



Speech by

**Jann Stuckey**

**MEMBER FOR CURRUMBIN**

Hansard Wednesday, 8 August 2007

---

## **APPROPRIATION (PARLIAMENT) BILL AND APPROPRIATION BILL: ESTIMATES COMMITTEE E**

**Mrs STUCKEY** (Currumbin—Lib) (7.44 pm): I am pleased to contribute to the debate on Estimates Committee E and note that my comments relate to the Education portfolio and, in particular, to children with special needs. As with other committees, non-government members found the process somewhat frustrating and failing in its objective of improving this government's transparency and competency. Funds have been allocated for expansion of special schools on the Sunshine Coast in this year's budget. To his credit, the minister states that he wants all special schools in the state upgraded to topnotch facilities. This is welcome news. The Currumbin electorate was fortunate enough to gain a brand-new purpose-built facility in Currumbin Waters last year that can cater for approximately 110 student enrolments. This state-of-the-art school was funded by both the Commonwealth and state governments. Students, families, teachers and support staff all settled in with a minimum of upheaval and the atmosphere of this learning centre is indeed positive.

However, it was not long before I had distraught parents calling me to say that their autistic children who had attended the school for several years were being forced into mainstream high schools. Given less than a week's notice to make changes to their work schedules, let alone prepare their children who are especially susceptible to change, these dedicated parents could not believe how callously the new legislation was being implemented.

These actions make a mockery of the minister's comments that his view is that parents of children with disabilities are often in the best position to make judgements on whether students should be integrated into mainstream settings or special schools. For the benefit of honourable members, children with autism spectrum disorder are no longer eligible to attend special schools as they do not fit the enrolment criteria and are placed in mainstream schools where possible. Schools in my electorate are struggling to cope with an ever-increasing number of children with special needs, in particular ASD. Together with thousands of parents of children with ASD, I would be keen to hear what strategies, if any, the minister has planned to cope with the huge increase in children requiring special education units and special school placements.

A department spokesperson told a *Gold Coast Sun* reporter in May this year that enough resources for students and teachers existed. If the spokesperson bothered to speak with some affected families with ASD kids they would learn the majority vehemently disagree. In fact, the situation is so bad that insurance agents tell me that one of the reasons—if not the main reason—for parents tapping into their superannuation early on compassionate grounds is to pay for supportive education and therapy for their autistic children. This is all because the government is derelict in its duty and failing to educate these Queensland children.

News that one child with autism has recently been awarded a placement in a special school for a period of time has set a precedent against the minister's own legislation and shown this section of the education act to be a paper tiger. Education in Queensland is in a sorry state indeed when the minister has to breach his own legislation and call on parents to sign confidentiality agreements to keep their placement

a secret due to his government's passing of discriminatory and unfair legislation. All parents should be made aware of their rights to apply to enrol their children in a supportive learning environment. It is the responsibility of the state government to provide education for Queensland's children. They should not be bullied into silence and coerced into signing multipage confidentiality agreements shrouded in secrecy. Behaviour such as this is becoming typical of the culture of Beattie's Labor.

The child I speak of was denied education for many months before this decision, as a result of an out-of-court settlement, allowed them a placement in a special school where there are, I might add, a number of vacancies. While the minister talks about a lowering of disability profiles of students as one of two reasons for a school to lose resources, education and support needs of students with disabilities, the real reason is more likely that the Education Department is pushing children with ASD out of special schools.

One of the most exasperating aspects when trying to unravel the puzzle of educating children who suffer from ASD is the lack of definite classification. Do they have a disability, do they have a medical illness or is it a behavioural issue? Without clear categorisation children with ASD continue to get a raw deal.

Results of the first autism prevalence study for Australia released in March this year concluded that one in 160 Australian children aged between six and 12 has an ASD. This three-year study led by Perth paediatrician John Wray sets clear benchmarks for early intervention planning and other services. These figures which mirror those gathered several years ago in America reveal a dramatic spike in the number of children with this disorder and present educators in particular with enormous issues.

A leading US paediatrician who was visiting Australia recently told me that there were entire preschool classes of children with ASD and that litigation cases against the government for failing to educate children properly were now on the cards. For parents to be told that they must look at creative ways to keep kids in learning shows how out of touch this government is with regard to this growing problem.