



Speech by

## Robert Messenger

MEMBER FOR BURNETT

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### EDUCATION (GENERAL PROVISIONS) BILL

**Mr MESSENGER** (Burnett—NPA) (4.13 pm): I note that the primary objective of the Education (General Provisions) Bill 2006, which is before the House, is to put in place a legislative regime that facilitates the making available to each Queensland child or young person a high-quality education that will help to maximise his or her education potential. This is a very broad policy objective. If we spoke to 100 people and asked them what sort of policy or strategy we would devise to help maximise a young Queenslanders' educational potential I would suggest we would receive almost 100 different responses. Those responses would reflect the broad views that our communities have towards education. But I would suggest that within those broad views they would agree upon one broad principle—that is, that parents are the primary educators of their children. The responsibility for a child's education, whether it be a good education or bad education, lies ultimately with the parents of those children.

Unfortunately, that is why we have seen an increase in the total percentage of children being educated in the non-government sector and a decrease being educated in the government sector. Parents are voting with their wallets and their feet, paying additional fees, so that their children are educated in the non-government sector. I believe that is a dangerous trend. I would like to see this trend reversed. I would like to see confidence restored in public education—a renewal of public education. This Labor government has allowed confidence to erode largely by underfunding, underresourcing and mismanagement. Students and teachers in our public schools have been let down by this government. It is a similar pattern that repeats in health, police and transport.

I note that the objectives of chapters 10 and 11 are to implement initiatives to ensure that young people continue their education beyond year 10. That is a great initiative, but it is placing our Queensland schools under even more pressure as it is forcing more students to stay at high school. More than 40,000 children are expected to enrol in prep year. This pressure must be alleviated by actually spending the dollars needed at the coalface—that is, on the schools. The state government must adequately fund our schools and provide the much needed resources to meet the needs of the influx of students.

Many members this afternoon and previously have spoken on the subject of prep year. In achieving the bill's main objective, it has been pointed out by the shadow education minister that the Queensland coalition is seeking to amend the provisions of this bill relating to the commencement age for prep year and primary school children under clause 160 of the bill. As explained by my colleagues, the coalition amendments will seek to effectively give state school principals the discretionary powers to allow a child to either be enrolled or held back from enrolment for the preparatory year or year 1 as the principal sees fit. This will be in the best interests of the child based on a child's maturity and learning ability. This would essentially allow for a parent or a school principal to have more direct involvement in a child's education. I would suggest that that is probably more about empowerment at the local level.

The current Labor state government excludes parents from having a say on how their children are progressing. The Labor government needs to realise that not all children are the same. The Labor one-size-fits-all approach is not enough and is not going to be of any benefit. The preschool and early school years for young children are absolutely critical. That is when early habits, attitudes, behavioural patterns

and confidence levels are formed. They are the critical influential years on which their future education depends so much. Children need to be in classes with children at similar levels of development.

Recently my office was contacted by one concerned mother whose situation I will use as an example of how the current policy relating to the commencement age for prep is not effective. Mandy Smedley has a very bright but bored son who was born on 10 July 2002, just 10 days after the 2007 prep year cut-off. Mrs Smedley believes her son Jake is ready for prep year despite being told she cannot send her son off to prep due to the cut-off date.

She said in a letter to me that she cannot imagine Jake being at home for another 12 months. She is extremely concerned about the effects that will have on him. Mrs Smedley believes her son can take in much more than she can give him at home. I am told that Jake is beginning to become a little destructive due to him being extremely bored and on acreage where there is no social interaction. She wanted me to make the point today that mums know their children and know what is best for them. I will read a small part of an email that she recently sent me. It states—

I live 100 kms north of Bundaberg. Our local school is Rosedale state. I have four children two at school two at home. My third child born the 10th of July is out by 10 days for the 2007 new prep year, he was due 26th of June and was 2 weeks overdue. I am hoping you could make some inquiries as to help me send my extremely bored bright little boy off to prep year next year. I fear he will be left behind if left at home for another year for the sake of 10 days.

As I said he is a very smart boy and living out here on 40 acres he is desperate to interact with peers. If Jake does not go to prep next year there is no options for us, no kindy and to drive into Bundaberg 3 days a week for kindy is in this day and age seems ridiculous.

That is not to mention the increase in the cost of driving around with petrol prices going up. She continues—

We had our boys close together, this will now make them 3 years apart as opposed to 2. The whole situation is very disappointing. I really hope you can help me. We are small business owners, home owners and voters in your area. This means a great deal to us and we would appreciate anything you could do.

I cannot contemplate another year of constant conflict with my son he is so bored. I really do hope you can do something for us. You are my only hope. There is nothing else but preschool within 150km radius.

Please help me get him off to school as I am sure this will ruin our relationship if he had to stay at home another year ...

Yours sincerely Mandy Smedley

Mrs Smedley hopes that this government will listen to the coalition and vote in favour of this practical adjustment to the commencement age of preparatory year students and school students. Her son's future depends on it. If the state government truly aims to fulfil its objectives of placing responsibilities on parents and the state in relation to the education of children and young people, ensuring education programs are responsive to the individual needs of children and young people, encouraging a parent's involvement in his or her child's education and encouraging parental and community involvement in the operation of state educational institutions, it will adopt the coalition's amendment to clause 160 of the bill.

Another major concern parents and teachers have with the set-up of the preparatory year is the lack of staffing and resources allocated to the program. There is a real risk to their child's safety due to this underresourcing. An article on page 1 of the *Courier-Mail* of Friday, 31 March 2006 titled 'Prep safety fear—Lack of staff and resources tipped to put kids at risk' highlights these major concerns. The article by Elizabeth Allen mentions that there are a number of concerns relating to the inadequate level of funding support for teacher aides considering the demanding nature of nurturing young children aged 4½ to 5½ years old. The article claims that teachers are predicting a rise in accidents, runaways and behaviour management incidents due to the lack of a full-time teacher aide for prep classes. Teachers believe the prep staffing formula of one teacher to a class of 25 children aged 4½ to 5½ for at least part of the day is a disaster waiting to happen. Surely this government will listen to the people on the ground—that is, the teachers who have firsthand familiarity with daily activities in the classroom.

While speaking on the Education (General Provisions) Bill 2006 I want to take the opportunity to raise an issue that was debated in the *Bundaberg and Region NewsMail* in February this year. The *NewsMail* article titled 'Cramped schools in funds call' dated 15 February 2006 claims that students at Bundaberg State High School are being forced to learn in cramped classrooms due to Education Queensland not providing sufficient funding to meet the school's phenomenal growth. The Queensland Teachers Union and Parents and Citizens Association president claim that the high school is bursting at the seams and has dangerous levels of students with inadequate infrastructure to handle the yearly increasing numbers of students. The QTU estimates that the Wide Bay-Burnett students are being short-changed by nearly \$16 million a year, and I would appreciate if the education minister could examine this issue. I would hope the issue would be addressed if it has not been already. Has the minister listened to these concerns raised by the union and also very importantly by the P&C of Bundaberg State High School? What actions has the minister taken to address these concerns?

Behaviour management is another major educational issue that needs to be properly addressed. There are many facets of behaviour management that concern me. It seems that more and more principals have no option other than to suspend and eventually expel students who choose to disobey regulations

within their schools—rather than choose an appropriate behaviour management program for those children. This is due to Queensland schools not being given enough funds for behaviour management.

I want to mention an alternative educational facility which does focus on behaviour management which I came across during my time as shadow minister for education which I found impressive to say the least. It was the Tom Quinn Community Centre, founded by the Salvation Army. It was named after a Salvationist who had a vision to establish a centre that could be used to assist those who had been through rehabilitation as well as target disruptive children at risk of disengaging from school and take them to a new level—a new beginning, if you like. The centre places these people in a community and gives the children new-found skills, confidence and work ethics. The centre is completely committed to reaching people with the good news of Jesus Christ through a number of compassionate Christlike services. It is this compassionate nature that drove the Salvation Army to establish the Tom Quinn Community Centre, aimed at filling the gap in the education system.

Thanks to the Bundaberg Salvation Army Tom Quinn Community Centre, this gap is ultimately being filled by providing an alternative education program for children with behaviour problems who do not fit with the traditional methods of teaching. It is a safety net that catches the kids who fall out of the high school system and the kids who are on suspension merry-go-rounds. Because of behaviour problems, they are being shuffled from one school to another until eventually they are caught in the criminal justice net, and then life gets measurably worse. Within the high school system, naturally you are only given a couple of chances and then you are out. At the Tom Quinn centre, because of the strong Christian values, children are given as many chances as they want—two, three, four, five, 10 or 15. They do not give up on you. There is always hope. The education program, which has been running for more than 12 months, is transforming disruptive children into valuable members of the Bundaberg community. I visited the centre and witnessed the phenomenal transformation of students. I found the work which is being carried out remarkably inspirational. The people involved in the centre are truly making a difference to the lives of local children.

School students and children enrolled in organisations such as Corrective Services, Juvenile Justice, community work and Work for the Dole who would otherwise be out on the streets and creating trouble for themselves were putting their skills to practical use. I witnessed children aged from 12 to 17 restore cabinets, bookshelves, tables and bicycles and participate in landscaping and other horticultural activities. I guess the best part about it is that the kids actually love it, because for the first time they are treated as equals. They are not talked down to and very quickly they start to build self-esteem. Many learn for the first time that there is such a word as hope.

The other issue that I want to speak briefly about with regard to behaviour management is the increasing trend to prescribe children with dexamphetamine and Ritalin. A Crime and Misconduct Commission report released in April 2002 described what ADHD is, and many of the children on those drugs are diagnosed with ADHD. According to the CMC report, while there is no proven cure for ADHD at this time and the cause is unclear, research is ongoing to learn more about the role of the brain in ADHD and the best ways to treat the disorder.

It first came to my attention when a constituent brought her young son in to me and told me about the problems that they were having at school. This young lad was a disruptive, bright young boy. He seemed to behave all right for me in the office, although he did bounce a ball off the wall a fair bit. But this young lad had been suspended from school and the only way that he was able to reintegrate into the school process was if he took medication for ADHD. In his case it was dexamphetamine. The mother was very concerned because she really wanted to take this young lad off this medication. He was not sleeping. On a Thursday night he would go to bed and then stay awake all night. On Friday he had no sleep at all. She took her problem with the medication to her doctor—her paediatrician—who immediately said that he could fix that and prescribed a course of sleeping pills. So we had a young lad who was on dexamphetamine during the day and then sleeping pills at night. I found that an incredible situation, and this is an issue that needs to be researched more fully.

I know that in the 2002 CMC report it was stated that in 1999-2000 Western Australia had the highest rate of prescription of ADHD medicine at 43.2 per cent and that Queensland came well down the list at 8.5 per cent, which was indeed a satisfying trend. But I wonder what the figures for this state are now. We do not know the long-term health disbenefits that may be experienced by children who take this medication. Certainly, I know that the drug administration in America has put a warning on Ritalin and dexamphetamine alerting people to the dangers of long-term usage of these drugs, which in young people can cause strokes, heart attacks, premature death or enlargement of body organs. The other issue is the psychological health of people who are on this medication long term. I have spoken to many parents and schoolteachers who have told me that their lives have been made better by the medication. But this is an issue that must be investigated fully and we must treat it with the seriousness that it deserves.