




Speech By
Curtis Pitt

MEMBER FOR MULGRAVE

MOTION: EDUCATION, BETTER SCHOOLS PLAN

 **Mr PITT** (Mulgrave—ALP) (5.41 pm): Stuart State School in Townsville recently celebrated its 122nd birthday. Since 1891 it has a proud record of educating children from outlying areas, including from Cungulla, Alligator Creek, Mount Elliot, Oak Valley, Wulguru and Stuart. Not surprisingly, it is cherished by those communities because its contribution over many, many years has been terrific.

It continues to thrive. There are approximately 80 students on the roll from prep to year 7. But that does not matter to this Newman government. It does not see the value of Stuart State School to its students and to the communities it serves. When the government looks at Stuart State School it sees dollar signs. It sees an asset that it can close and sell, as it does many schools around the state.

A case in point is the Toowoomba area where three primary schools are threatened with the axe—Wyreema, Toowoomba South and Charlton. For good reason there is anger in those communities when you consider the disruption to students, parents and teachers who cannot understand why their schools have been earmarked for closure. The campaigns to keep the Toowoomba schools open have focused on the population growth in those communities. The catchment of Wyreema State School has been identified as a major growth area in coming years. Protestors have rightly questioned the wisdom of closing and selling a school now when demand will necessitate the building of a new school in the next five to 10 years.

The policy does not stand up to scrutiny—people all over are struggling to understand. As the government scrambles to close schools and sell assets, the first report of the Schools Planning Commission suggests the number of schools needed to be built across the state, to keep pace with the growth in the school-age population, is in double digits. The study concluded that up to 23 new schools will be needed in just three of the top 20 high-growth areas—Brisbane metropolitan north, Caloundra and Townsville, where Stuart State School is fighting for its survival. Quite simply, this government does not care about making sense, does not care about the value to regional communities of the local school and the community hub that it provides and does not care that it is seeking to close and sell schools in areas where the proper demand mapping has not yet been done. What matters is the government's bottom line and the value of the land those schools sit on.

During the estimates hearing this year the LNP released a list of 33 properties sold by the department of education for around \$38 million, including vacant land at Edmonton for \$900,000. This land in my electorate—on Farmer Street adjacent to Petersen Park—was originally acquired for a future school but, as development is anticipated to the south of Edmonton, the department of education looked to the future Mount Peter development area instead.

Since elected, I have worked with Edmonton Storm and council to change the purpose of this land to expand the rugby league footprint at Edmonton. In early 2012 my lobbying paid off and Education Queensland agreed to hand over the land to council on the understanding that at some stage in the future council would acquire a suitable parcel of land at Mount Peter for a school several years down the track. This was to ensure a swift end to negotiations that had been going on for several years and to ensure council's short-term budget considerations would not be a hurdle. For

whatever reason, the new government ditched the land swap approach, instead requiring the land to be purchased by the new council, delaying the process for another 18 months. That being said, I am happy that the issue has finally been resolved. I congratulate the Cairns Regional Council on the acquisition of the land to expand the Petersen Park sports fields.

Let me go back to this government's closure policy. It means even those schools that escape the axe this year will face an uncertain future. Every year every school could be forced to justify its continuing existence. That would be bad enough if it were the only consequence of the haphazard and disjointed way that the Newman government is handling the education of Queensland's children, but, of course, it is not. This government has politically and arrogantly turned down the advantages of the Better Schools Plan which would provide additional money for students from the most disadvantaged backgrounds. The Newman government is also betraying Indigenous students, students with a disability, students at regional, rural and remote schools—and this will be of great interest to those fighting to save those schools threatened with closure—students at small schools.

The Better Schools Plan would dramatically increase the amount of funding for such students, underpinning the viability of those schools and enhancing their educational opportunities. The Better Schools Plan acknowledges the value schools like Stuart State School provide to their students and the wider community. It is a real shame that this government by its actions and its ideology does not acknowledge the value of our schools and this program.

For the benefit of the Minister for Education, Tony Abbott telegraphed his intentions last week in no uncertain terms. The minister failed to read between the lines. It was a big fail. This is an opportunity missed. When the federal government puts on the table two-for-one funding you find a way to make it work and sign up, and you certainly pay attention to the leader of the federal opposition who says that they want to accept this and go forward. What we do know is this: the federal leader of the coalition, Tony Abbott, does not want to be seen with Campbell Newman. Now the decision has been made by this government not to sign up to the Gonski reforms he obviously does not want to be seen with them in a classroom environment either.