



Speech by

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MEMBER FOR BURDEKIN

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EDUCATION (GENERAL PROVISIONS) BILL

Mrs MENKENS (Burdekin—NPA) (5.54 pm): I am very happy to speak to the Education (General Provisions) Bill 2006. Firstly, I would like to commend the government on the initiative to make high-quality education available to each and every Queensland child, allowing each to, as the notes state, 'maximise their educational potential'. The investments we make in and on behalf of our children will pay long-lasting dividends into the future so long as we get it right. Access to quality education, well resourced and with definable outcomes, is the right of every school-age child, just as it is the responsibility of the government of the day to ensure that this access is available to all. This access should be available to all regardless of location, of circumstance, of ability and of age.

It is not enough to get it half right or almost right or to model a system that suits most students. The department of education and, by extension, the government has the responsibility to ensure that any changes to the system retain the right of a student to equal access and the right of a student not to be disadvantaged by change to the system. This is not negotiable. No current or future students should be forced to suffer or be deprived of the opportunity to participate or be forced to enter school too early because of a lack of forethought and planning by any government.

We have heard of the good that will follow with the passing of this bill, and I have no doubt that it will. We have also heard—at least from this side of the House—of some of the not so good sides. It is a mystery to us as parents, teachers, teacher aides and anyone with an interest in the early years of education why the minister persists in retaining in the current form the clauses dealing with the introduction and management of the prep year in our schools. We certainly welcome the introduction of the prep year. This has the full support of the coalition. But, despite a concerted effort by those most intimately acquainted with and part of a child's early years in the education system, the minister up until now has continued to ignore their valid and well-supported objections to the inflexible nature of the proposed provisions.

My office, and I believe most electorate offices in the state, have had visits, calls and letters from parents of children very worried that because of an arbitrarily imposed cut-off date their children will be forced to attend school regardless of their stage of mental or emotional development. We have had deputations from teachers and school principals. They have shared the concerns of these parents and they are worried about how to balance the needs of individual students and those of the school in the face of inadequate direction and restricted resources. I have heard very few, if any, objections to the introduction of a prep year. As I said, the coalition has welcomed it. But I have heard many objections about the lack of planning, the lack of flexibility more than anything and the lack of resources allocated to its inception.

Almost without fail these complaints have referred to one or both of the following: the glaring failure by the government to fund full-time teacher aides for the preparatory year and the inflexible and compulsory age cut-off dates for preschool and year 1. In addition to these two very glaring areas, we are being told of the detrimental effects of this government's failure to adequately explore the full effects the changes will have on small and one-teacher schools. I have certainly heard today from this side of the House many comments to this effect. Teaching and support staff are worried about the almost complete

absence of planning and consultation on the inception of the prep year and the lack of available assistance for its implementation.

There has also been inadequate attention given to the provision and use of physical resources and facilities suitable for these young students. The availability and adequacy of toilet blocks, play areas, meal areas and the like suitable for these students and their ability to be supervised by teaching staff has been ignored by the government as a direct result of its failure to consult widely enough on the issue.

It is a mystery why the minister and the government have persisted in this approach. Even though they singularly failed to consult before putting this bill before the House, I would have thought that the outcry since its full intent became known must be ringing some alarm bells in department corridors.

The Premier has previously demonstrated his government's ability to back down when it has misread public opinion and in his willingness to override his ministers in his eagerness he is seen as 'Mr Fix-It'. Should we be prepared to sit back and wait for this to occur again? I find it impossible to believe that the minister has not taken note of the apprehension these problems have caused. When faced with an outcry over a reduction in available teacher aide hours previously, very fortunately common sense reigned. I fully expect and hope that the minister will again realise his mistake.

The Western Australian example, in particular, outlines the need for full-time teacher aides in the prep area. Where initially it started with only part-time hours for teacher aides, it found that it did not work and now that government is employing full-time teacher aides to assist in this very difficult and demanding area.

The Queensland Association of State School Principals—the minister's own employees—recommends the current collative model of 30 hours of teacher aide time per week as desirable, not the paltry 15 hours per week that is being offered by this bill. It states that teacher aide hours should be adequate to allow staff to prepare the learning context, to fully engage with the children, to ensure the safety and welfare of the students and to inform and prepare parents of their roles in the early education years under the prep model.

The first year, which is coming up next year, is imperative and the most important of all, because teachers have to prepare the curriculum and the resources. This is totally new ground and there is an enormous amount of work to be done. I have no doubt that prep school teachers are facing next year with quite a deal of trepidation.

The minister has been warned that a failure to allocate full-time teacher aide hours to prep classes could jeopardise many of the initiatives the introduction of this bill is purported to address. These include, but are not limited to, issues to do with the quality of the learning experience due to a lack of time and resources to dedicate to the students' learning needs. There are issues of concern over the safety and supervision of the children due directly to limited staff resources and reduced teacher aide hours under the current provisions.

This is not an overall indictment of this bill. As previous speakers have detailed, there is so much in this bill that the coalition supports and endorses, and I do compliment the minister on those particular measures. Why not, then, amend this bill? I really do beg the minister to take on board the coalition's amendment, which will address the concerns outlined and make this bill, in its entirety, worthy of bipartisan support. The coalition has stated that it would fully investigate the cost of providing full-time teacher aides but it has been stymied by a reluctance on the part of the department to release any teacher aide prep year costs. This omission by the department, and the continuing reticence to prepare and release such costings, is, I am afraid, an admission by the minister of his refusal to take the parents' and teachers' concerns seriously.

The coalition endorses the introduction of the prep year in 2007, but only on the proviso that it is done properly and with the full realisation of the actual costs involved and that the system be flexible enough to cater for those students who will be disadvantaged by the mandatory enrolment dates. I know that the minister is not uncaring enough of his students and the department is not so draconian that they believe a one-size-fits-all approach is appropriate. Surely they realise that those best able to ascertain a student's readiness for school are the parents and teachers involved.

Because of an arbitrary cut-off date in 2001, at least half the state's children will be forced to attend school whether they are actually ready or not, with little or no recourse. This particular course seems cruel and heartless, and it certainly smacks of authoritarianism. The coalition recognises and endorses parents' rights to determine what is best for their own children when it comes to determining their individual education needs and preparedness, and it supports the calls to reintroduce flexibility to the system—the flexibility that is currently there.

For the most part, this bill deserves and has coalition support. As previous speakers have identified, the mooted changes will, for the most part, make available high-quality education for Queensland's young people. Where it falls down is in the arbitrary and inflexible attitude on when students are deemed able to enter the system. It is based purely on a bureaucratic selection of birth cut-off dates for entry. The bill itself, in outlining how it is designed to achieve its objectives, clearly states that these would be primarily

achieved by placing responsibility on the parents and the state in relation to the education of children and young people. I call on the minister to acknowledge the necessary changes to this bill to allow those best able to make a decision on whether or not a child is ready for school to do just that. I call on the minister to allow the parents, the teachers and school principals the latitude and flexibility to decide what is right for the individual child.

This is a very large bill which contains a large number of clauses that encompass wide-ranging issues and changes. I note that it incorporates the learning and earning laws that came into effect this year. These laws require young people to participate in year 11 and 12, be they in the earning or learning area. I am aware that when this was first mooted many teachers were rather nervous about how particular students would cope with being kept at school. However, I think it is an excellent program and I commend its introduction.

Recently when I was visiting different schools, I visited the Collinsville State High School. The principal was a little apologetic because none of the members of the student council were present. On that day they were all out working on their apprenticeships or traineeships or were at various stages with their various vocational providers. I really am a great believer in a mixture of academic and vocational training for students, and I think this is a tremendous start for them. I actually look forward to seeing in a few years time how well this system is working because, as I say, I truly am a great believer in it.

I note that home education has been acknowledged in this bill. It has made this a legitimate third educational option. I note that the education department will be creating a registration system. This gives parents the right to educate their child at home. I also note that there is a reporting framework, which I think is a particularly good move. It is parents' right to educate their children, but it is very much a government responsibility to oversee this and to ensure children receive a quality education. I have no doubt that this particular aspect will be welcomed by many parents, because the number of parents who are educating their children at home is growing by quite a large amount. In fact, I can cite one particular family in Mackay who home educated their children right through to year 12, and two of those young women are currently studying at the James Cook University school of medicine. That really goes to show the quality that some people can actually deliver in home education.

I was also very pleased and relieved that the proposed changes to religious education are to be removed, although there is some concern that maybe those changes have not been removed but only postponed. There has been a huge amount of controversy over those changes. From my personal perspective, I would be very disturbed to see the status quo changed. The existing legislation certainly allows for religious education to remain, and it is through religious education that ethics, morals and principles are able to be imparted to children.

I must comment on the schools of distance education. It is one of the really top areas of education in Queensland at the moment. It is a magnificent program that is offered through distance education. The quality of the education is second to none. I must particularly commend the staff who work in those areas and acknowledge the work and effort that is put through. This has improved greatly over recent years with technology, with computers, with internet access and so forth throughout the bush. To our city members who have not had the opportunity to visit a centre of distance education, I would really encourage them to visit because it is a state-of-the-art method of educating the masses—in this large area of rural and regional Queensland where it is impossible to access schools. I note the payment of fees for distance education for those parents who opt to homeschool their children. I support that payment. I think that is very sensible, but I also note the concerns that the shadow minister flagged in that regard.

Behaviour management is a huge problem in schools. It is a huge problem for teachers. It is definitely one of the most difficult areas. So often teachers become the home life, the mentors—just a huge part of a child's life, far more so than just educating. The member for Gregory vehemently outlined these areas. Sadly, we are now in an era of political correctness and acknowledging children's rights, and this has become an extraordinarily difficult environment for teachers. It is behoven on the government to set up behaviour management programs that will give teachers the ability to work within the system.

I also note that dress code provisions have been brought in. This is similar to the provisions of the school uniform bill 1999. I note that principals will consult with parents, staff and children to design the dress code. A dress code or uniform is important to students because this is where a school is judged—on the presentation of the students. It is important that students have some pride in it, too. In years past it was somehow uncool to be seen to wear a school uniform, but I believe those ideas are changing. Because there is such an importance put on corporate uniforms, on the corporate nature of uniforms in the business world and in the commercial world, I think this has had a flow-on effect. I am noticing that children do take more pride in their dress and in their uniform. This is an area that we support very strongly.

In closing, I put on record my sincere admiration and respect for the professionalism of teachers. We cannot underestimate the huge effect that teachers have on our children. They are moulding the future generations. They are not just there as educators; they are there as mentors and have a huge effect on children right through.