



Speech by

Hon. Rod Welford

MEMBER FOR EVERTON

Hansard Thursday, 2 March 2006

PREP YEAR

Hon. RJ WELFORD (Everton—ALP) (Minister for Education and Minister for the Arts) (11.30 am): I move—

That this House supports the introduction of the prep year to give Queensland children the best start possible to their schooling and recommends that the government should provide information and advice to parents about this historic new approach to the early years of schooling.

Our government is building a modern, responsive education system that equips our young people for the challenges of the 21st century. It will be an education system that gives our children the best possible opportunities to excel and reach their full potential.

One of our most significant changes is the introduction of the prep year of schooling. The prep year represents an historic change to education in our state. It will ensure that throughout the state children have the same educational opportunities as children in other parts of Australia where the prep year is already established. As part of our reforms to the early years of schooling, in 2008 we will raise the compulsory school starting age by six months to bring Queensland into line with other states.

Starting full-time education is a big step in a child's life. It is also a big change for their mums and dads. The introduction of the prep year and eligibility for prep in 2007 has brought many queries from parents. That is why we are currently running an advertising campaign in newspapers and on radio and television across Queensland, to raise awareness about the full-scale introduction of the prep year in 2007.

I want to make sure that all Queensland parents have as much information as possible about the new prep year—when it starts, who is eligible to attend and how it will work. Children born between 1 January and 30 June 2002 will be the first group of students eligible to enter the prep year next year. We have advertised in various media inviting parents to contact their local schools to discuss their children's enrolment if they fall in the eligible category. From next Monday, 6 March, Queensland state schools will be taking enrolments for the prep year 2007.

As members are aware, we have been getting ready for the introduction of the prep year for some time. This year, the prep year is being offered in 97 state and 25 non-state trial schools as part of the ongoing progressive introduction of prep to finetune the arrangements. Throughout the state we are spending over \$350 million on new resources, including 1,600 new or refurbished classrooms to accommodate prep students. An extra 106 teachers will be employed, and they will join more than 800 preschool teachers who will also be teaching the prep year when it is fully introduced next year. We will also provide every prep teacher with teacher aide, curriculum and equipment support.

Schools will use the early years curriculum currently being finalised by the Queensland Studies Authority to devise appropriate programs, including play based activities. The Queensland Studies Authority has been consulting with members of the profession—that is, the early childhood teachers throughout the state—to refine the workings of the program and devise a consistent early childhood curriculum for application in the prep year across the state.

At a number of the trial schools I have attended I have talked with the prep year teachers about how they are conducting their programs. I have been very impressed with what I have seen. Children who attend prep will develop a range of skills that will help them make a successful transition to year 1. They will develop their listening skills, learn to sort and describe things, improve their coordination and learn how to work with others.

Starting full-time education is a big change for children. That is why the introduction of the prep year will provide an effective and valuable transition year for students who are soon to enter year 1. We have worked hard to make the prep year a valuable and important step in the lives of Queensland children. We are inviting parents to start contacting their local schools to discuss their children's enrolment.

The feedback from the trial schools has been enormously positive. Feedback from parents of children in prep year shows that they have been impressed by the progress that their children have made, not just in terms of the things that they learn and do at school but also in terms of the personal development that their children have demonstrated when at home, such as their communication skills, their problem-solving skills and their capacity to participate in household tasks and work as part of a team. Those are all the basic building blocks of lifelong learning. They are the things that we can start in the prep year and continue to build on throughout years 1 to 10—that is, the early and middle phases of learning.

The Queensland Studies Authority, through the Queensland curriculum assessment and reporting process, is currently undertaking a review of the essential things that children must learn in the early years and right through to year 10. That will fit neatly with the new early childhood curriculum being developed for prep schools.

It is not only parents who have been impressed by the effectiveness of the prep year. In my travels throughout Queensland to visit prep trial schools I have met many teachers who have been greatly impressed, particularly teachers of year 1 and 2 students. Those teachers are very excited about what prep offers and about the quality of students coming into year 1. They are finding that those students start their year 1 studies much more effectively than they would have had they not been able to experience the prep year.

Of course, preschools already provide a valuable service, but most preschools operate only on a half-time basis. The advantage of prep is that it does everything that a preschool does and more in terms of full-time preparation for year 1. It also introduces the children to the school environment. Therefore, they will already be familiar with the school at which they possibly will spend years 1 to 7, if not beyond.

The prep year is a positive approach to learning. It is about focusing on the independence and confidence of the students. As I say, it develops their language, communication and problem-solving skills and, of course, builds on the important early foundations of literacy and numeracy.

There has been some discussion about who is eligible to commence the prep year. Some parents whose children fall outside the first year prep eligibility criteria will want their children to do prep next year. Students who are older than the eligible group of students that I mentioned earlier will be able to go straight into year 1. Students who are younger—that is, those born in the second half of 2002—will wait a year longer to enter their prep year.

However, there is some flexibility. Parents who have a child with exceptional circumstances or exceptional educational needs will have the opportunity to discuss with their local school and regional officers of the education department whether their child should enter prep in the year for which they are eligible, or whether they perhaps should be delayed or advanced. There is some flexibility but, like all arrangements, we have to start students somewhere. There are current arrangements for those students who enter year 1, and students who would normally enter year 1 next year should do so.

Some parents may want to advance their children into prep ahead of time. Obviously, the department and the individual schools will assess those children to see whether they are ready for school. As I say, only in exceptional circumstances would it be appropriate or desirable for children to enter school ahead of time.

There is much debate about whether having a prep year will be of significant benefit to students in the long run, but we have no doubt that prep year is already demonstrating itself to be a successful initiative in terms of students entering school at an earlier age. In other countries students start school when they are older. Prep year brings Queensland into line with what is happening in all other states in Australia. We are confident that the enthusiasm of teachers and the commitment that parents have to this new initiative will ensure that when prep year starts in 2007 it will be a huge success and we will see students accelerate their learning into year 1 and the years beyond as a result of the experience they will have under the early childhood curriculum being developed for the prep year. I urge all members of the House to support the prep year initiative and to support our government's efforts to ensure that parents are aware of how the prep year will affect them and their children.