



Speech by
Jeff Seeney

MEMBER FOR CALLIDE

Hansard Tuesday, 6 October 2009

EDUCATION LEGISLATION AMENDMENT BILL AND EDUCATION AND TRAINING LEGISLATION AMENDMENT BILL

Mr SEENEY (Callide—LNP) (5.40 pm): I rise to make some brief comments in the consideration of the two bills that are before the House, both of which deal with education and training. As is the case with other members who have spoken already in this debate, the importance of education to my constituents cannot be underestimated. It is common across the state that no matter where people live in Queensland, the provision of a high-quality standard of education is one of the core requirements of any community and any family. As I have indicated in the House before, within the electorate that I represent there are a large number of small communities. Because of that, within my electorate there are a very large number of schools. I think there is something approaching 60 schools within the electorate of Callide. Those schools range from very small one-teacher schools through to the larger schools in centres such as Murgon, Biloela and Gin Gin, through to the P-10 schools, which are unique educational facilities that members who represent city electorates probably would not be aware of. A P-10 school goes from the prep year to year 10 and presents a unique set of challenges to teachers and school communities that operate within a school like that.

I also have in my electorate a number of what would be considered to be reasonably large high schools—in Gin Gin, Biloela and Murgon; the larger communities within my electorate—that deal with the same issues that the larger high schools in urban areas deal with. Also within the electorate of Callide there is a very strong private schooling system, with St Joseph's school in Biloela, St Joseph's in Murgon as well as St Therese's school in Monto. They are well recognised for the quality of education that they provide. All of those schools are important parts of their communities. All of them will take a very keen interest in any education legislation that passes through this House.

I want to touch on an issue that I have raised in the House previously and an issue that I have raised directly in representations to the Minister for Education. I refer to the PCAP funding, which is the Priority Country Area Program funding, which provides an important source of funding for country area schools in order for them to provide the extra opportunities that larger schools take for granted. It has been an issue in my electorate for quite some years. Unfortunately, in the latest review some schools that previously were able to access PCAP funding found themselves, because of the new model, not able to access that funding any longer. Conversely, some of the schools on whose behalf I had been lobbying for quite a number of years found themselves included in the new funding model.

It is unfortunate that any small country school should be denied that relatively small amount of funding that made it possible for them to provide the extra curricular activities that are so important in ensuring that a standard of education is available to students in relatively remote areas. The schools within the Callide Valley cluster were the ones that were excluded in the latest round of funding. Small schools such as those at Jambin and Goovigen suddenly found themselves without that funding—and at very short notice, I might add. Those schools found themselves without the funding that allowed them to have their computers maintained, that allowed their students to go on school camps, that allowed them to access the Queensland Arts Council and extra things such as that. To take away that small amount of funding has caused an enormous degree of angst within those school communities. Conversely, I would say that I am

pleased to see that small schools at Durong, which is a rather isolated area between Kingaroy and Mundubbera, were at last recognised as being deserving of being included in this funding.

I say to the minister today, as I have done previously, that the model that is used to determine the allocation of these PCAP funds has to be flexible enough to take into account the particular situations of small country schools. We cannot allow a rigid model to be put in place that provides outcomes that are clearly and demonstrably unfair and it is, I would submit, clearly and demonstrably unfair for small schools such as those at Goovigen, Jambin and Prospect Creek to suddenly have that funding cut from their school budgets. I once again call on the education minister to ensure that that relatively small amount of funding in the whole Education budget, but a significant amount of funding for the students and families who depend on these schools, is once again reinstated.

I also want to reinforce the comments that have been made by other members on this side of the House who have spoken in the debate about the importance of ensuring that the teachers who work in our schools are paid properly. I know it is a political issue—and I have listened to the debate in this House this afternoon and I have heard some of the comments and the interjections across the chamber—but any visit to any of these small isolated schools that I represent would reinforce to any reasonable person the need to ensure that the men and women who work in those schools are properly recompensed for their efforts. It is heart wrenching at times to see the diversity of roles that those teachers play in small, isolated schools. The responsibilities that those teachers have in those small, isolated schools would be almost unimaginable to teachers who work in big city schools. It is something that they just do. They play a whole lot of roles just to make the school work, just to make sure that the kids who come to those schools have the best educational opportunities provided to them with the resources that are made available.

A big contributor to the standard of those educational opportunities is the efforts that those teachers go to over and above what they could reasonably be expected to be paid for to make sure that their schools work properly. This issue was brought home to me when I visited a small school in Proston in my electorate—a very small community. The teachers there made the point to me very forcefully over a very nice morning tea that they were paid less than teachers who worked in a big school in the centre of Sydney, where teachers would be able to access a range of support services that the teachers in Proston could only dream about. But not only did those teachers in Proston fulfil their obligations as professional teachers, they also played a whole lot of roles that would never be considered to fall within the responsibility of teachers in those large city schools. For Queensland teachers as a whole not to be paid as much as their interstate counterparts is inexcusable, but for teachers who work in those small, isolated rural schools and who perform duties far and beyond what is required of teachers in larger centres where they are better supported not to be recognised and financially compensated for their efforts is a situation that this government needs to address and address very quickly.

I say that without trying to inflame the political situation; it is just a fact. It is a core responsibility of any state government to ensure that educational facilities are as good as they can be. I appreciate more than anybody the difficulty of delivering educational services to small rural areas. An essential part of ensuring that they are as good as they can be is to ensure that the men and women who give their professional best to work in those places are properly compensated financially for their efforts.

There is a constant battle in my electorate for capital funding for school facilities. While the federal stimulus package has been welcomed in many schools, it is very difficult for school communities to accept the amounts of money that are being quoted to build what are modest facilities indeed. Some of the costings that have been put forward for things such as libraries, assembly halls, shade structures and shelters are quite phenomenal in terms of the value for money that the school community is getting. I have had a number of examples brought to my attention where schools have been investigating the construction of certain facilities, they have received quotes and have sometimes moved a fair way through the process of establishing fundraising targets and so forth. Then they have had the project taken over by the federal stimulus package only to find that the project is suddenly going to be completed but at a cost of four or five times the amount, and sometimes even more than that. Some of the amounts of money are quite extreme, but such facilities are certainly well overdue in many of those schools and will be welcomed. I only hope that the money that is being made available by the federal government is properly used and that those school communities get the most value for it.

The legislation before the House also deals with child-care services. In an electorate such as mine with so many small communities there are a very small number of opportunities where the more traditional established child-care services can operate economically. By far the most common method of delivering child-care services is through the family day care system. While there are established child-care centres in Biloela and Gin Gin, there are a large number of people in those communities who operate a business as a family day care provider. It is a very important part of the child-care options that are available to my constituents.

I am pleased to see that in the minister's second reading speech he mentioned family day care services, along with the more mainstream child care. Too often family day care has not been recognised whenever child care is talked about in this place and in broader community debate. While that may be

understandable in communities where family day care is not a significant part of the child-care market and is not significantly relied upon, in the communities that I represent family day care is extremely important. Family day care is identified in the minister's second reading speech as being subject to the amendments that are included in the bill, the same amendments that will apply to the larger day care centres.

I put on record here today the great service that family day care providers provide in those communities. They, like the teachers that I spoke about earlier, very often provide services far beyond what they are paid for. They do it because they operate in small communities and in many cases they have a personal knowledge of the people for whom they provide the family day care and they do it with the intention of ensuring that it is a valuable community service.

While family day care providers are paid through government funded schemes, to a very large extent there is an element of community service involved. Some of those family day care providers have been providing that service for a long time and are well recognised in the small communities that I represent. For a number of the communities that I represent there has been an issue with accessing family day care coordinators. Family day care coordinators need a level of qualification that is sometimes hard to access in small communities. I am pleased to have been able to work with some of those people to access those qualifications through the TAFE system. The department and the minister need to be aware of this and to ensure that there are opportunities for people in those small communities to access the qualifications that have been identified as a basic standard so that the family day care service providers can continue to provide the valuable services that they do in small communities.

As the shadow minister has indicated, the legislation before the House will not be opposed by the opposition. I am sure that the reservations that the shadow minister has alluded to in his speech on the second reading will be explored in some detail in the consideration of the clauses of the legislation. I will listen with interest to that debate. When legislation comes before this House that deals specifically with education, it behoves all of us to recognise the important role that education plays in every community and every family. I believe that it is one of the main motivators for families when they choose where they will live and where their children will go to school. It determines a great many other things in their life. For communities that are struggling and have issues with economic development, the provision of high-quality education opportunities is one of the things that will help to attract people to small communities and ensure that those communities remain viable.

I welcome the opportunity to point out again some of the education issues that are relevant to my constituents. I urge the government to provide the resources that are necessary to ensure that our education system, not just in Callide but right across the state, is of the highest quality and that the men and women who work in that education system are properly compensated for the great work that they do.