



Speech by

Robert Messenger

MEMBER FOR BURNETT

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EDUCATION LEGISLATION AMENDMENT BILL AND EDUCATION AND TRAINING LEGISLATION AMENDMENT BILL

Mr MESSENGER (Burnett—LNP) (7.46 pm): The education and training cognate debate is a wide-ranging and broad debate in this chamber, as we heard from the member for Mirani. The minister notes in his second reading speech that the department administers 21 acts. I congratulate the shadow minister, the member for Moggill, on his detailed examination and assessment of the technical aspects of this bill.

On behalf of the parents and children of the Burnett, I congratulate and thank all of the teachers. Sometimes under very difficult circumstances they work miracles every day. I particularly want to congratulate the teachers employed by Education Queensland in our state schools. Given the lack of political support and the lack of on-the-ground front-line resources provided by this state government—or not provided by this state government—they do a fantastic job.

I want to give the House some statistics from the Burnett electorate. There are a total of 26 state schools in the Burnett electorate and three non-state or private schools. The total number of state school students in the Burnett electorate is just under 4,000—it is 3,893—and that figure will grow into the future, when we consider the 35 million people who will be in Australia in coming years. I believe that many of those people coming to Australia and migrating north to Queensland will end up around the Burnett electorate. Therefore, we have to be very mindful of the infrastructure that we provide for state school education.

I want to share with the House tonight some of the great state schools we have in the Burnett electorate: Agnes Water, Alloway, Avondale, Bargara, Booyal, Bororen, Burnett Heads, Childers, Cordalba, Elliott Heads, Givelda, Gooburrum, Goodwood, Isis High, Kalkie, Kolan South—a school that I attended when I was a young fellow—Lowmead, Miriam Vale, Moore Park, Oakwood, Rosedale, Sharon, Wartburg, Winfield, Woongarra and Yandaran. All are vibrant schools with vibrant P&Cs and a fantastic crew of teachers.

There is a general perception within the broader community that private schools provide a better education for children. When one looks at state-wide figures on a percentage basis, the statistics are showing that parents are voting with their feet in many areas of the state and finding that extra money from their ever-shrinking family budgets—budgets which are being eaten into by state government charges and taxes and in the future, if the ETS comes in, they will be paying extra money for that—and sending their children to private schools. This is a trend that I believe we should acknowledge and also try to reverse. I am a big believer in the public school system, especially the public school system in regional and rural areas.

The Burnett is receiving its fair share of the 2,000-odd people who come across the border every week to settle in Queensland. But unfortunately, I do not believe that we are receiving our fair share of new infrastructure. In speaking in this cognate debate on the Education Legislation Amendment Bill and the Education and Training Legislation Amendment Bill, I would like to talk about new educational infrastructure and also the feedback that I have received about our Burnett state schools and teachers from parents who probably barrack for New South Wales during the State of Origin. I can say that that

feedback is enthusiastic and overwhelmingly positive. According to those people I have spoken to who have recently emigrated from colder climates down south, we in the Burnett are giving their children an education experience that exceeds the public and also the private standard of education in New South Wales. In that regard they were talking about the standard of education offered in the city.

I think one of the best educational experiences any child can ever have is to grow up in a regional Queensland school. I cannot speak from personal experience about city schools. I have reservations about big city schools and the culture that develops within them. But all of those small regional schools—the schools with 140 kids, or 200 kids, or 60 kids, or 15 kids, or the one-teacher schools—certainly provide quality teaching and learning experiences for our students.

I have spoken about the following issue with the minister tonight. There is an emerging public health issue that could affect and may well have adversely affected the health of schoolchildren at two Burnett state schools: the Bororan and the Miriam Vale schools.

Mr Wilson: And I can indicate I have actioned that through my department. Thank you for raising it with me.

Mr MESSENGER: I thank the minister very much for that. By way of explanation to the House, Bororan State School is a small country school that is situated approximately 14 kilometres north of Miriam Vale. It caters for prep to year 7 students. The total number of students there is 45 and the principal is Ms Jane Van Der Weide. The principal of the Miriam Vale State School is Mrs Margie Burrell, and I had a chat with Margie today. It has been recently brought to my attention that, unbeknown to the residents of the township of Bororan, they have been drinking—possibly for years—unpotable water, or water that is not suitable for human consumption. This is an ongoing issue. It obviously has relevance to the schoolchildren there.

The Mayor of the Gladstone Regional Council, George Creed, told me on Monday morning that the residents should now boil their water before drinking it. The community is only now being warned about the dangers of drinking their water supply. Unfortunately, there is plenty of evidence to suggest that, without proper warning, the residents of Bororan, including their children, have been allowed to drink contaminated water.

Just to give the House an example of the nature of the potential health threat facing students, teachers and families in Bororan and Miriam Vale, I have been contacted by a young Bororan mum who has three children and a husband. They have all had health complaints. Their family doctor is now questioning whether their ill health has been caused by their council's supplied drinking water and has asked for it to be tested. I have asked the health minister to be involved in this issue and also to make sure that independent tests are carried out. To give an example of the threats that are being faced by the schoolchildren, this young Bororan mum told me that her two-year-old boy had a long history of stomach and internal bleeding. His skin cracks and weeps. He can barely walk when he gets up of a morning. His skin flares and goes red, dry and scaly after a shower.

Mr Lawlor: What's this got to do with the bill?

Mr MESSENGER: I am very disappointed really to hear the little snickers around the chamber tonight saying, 'What's this got to do with the bill?' I can tell members what it has to do with the bill. It is to do with the health of schoolchildren because there are some doubts about the water supply and the water that is drunk by the children at the Bororan school. As we know, today the schools encourage the children not to bring to school drinks with a high sugar content. One of the things that the children then do is rely on water supplied by the school. So I am surprised that those members would fail to find the relevance of the issue I am raising, which is a serious public health issue for schoolchildren.

Government members interjected.

Mr MESSENGER: I find their interjections moronic, insensitive and uncaring, which is what I have come to expect from most of those members on the opposite side of the chamber. After speaking with the mayor, I can say that there is also a small possibility—probably larger than a small possibility—that the Miriam Vale State School may be facing a similar danger.

The community of Agnes Water/1770 have been crying out for a high school or a middle school to be established in their area. There are a lot of Agnes Water children attending boarding schools and, therefore, living out of the area, because there is no high school in their immediate community. They are not being accounted for when the education department calculates and considers whether they should build a secondary facility at the Agnes Water school. Of course, the cost of their education is subsidised by the federal government. So, in effect, this state government is shirking its responsibility and cost-shifting the students' educational fees.

Community advocates and parents alike are really perplexed as to why this government keeps on insisting that they do not have the numbers to warrant a high school. I know that the minister has been approached by a delegation in Bundaberg and wonderful community advocates in Agnes Water/1770 such

as Dr Ali Black. She has pointed out that, as shown by the 2006 census data, the percentage of children living in Agnes Water aged between five and 14 years is 15.7 per cent, which is greater than the national average for that age bracket of 13.5 per cent. That is one pertinent statistic. Dr Ali Black also states that the government should not be allowed to have it both ways. There is quite a push by the government to recognise the growth in the Discovery Coast area by saying that, because of that growth, the people there will need a desalination plant and that the government is prepared to throw \$30 million at it, but the people there cannot have secondary school options.

In the past I wrote to then education minister Welford stressing the importance of constructing a secondary school at Agnes Water, but those pleas fell on deaf ears. I am hoping that this minister realises that the need for a secondary school is becoming a critical issue for the families who are constantly moving to the area. The need for this school has an overwhelming amount of community support. The provision of a school in the area would allow parents to be more involved in the school community and in their children's education.

In the media of late there has been much attention focused on the serious issue of schoolyard bullying, which is on the increase. It is evident that there has been a frightening growth in violence and disruptive behaviour in Queensland's schools. It is obvious that bullying is still rife in schoolyards and has a major impact on the learning ability of students. The issue of schoolyard bullying desperately needs to be addressed. Students should not have to put up with bullying. It is their basic right to feel safe and to be provided with a safe learning environment.

It continually puzzles me to find that there is an imaginary line drawn at the boundary of the schools. An assault committed over that boundary in the wider community is considered to be very serious whereas horrific injuries can be inflicted on students by other students and it is not treated by society in the same way. Similarly, in relation to drug offences, there is an invisible line. If you move into the schoolyard, you are in the twilight zone, whereas on the outside, it is 'Welcome to the real world' and if you are found with drugs and illicit substances you are treated in a very serious way.

Earlier this year I received a letter from a local teacher whose thoughts and words deserve to be heard during this wide-ranging cognate debate on the Education Legislation Amendment Bill and the Education and Training Legislation Amendment Bill. I will not identify this teacher, because I know how vindictive this government becomes to public servants—

Mr Lawlor: You already read anonymous letters.

Mr MESSENGER:—who speak out and blow the whistle about waste, mismanagement, dysfunction and the corruption of this Labor government.

Mr Moorhead: You name them in the parliamentary record.

Mr MESSENGER: We all know that all of those members opposite who were here in the last parliament actually voted to let off the hook a convicted, corrupt former member, so when I hear their protestations and their crying out about anonymous voices it is like water off a duck's back; it really means nothing. The teacher writes—

I am a State School teacher and have been for 20 years.

The State School system is totally falling apart because of gross neglect from many previous Governments, both State and Federal.

This Government is certainly greatly contributing to the disaster.

I am at a school where the teachers are just fantastic and we are doing the absolute best that we can. You wouldn't get a better education anywhere.

I wholeheartedly agree with that. The teacher continues—

However, many of our teachers are close to retirement. Most of the teachers I speak to can't wait to retire because they have had a guff of the lack of funds, remuneration and respect.

Last term two of our experienced teachers retired basically the day they turned 55. This was a huge loss to our school community.

Why aren't these teachers being encouraged to keep teaching!?

The Government has even periodically been offering \$50 000 to entice experienced teachers out of teaching. Why? The only reason is to save money because these teachers are replaced by graduates who are paid much less and the Government saves loads of money.

If the Government and the public think that education has problems now, wait another 10 years. By that time most of the experienced teachers will have either retired, resigned or gone to teach somewhere else.

Many of the graduates who are replacing them have OP's of 15-19!!!!

My daughter is in Grade 12 and is going to get an OP of about 2 or 3. Several of her friends are also very academic.

They laugh hysterically when anyone talks about becoming a teacher. It is absolutely the bottom of the ladder of choices. Basically the only students who stoop that low have no other options.

These are the teachers of the future. Good luck to our grandchildren.

What that teacher has said might grate on some of those opposite. I believe that this person is speaking the truth and speaking from the heart. His comments need to be recognised and listened to by all policy makers on both sides of the parliament. I have given an undertaking to my local teachers that I will be lobbying and advocating on their behalf so that Queensland teachers become some of the best paid teachers in Australia.

Mr Moorhead: How much would you pay them?

Mr MESSENGER: I have actually had the library carry out research on some of the best paid teachers in the world. Finland is one of the places where educational standards are recognised world-wide as being the best. I commissioned the research after I bumped into a newly graduated teacher from Finland in Agnes Water. He and his girlfriend were travelling around Australia before going back home to work. We had a nice conversation about the comparisons between the different teaching systems. I think that it is time that we compared our teachers with not only the Australian standard but also the international standard.

In Finland there is a system where to become a teacher one almost has to have a masters degree. According to the library brief, teachers are considered pedagogical experts and are entrusted with considerable independence in the classroom. They also have decision-making authority as concerns school policy and management. They are deeply involved in drafting the local curricula and in development work. Furthermore, they have almost exclusive responsibility for the choice of schoolbooks and teaching methods. Teachers continuing professional development is regarded as essential and is organised extensively.

The OECD Program for International Student Assessment, PISA, carries out surveys of key exercises of 15-year-old students. Commencing in 2000, the PISA surveys are administered every three years in the OECD member countries.

Mr DEPUTY SPEAKER (Mr Pitt): I ask the member to come back to the intent of the bill. I think we have given a fair bit of latitude.

Mr MESSENGER: In relation to the Education and Training Legislation Amendment Bill in this cognate debate, I am actually trying to compare education standards in Finland to Queensland.

Mr Lawlor: It has nothing to do with the bill.

Mr MESSENGER: I know that members opposite think that there is no relevance there, but they are of very limited intelligence, you would have to agree with me, Mr Deputy Speaker.

The Australian Council for Educational Research has produced a report on PISA, comparing the results of schools in each Australian state. This gives some comparison between Finland and Queensland in 2006, with Queensland, along with other states, performing at the OECD average in science and above the OECD average in reading and math. The mean results for Queensland in 2006 compared with Finland were: in science, Finland rated 563 and Queensland rated 520; in reading, Finland rated 547 and Queensland rated 510; and in math, Finland rated 548 and Queensland rated approximately 520.

I have never been able to understand why a system which prides itself on teaching our children the logic that if they further their education and qualifications they will be rewarded unfortunately fails to follow its own advice. After talking with many teachers and friends, if a person chooses to spend their time furthering their qualifications to a masters level, there is no guarantee that the Queensland government will reward them with increased wages or better conditions. In fact, a teacher friend of mine said that there was a clear disincentive for her to further her academic qualifications because she would be out of pocket. At the very least our education system should provide a clear incentive for teachers to further their own education because everyone wins: the children win, the teachers win, the parents and the community win. I support the bill.