




Speech By
Hon. John-Paul Langbroek

MEMBER FOR SURFERS PARADISE

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EDUCATION AND OTHER LEGISLATION AMENDMENT BILL

 **Hon. JH LANGBROEK** (Surfers Paradise—LNP) (Minister for Education, Training and Employment) (5.09 pm), in reply: I thank all members who contributed to the debate on the Education and Other Legislation Amendment Bill. I especially want to thank the members of the Education and Innovation Committee for their considered report and support for the bill.

At the outset I want to point out that there has been considerable praise for my department and my role as minister. I want to draw the attention of members to the fact that this bill is a product of a definite strategy from the Commission of Audit, commissioned by the government when we became the government, making sure that we had a strategic direction for education in Queensland. It has involved making sure that we focus on high achievement and enhancing student performance in every school, including supporting school autonomy to generate innovative school based solutions balanced by strong accountability frameworks.

We have said that with autonomy comes responsibility, but we have also looked at legislation, such as the education acts that are relevant to my portfolio, to make sure that we could review opportunities to make sure that we support school autonomy, enhance local decision making, support school safety, improve educational outcomes and reduce red tape. That is what I think members have seen over the last 2½ years of this government, evidenced by significant maintenance funding and the Great Results Guarantee, which has had the most significant response that I have seen in my time in this place from schools in terms of their appreciation for the government of the day acknowledging these areas and making sure that they are supported to be able to deliver the services to their parents, students and teachers to make sure that we do get great results in our schools.

At the outset I think it is important to mention that it is a team effort by the government. The Newman government commissioned the Commission of Audit and then this department has said, yes, we are going to increase spending because we are always going to be employing more teachers based on enterprise bargaining negotiations that have class size targets and the whole department focuses on our mantra of 'from crayon to career'. That means reducing red tape where we can but also making sure that we supply resources into schools so that people can use them at their discretion to make sure that we do get the focus on getting the best results.

I want to thank members for their contributions. I am going to go through some of those now before we come to consideration in detail. I thank the honourable member for Stafford, the shadow minister. It is his first bill. I am sure it is a rather daunting process to come in and do your first bill, so congratulations and thank you for your support and that of the opposition. I know he made a statement of reservation, but I also want to acknowledge his acceptance of my explanation in the second reading speech for the queries that he raised in the statement of reservation, and that is appreciated. I am glad that he can see that the verbal command provisions will enhance school safety. He is satisfied that they are reviewable and subject to proper process. I also welcome his support of the removal of chapter 18, after an explanation from the Department of Education, Training

and Employment officials that children would only be able to be taught as an addition to properly accredited schools, or for a short time. As the member mentioned, this is part of the Newman government's red-tape reduction agenda.

I would like to reassure the member that special-assistance schools are only used in the most serious circumstances. It is an important part of the third tranche of our policies that involve teacher quality, autonomy and discipline measures. The discipline measures specifically are not just punitive measures. That is what we have said. For students who are disengaged at a particular time in their lives—and, as I travel around to principal round tables, members here will confirm that it is the principals who raise this point—often the issues that lead to disengagement are a consequence of things that those particular students are not themselves responsible for. It can be to do with drugs and alcohol and unemployment in their families. It can be to do with other issues to do with communities and housing. They are things which I have committed to working on with our principals in our schools, which are seen as community hubs, and to try to work on with other ministers.

If schools are seen as community hubs and the community goes there, we need to be able to work with those students if at times they are disengaged. We are increasing support for special-assistance schools. I want to reject the member for Stafford's assertion that we are cutting resources to support these children. I visited many special-assistance schools. Arethusa is one that I know in the member for Murrumba's electorate. There are 150 alternative programs in state schools. Just last week I signed off on capital assistance grants going to the provision of more special-assistance schools—some in the non-state school area, where we have dozens of programs delivered at dozens of campuses where we can hopefully get these students back into mainstream schools.

The special-assistance schools are committed to ensuring that these children who face, as I have already mentioned, many difficult life experiences remain engaged and participate in education. It is particularly reassuring when we see students who sometimes will come and give us their testimonials about what state they were in when special-assistance schools have led to them successfully returning to school and completing school, and we want to make sure that happens. We do have positive learning centres throughout the state and they have had mixed results. That is why, as part of us looking at how we are providing these services, we want to make sure that we provide these services as efficiently and effectively as possible in this portfolio. We continue to give serious thought to making sure that we cater for disengaged children.

I thank the member for his acceptance of the regulations for mature age students attending state schools. I also want to reject his assertions though concerning a lack of options. There remains the possibility for mature age students to access free distance education. If they choose to pursue their studies at TAFE, they may be eligible for the Queensland government's certificate III guarantee. I was looking at some notes here about the number of schools that were anticipating having mature age students enrolling and the numbers are quite large.

We understand his concerns about the suspension of students facing serious charges. We will be providing mandatory training for principals to ensure these provisions are clearly understood. Of course I have heard the argument of the Law Society and their concern for civil liberties. We do not apologise for making sure that parents around the state can be absolutely confident in the safety provisions for their children in schools attended by those students who may have faced serious charges, and we will make sure we are very discreet through the director-general with that information.

I want to thank the member for Burdekin, the chair of the Education and Innovation Committee. I know that she started with an assertion that when you educate a woman you educate a generation. I think there is no doubt that in the modern world it is mums who are often the ones who are discussing these issues, from early education all the way through to what schools we are going to send our children to. Fathers can be involved as well. But there is no doubt that, from speaking to mums, they are the ones who are often making these decisions in conjunction with their husbands. It is an acknowledgement that, whether it is mums or dads, it is important for us to work together to make sure that we get the best outcomes for our students. I know that, as a former teacher, she has already been wished the best for World Teachers Day tomorrow by the member for Beaudesert. So that is certainly acknowledged, too—someone who came in with me and the member for Caloundra in 2004, and I know we are going to miss her in this place after the next election.

I thank the member for Mount Coot-tha, my assistant minister, for her contribution. This bill is all about making schools the safe and welcoming places for all students including those who find it difficult to cope with mainstream schools. I am sure the member is celebrating the lavish praise heaped upon her by the member for Gaven in his contribution.

As the Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry and member for Toowoomba South pointed out during his remarks, this bill is aimed at ensuring that all students, no matter where they are, have access to a first-class education in a safe, welcoming environment. And may I wish his wife, Anita, a happy World Teachers Day for tomorrow, as she sets out for her classroom in Toowoomba.

I want to reject the member for Gaven's assertions that the reform agenda by the LNP for education in this state is a 'jingoistic' regurgitation of the previous government's work. This government is unreservedly about improving outcomes for the children of Queensland. We know education is the foundation of opportunity, and I am glad the member did agree with me on this important fact. Let me reassure him that this bill is about giving principals and school authorities the support and capacity to provide this first-class education to all students, no matter where they live or what their family situations are.

I must reject his assertions made during his incoherent remarks about school closures. We are the first government to actually appoint a Schools Planning Commission to carefully and assiduously assess demographic information to decide where schools are needed. These decisions are based on facts, on population figures, not on donations as the member implied. I want to point out that the previous Labor government closed 140 schools over nearly 20 years—an average of seven a year. This is something that governments have to do, even though they may be difficult decisions. It is important to note that six schools were closed last year but we are planning for 10 new schools. Because of the poor planning of the former government, no state schools were opened this year in 2014. That is an indictment on a state with 4½ million people and with growing figures in the state school sector.

I want to thank the member for Gladstone. She mentioned the schools in her electorate, of which there are about 30 or so. Her commitment to excellence in education is commendable. She made comments about principals managing hostile people on school grounds and asked for a comment. I would like to assure the member that care will be taken in assessing whether people are judged as hostile and that all principals will be given training in the procedures to be followed and the required documentation for giving a direction to a hostile person. It is a measure of last resort and there are serious consequences if principals fail to comply with departmental policy and procedures.

I would also say to parents that it is part of their responsibility and part of the respect they should have for principals and schools that they should maintain decorum when they are in schools, no matter how frustrated they may be. I get to see those incident reports every day. While parents may be passionate, there is no reason for them to deal in disrespectful ways with anyone in an area of responsibility—be it the police, teachers or emergency service workers. They are public servants doing a job and they deserve our respect.

I would also like to reassure the member for Gladstone that the cancellation of enrolment for the nonpayment of fees for distance education is a measure of last resort. I do understand that many Queenslanders are facing difficult circumstances in this current drought and with other adverse conditions. My department works with any students or families who are facing financial hardship through the negotiation of payment plans to ensure that schooling continues. The chief executive of my department also has the capacity to waive fees.

Other members made contributions and I have not mentioned them, but I can see them here—the member for Greenslopes, the member for Waterford, the member for Albert and the member for Caloundra, whom I did mention. I know these members all share the same passion that I would like to think all of us as legislators do. We want to make sure that those of us who have had the benefit of an education that led us over time to this place realise that this is something that Queenslanders do not want us to be partisan about. That is why we had the Education Accord Summit just a few weeks ago. Out of that came the sense that it is so important for the future that all of our future leaders and all of the future citizens of Queensland deserve the best chance. No matter what their condition and no matter where their location, we should be able to support them—whether they are in a small or remote school, whether they are Indigenous or have a disability, whether they speak a language other than English or whether they have other issues that affect them and their socioeconomic status. That is something that we on this side of the House are committed to. We want to make sure that we provide a safe, supportive and welcoming environment so that students have the best possible opportunity to learn and thrive. The Newman government firmly believes that this bill helps deliver on those aims. I commend the bill to the House.