




Speech By
Stephen Bennett

MEMBER FOR BURNETT

Record of Proceedings, 27 November 2014

EDUCATION AND INNOVATION COMMITTEE

Report No. 42, Motion to Taken Note

 **Mr BENNETT** (Burnett—LNP) (11.10 am): The great news for Queensland is that school attendance rates have improved. This government introduced the Every Day Counts campaign following a 2012 Auditor-General report which found that attendance rates across state schools had not improved over the four preceding years, despite failed strategies to try to get more students to school. The 2012 audit found that the previous government's state-wide attendance rate target was not being achieved, going backwards and dropping annually in a disturbing trend. It also found that there was no change in the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous attendance rates and an indication that, unless action was taken, the gap would not close by 2013. The most recent review found that state school attendance rates had seen an improvement. The biggest jumps were seen with Indigenous students, from 83 per cent to 84 per cent. It is not a lot, but it is still an improvement. The gap between the Indigenous and non-Indigenous students continues to be a concern, with 92 per cent of non-Indigenous students being sent to school.

Our committee received submissions particularly relating to Indigenous students' attendance and I personally was gratified with the improvements and strategies to address Indigenous communities' engagement. On average, we see smaller schools doing better in their attendance rates than larger schools. I note there have been comments from some sources that reflect on the success and the reasons for improved attendance. There have been comments like, 'The lack of an evaluation strategy means we can't be certain what it is that is working in some schools, or why others are not having success in improving attendance rates.' However, I can attest to the renewed focus of school attendance by our great school principals, teachers, communities and the department. As I travel to every award night in the electorate I have seen the principals talking about a renewed investment and sustained focus. This, along with the support of the government, in my view clearly reflects improvements. We have seen schools use a number of strategies, including special activities, breakfast clubs and so on. I am excited that we are seeing some of the best attendance rates ever in Queensland schools. We should acknowledge how important these trends are for curriculum outcomes. We know that the big positive is that the department has made improvements to its data collection capacity and schools are using that capacity to set targets and to monitor and develop strategies to improve attendance. We know that in time the data will support comprehensive evaluations of those strategies.

I was again reminded last week at the many state school awards nights—and every principal made a point in their address—that, if students had an attendance record of 90 per cent every year, by the time they reach year 10 they will be only at a year 9 level. That highlights why this government's initiatives are really important. There is a strong correlation between attendance and academic achievement. We know that school attendance is essential for students to achieve core skills, including numeracy and literacy. The harm to students from low attendance also includes poor

results and academic performance and can have negative social effects because students with high levels of absenteeism tend to become social outsiders because they do not feel they belong at school.

I reference the report's recommendations particularly regarding reporting, recording data and additional requirements for schools and the suggestions that many of the initiatives are at a school level and should remain the domain of the school, reflecting schools' independence and unique circumstances. Schools and their own communities need to drive school attendance outcomes. Schools play a key role in monitoring and facilitating attendance, and this government has performed in terms of addressing these. Recommendation 7 is of particular interest and I feel a real opportunity exists to deal with formal arrangements for support provisions to respond to the issues of students with chronic absenteeism. Perhaps a renewed focus on chaplaincy services is required.

It is critical that school attendance remains a community priority by keeping our focus and engaging with the public as to whether there have been any significant changes. The committee reviewed available research evidence in respect of school attendance rates. We visited schools and communities and sought advice from other Australian jurisdictions as to how they manage school attendance rates. I feel it is important to acknowledge the generosity of the schools, particularly those in my region such as Bundaberg State High School and Bagara State School. On behalf of those with a real interest in educational reforms and those who are engaged, I must apologise for the disingenuous statement of reservation from the member for Stafford. The fact that the member used the work of the committee to make a clearly political statement that had nothing to do with the work of the committee only lowers the expectations of the community about the important work of parliamentary committees. Referencing the predictable union-led call for more resources only highlights how influenced these members are. There is an all-too familiar cry of, 'Let's just throw money at it,' without consequence or a solid basis.

In the time remaining I think it is prudent to remind those taking the lazy political position that we do talk about the Great Results Guarantee funding, the Great Teachers = Great Results, school discipline reforms, additional prep teachers, the 300 master teachers, our capital works program, fixing the maintenance backlog, our investment in thousands of extra apprentices and trainees, implementation of strategic training reforms and, of course, supporting the transition of year 7 into high school. Unfortunately, that is what we have come to expect from those opposite. Perhaps another apology to the House is required.

I need to acknowledge my fellow committee members and, of course, the important work of the committee secretariat and the Library for their support and assistance.