




Speech By
Stephen Bennett

MEMBER FOR BURNETT

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EDUCATION AND OTHER LEGISLATION AMENDMENT BILL

 **Mr BENNETT** (Burnett—LNP) (12.10 pm): I rise to support the Education and Other Legislation Amendment Bill 2014 which continues the government's commitment to giving schools more local autonomy, reducing red tape and improving education outcomes by giving principals and teachers the support they need. This bill will help bring our education system in Queensland up to date with expected standards relating to mature age students, disengaged students and international and interstate students. The bill will also help school principals deal with hostile persons on school grounds and exemptions from compulsory schooling in a much more practical and timely manner. I acknowledge the committee's examination of the bill and the unanimous support for the four recommendations. I also note the minister's response.

The first issue I wish to cover is that of mature age students. I am sure most of us can appreciate that it is not unusual for people who may not have made the best decisions the first time around, to want to properly complete their schooling. As a government we certainly want to support them in their endeavours and ensure they have the best chance of success in an age-appropriate environment.

For that reason, this bill restricts enrolment of mature age students to prescribed mature age state schools, known as centres for continuing education, or state schools of distance education. Currently mature age students can enrol in any state school provided they have a mature age student notice from the director-general of the department. While a student may not have a criminal history and be able to obtain a notice, the reality is that their presence in schools not equipped for the special needs of adult learners causes all sorts of problems. In fact, the department's research shows that adult learner completion rates in centres for continuing education are around 80 per cent compared to around 50 per cent for mature age students in other state schools. There is no doubt that centres for continuing education provide a more appropriate learning environment for adults whereas the majority of state schools cater predominantly for students under 18.

I note that the locations of the four existing centres for continuing education will not suit all adult learners, particularly those in regional areas, with the only facility outside the Brisbane metro area being in Townsville. However, as mentioned previously, there is also the option of distance education. As the minister pointed out in his introductory speech, TAFE Queensland and other training providers are able to provide alternate pathways to higher learning if that is the student's ultimate goal.

I feel comfortable that mature age students in regional areas have plenty of options to pursue learning that will give them the skills they need to improve their employment opportunities or go on to higher learning such as university. At the same time, we are able to maintain age appropriate learning environments for all students in state schools. This measure also gives us the opportunity to remove another piece of unnecessary red tape. By ensuring that mature students can only enrol in prescribed mature age schools it creates an opportunity to give principals of these schools more autonomy to

make decisions on a prospective adult students' suitability for enrolment. This bill empowers principals to do just that.

I move now to the issue of state and non-state school principals needing to deal with hostile persons on their school grounds—an unfortunate reality of working life for our teachers and principals and students. Currently a principal is required to give a written direction to a hostile person. Under this bill they will be empowered to give a verbal direction to a hostile person to immediately leave and not re-enter the school for at least 24 hours.

At the departmental briefing to the Education and Innovation Committee, I posed the question as to whether the current requirement actually provided an opportunity for the principal to temporarily remove themselves from the escalating situation and take a breath, so to speak. The minister's staff demonstrated that throughout their consultation with key stakeholders there was overwhelming support for this measure that gives principals the ability to deal with a hostile person quickly and practically on the spot. I therefore welcome the inclusion of this measure.

I also welcome the further enhancements to the process provided for in the bill. These include empowering a principal to give someone a written direction banning them from the school for up to 60 days. Further to that, the director-general of the department or a non-state school governing body can issue a direction banning a hostile person for 60 days to a year.

Altogether the bill creates a clear, practical and easy to implement series of steps for dealing with hostile people that gives principals the power they need to keep their school community safe. I note that these measures for dealing with hostile individuals do not apply to students of a school. The school's disciplinary measures will apply if it is a student who is being aggressive or hostile.

Another area in which this bill enhances local decision making is that of granting exemptions from compulsory schooling or the compulsory participation phase in non-state schools. Exemptions are often sought for a range of reasons including illness, travel and other family needs. There is nobody better placed to make an informed decision than a local school principal who is familiar with a student, their family, and their overall situation.

Currently state school principals are able to make a decision on exemption through delegation from the director-general. However, non-state school principals must apply to the department on behalf of parents of their students. Under this bill principals of non-state schools will be able to grant an exemption of up to 110 days, or roughly two terms, per calendar year. This common-sense measure brings non-state schools into line with state schools on this issue while still retaining the safety net of review by the director-general if required.

I move on to the cases where parents do not do the right thing and fail to comply with compulsory schooling and compulsory participation requirements. The bill puts into place another common-sense measure for dealing with this at a local level. Unfortunately, not all parents care about, or perhaps understand, the importance of sending their children to school. The reasons for this are often complex and again best dealt with by someone with access to detailed knowledge of the student, their family circumstances and other community issues that affect school attendance. Given that, I welcome the provisions in this bill that empower the appropriately qualified people, such as regional directors, in consultation with school principals, to commence prosecution against parents who fail to comply.

The bill of course does not change the prerequisites, including notices and meetings, to discuss a child's absenteeism before the problem escalates to the point of prosecution. What it does provide is direct access to a final course of action for those who are fully informed about the individual circumstances of a student and their family, and what attempts to rectify the situation have been made before arriving at the last straw so to speak.

On a similar issue, some of the amendments in the bill are aimed at improving educational outcomes for those young people who have disengaged from mainstream education and who are not working or pursuing vocational education. Special-assistance schools are non-state schools that exist specifically to cater to this group and give them the best possible opportunity to re-engage with their education. Critically they do not charge tuition fees. This bill makes the process of becoming an accredited special-assistance school much less complicated and also provides much more flexibility allowing operators of these schools to be much more responsive to the needs of disengaged youth—something that not only benefits the individual young people, but the state of Queensland as a whole. The bill also allows a non-state school to operate dual campuses—one offering a conventional education and a separate site being for a special-assistance school. This currently is not allowed, but I do welcome this development.

Further to the main issues I have covered, the bill provides a raft of miscellaneous amendments which are all designed to achieve the government's ongoing objectives of continually reducing red tape and building an education system that effectively serves Queensland into the future. I acknowledge the work of the Education and Innovation Committee. The Education and Innovation Committee of the 54th Parliament formed in May 2012 and has met on 29 occasions during 2013-14. With many varied and interesting inquiries and issues reviewed and debated during this term, I would like to touch on some of the positive initiatives of the department and this government.

The OneSchool system is a great resource for tracking and monitoring attendance. That is something that the committee has done a fair bit of work on over the last couple of years. I acknowledge all the schools, teachers and stakeholders, particularly in the Bundaberg-Burnett region, for organising school visits for the committee to gather much needed data. I particularly acknowledge the departmental officers' engagement with the committee; it was very professional and very much respected.

The work in engaging with Queensland families has been really important in emphasising the importance and value of a good education. There is also the targeting of chronic absenteeism, like Principal Karen McCord of the Bundaberg State High School and her team who have conducted a lot of work and have set standards in the community in dealing with this issue. I would like to acknowledge the Bundaberg schools that pooled their resources to fund a TAFE teacher to work with disengaged young people—a great success and also an ongoing program.

I would like to take the opportunity to recognise the Goodwood State School principal, Mr Steve Coleman, as one of five finalists for an excellence in teaching award. The Queensland College of Teachers Excellence in Teaching Awards recognise outstanding and inspiring teachers from across the state. Mr Coleman is in the running for the Dr John Dwyer Excellent Leadership in Teaching and Learning Award for 2014. I acknowledge Mr Coleman's involvement in the Education Accord and the great contribution that he made.

I highlight 26 schools in the Burnett region that will be better off following the announcement of our government's education program, Great Results Guarantee—clearly a long-overdue initiative and one that is very welcome. It remains clear we are about investing in our future, our children, and ensuring that Queensland remains a great state with great opportunity for generations to come—for example, after-school numeracy tutoring, reading workshops for parents or a coach to improve teachers' skills in delivering programs for students with a disability. I was particularly thrilled to see the investment in Woongarra State School, with \$110,000, and Rosedale State School, with \$196,000, to continue the great work in that space.

Our investment in great outcomes for students everywhere is highlighted by the support for the Isis District State High School. It will receive nearly \$350,000 to work with the local community on plans that will achieve the best outcomes for their community and their students. From the \$20 million best start program to the \$5 million in my electorate alone to fund the backlog in maintenance for all the local schools, this has been a great initiative and, as alluded to by previous speakers, a wonderful policy and a great outcome. I am very proud of the work the committee has done.

The abundantly clear message that comes through during the many community consultations is that what matters most is the quality of education our young people receive and that they are well supported through the tender years of early adolescence and through their student educational journey. Supporting education is important and so is continuing our record funding in education, targeted especially to all state schools and non-state schools. We are empowering school communities, principals and the P&Cs with flexibility to spend money wisely. It is particularly important to acknowledge that kindergarten participation is at record highs.

I wish to thank my colleagues on the Education and Innovation Committee for their work during this inquiry and all the other inquiries as we come toward the close of this calendar year. It has been a pleasure to work with them and of course the secretariat staff. I thank the minister and his staff for bringing this bill to the parliament.