



Speech by

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EDUCATION FUNDING

Mr LANGBROEK (Surfers Paradise—LNP) (12.21 pm): Over the last few weeks Queenslanders have witnessed the Beattie-Bligh government's omnipresent blame game in full swing. This time the education minister is the key player, deflecting blame for his government's poor policy and bad management of our state education system. Last month the Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs released the results of the first standardised national tests for literacy and numeracy. The results were scary and, quite frankly, are an indictment on the Bligh government.

According to National Assessment Program Literacy and Numeracy—or NAPLAN—results, Queensland finished second last amongst the eight states and territories. In the Smart State by the time a child is eight years old or in year 3, they may already be starting to fall behind the minimum literacy and numeracy standards. By the time they finish primary school in year 7, a higher percentage of students have fallen even further behind. When students in high school fail to meet minimum literacy and numeracy standards, as is the case for more than 10 per cent of year 9 students, it is for the most part too late to make up lost ground. They become lost to an education system that forgot about teaching the basics—a system manufactured by the education minister, the member for Everton, who has been the minister since 2005 and his predecessor, our Premier, the member for South Brisbane, who was the minister for education from 2001 to 2005.

Rather than acknowledging the obvious problems with the Queensland curriculum, the Premier and the minister instead have tried to shift the blame. It is the fault of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders and regional and rural Queenslanders that Queensland is so far behind national benchmarks, according to them. It is the fault of parents for not taking an active interest in their child's education, they say. It could not possibly be the fault of the government, they say, because they spent so much money on schools last year. Yet if we have a look at funding for the Department of Education, Training and the Arts over the past five years, what we see is a decline in the proportion of overall government expenditure.

According to the Queensland Teachers Union preliminary state budget report, the 2008-09 budget is the first budget in which education as a policy area is not the largest area of expenditure. Expenditure has declined from 25 per cent to 22 per cent of the total budget. I acknowledge that it is a moot point that between health and education, the two biggest areas, there is going to be some flexibility some time between years, but it is certainly a quite evident pattern when we look at the years since 2003-04 when education expenses were 26 per cent of total government expenditure and in the most recent 2008-09 budget they were 22 per cent of total government expenditure. This is from the Treasurer, who talks about education and skills as the foundation of our economic future.

If the Bligh government had maintained past levels of funding, there would have been an additional \$966 million available for educational programs and services. In addition to decreasing education spending relative to the state government, the current DETA budget does not allow for increased inflation and increased enrolment figures. According to the QTU, this means there has been a decline in education funding in real terms. That is less money and fewer resources for teachers in classrooms.

We know that our public high schools are bursting at the seams. A comparison between student capacity numbers and actual enrolment figures reveals that many of our schools are operating at near capacity, with some schools such as Browns Plains, Palm Beach Currumbin High School, Kenmore State High, Kirwan State High and schools on the Sunshine Coast running well over capacity—up to 70 students in some cases. While our schools are oversubscribed, the Bligh government is spending less and less in real terms on keeping our public education system running. It is no wonder our kids are struggling to keep up with the rest of Australia when the state government refuses to invest in the future of Queensland.

The Bligh government is perpetuating an ineffective expensive education system that will compromise the academic future of Queensland children. Not only are they short-changing state schools, the Premier and education minister are targeting private sector schools in a bid to boost the state's bank balance in order to service Labor's crippling \$65 billion debt. I note, too, that budget paper No. 2 shows that growth in educational expenditure from 1998-99 to 2008-09 lags significantly behind expenditure growth in health, social welfare, housing and community services, and public order and safety—all valuable in their own right, but should they come at the expense of education?

In recent months Minister Welford and other state government agencies have imposed the following additional charges and cuts on independent and Catholic schools in Queensland: a \$1,000 per subject fee for subject studies by distance education, a fee not charged to state schools; a \$21 charge for every student in years 3, 5, 7 and 9 for the compulsory literacy and numeracy testing, previously provided at no cost and a fee not charged to state schools; a 50 per cent increase in the fee for blue cards for employees, a fee not charged to state schools and a child safety requirement that is apparently not needed in state schools; and a real cut in per capita grants for non-government schools phased in over several years so that the state government can cover for its failure to adequately fund the educational needs of disadvantaged students.

Time expired.