. Therefore, we support the existing provisions, rather than the extraordinary ones that the education minister wanted to slip through, thus opening the door to an extensive array of rather interesting groups.

I turn to another issue that this legislation allows. Mountain Creek State High School is located on the boundary of my electorate. It services a large number of high school students at the Mooloolaba end of the electorate. This school has been very innovative in opening up new educational opportunities for students. It has certainly been very innovative with regard to how its campus is used. It is one of the largest schools in Queensland with over 2,200 students. Therefore, the pressure on resources is considerable. The school runs a split shift, which means that it can better utilise its resources by ensuring that the pressure on the campus is spread throughout the day. The school has also introduced the international baccalaureate. I understand from participating students that they are very excited to be given the opportunity to undertake an international qualification that potentially will open doors for them throughout the world. The legislation before us recognises international qualifications within our high school system. That is to be commended.

There are schools that have taken the lead. This is certainly a way to help facilitate that process. It is a big world, but it is great to know that there are schools in regional areas that are leading the way and showing that they can put up innovative ideas and they are able to say not only to the rest of Queensland but also to the world that you do not have to do things the same way that secondary education has been done in the past and that it is possible to provide a different type of qualification. Those students still have the opportunity to participate within the Australian tertiary sector. Their qualification will allow them to do that.

I ask that the government consider the amendments that my colleague will move in regard to the preparatory year. I believe that is in the best interests of the child. I strongly support those amendments to this bill.