



Speech by

Shane Knuth

MEMBER FOR CHARTERS TOWERS

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EDUCATION (GENERAL PROVISIONS) BILL

Mr KNUTH (Charters Towers—NPA) (3.28 pm): In rising to speak to the Education (General Provisions) Bill, I would like to raise a number of concerns from parents who feel that their children are being discriminated against because they were born between July and December 2001. These children are unable to access prep in 2007 due to the education department's decision to accept only a six-month cohort instead of an entire 12-month cohort. This ridiculous decision will impact severely upon families, schools and communities with limited child-care facilities.

While we agree that the introduction of prep has its merits—children start later and they have an additional 12 months of schooling to prepare them for the real thing—limiting the initial cohort to six months instead of 12 months has caused heartache for families and is contradictory. The affected children will either enter year 1 or the families will hold them back, meaning that they will have to find alternative care. In some communities this will mean that one of the parents will have to give up work to care for their child. In some communities where there are no child-care places this will mean that parents who cannot afford to give up work will be forced to use backyard child-care facilities that do not have the protection of accreditation. The available accredited child-care facilities are already reporting waiting lists for the kindergarten groups.

Parents are convinced that if they hold their children back to commence year 1 in 2008 their children will be disadvantaged in a class of children who have been permitted to attend prep. Some families are opting to leave smaller communities and relocate to larger centres where children born in 2001 will be able to attend prep or equivalent at private schools. If the government believes its own position that prep will be advantageous for children, then why discriminate on the basis of their date of birth or their nationality?

It would be prudent to permit students born between July and December 2001 to access prep in 2007 so that they can also enjoy the benefits of the initial prep year rather than just the lucky ones who were born between January and June 2002 or those who have come from interstate or overseas. The government has been blowing its own trumpet about prep since 2003—how wonderful the trials have been and how prep children were rated as more socially skilled and better adapted to the school setting than those who attended preschool—yet then denies children born between June and December 2001 the opportunity to be more socially skilled and better adapted to school. It is the most contradictory decision, and for one group of children it will have far-reaching consequences.

These children and their parents know that their education, their ability to adapt well to their environment and their social skills are not valued by this government. If they were, the government would be giving them the opportunity to enrol these children in the introductory year of prep. If the minister believes the department's stance on the benefits of a prep year, then he is compelled to change this discriminatory decision and allow the full 12-month cohort in the introductory prep year.

Teacher aide time is also a concern for parents. The allocation of an aide to the prep class is 15 hours a week compared to a full-time allocation in preschool—that is three hours per day in a class of 25 children, the majority of whom would never have experienced any educational settings prior to prep. This is ridiculous. The government seems to have published many promises regarding improving our children's

education recently, yet it can so easily turn around and make the job harder for already overburdened teaching staff by reducing the allocation of teacher aide time by half. If the school decides to top up the allocation to support the prep teacher then those additional eight hours must come from the school's general teacher aide allocation, effectively penalising the rest of the student body.

Has any thought been given to the hundreds of teachers across the state currently teaching in band 5 schools or one-teacher schools? They are not eligible for a second teacher until their numbers reach 25. Is this going to be reduced without the introduction of prep? Or will the teachers need to cater for children at all age levels across all key learning areas, with the extra burden that the play based and inquiry based curriculum of prep will incur? The government has promised them an additional five hours of aide time per week—that is one hour per day. For the rest of the time, the hours will be taken from the rest of the children. Teachers in these schools are already overworked and stressed and have been forgotten in the whole prep situation, yet they will also have to cater for an extra age level, additional curriculum and additional accountability measures.

While the introduction of prep will allow our students an extra year of schooling which will hold them in good stead for the future, the whole implementation plan and consequences have not been thoroughly considered. Extending the cohort to the correct 12 months will alleviate the pressure currently experienced by kindergartens and playgroups across the state and will remove the discriminatory omission of children born in late 2001. Adequate allocation of teacher aide hours will reduce the workload on overburdened teachers, and reducing the number of students required in band 5 schools until a second teacher is appointed will ensure the success of prep in smaller remote schools.

I would like to raise an issue related to this which I believe is important. In this bill the government attempted to change the legislation governing religious education. Our traditional Aussie Christian culture and our way of life were threatened by this move, and it was prudent that the state government backed down due to an overwhelming public backlash. Australia was founded on Christian values, and this has guaranteed that we live in one of the most free and prosperous nations in the world today. It was a disgrace that the government would even contemplate changing a tradition that has had such a monumental impact on the development of this nation.

Religious education has been taught in our schools since 1911, when the people of Queensland passed a referendum guaranteeing time for religious education in Queensland schools. It is one of only two referendums ever to pass in Queensland. Most people, even those who are not particularly religious, appreciate the fact that their children can learn good Christian education values in Christian education classes. It was a lesson in democracy for any government that forgets to listen to the voices of the public. The number of people throughout Queensland who were appalled at the government's plan to allow religious education to be taught in our schools by religious advocates violently opposed to our Christian values was overwhelming. Queenslanders spoke loudly and clearly—they would not tolerate atheists, witches and other non-Christian based religions lining up to teach in our schools. I wanted to bring that to the attention of the House.