




Speech By
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MEMBER FOR TOWNSVILLE

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GRAMMAR SCHOOLS BILL

 **Mr STEWART** (Townsville—ALP) (4.21 pm): I rise today to support the Grammar Schools Bill 2016 as the chair of the Education, Tourism, Innovation and Small Business Committee whose responsibility it was to examine the bill in detail. Firstly, I would like to acknowledge the individuals, groups and organisations for their submissions on the bill. I would also like to thank members of the committee from both sides of the House and the secretariat staff for their involvement in the examination of this bill. This is a great bill because as we have heard from the shadow education minister this is about choice and about providing choice. I am a little one-eyed though. I think state schools do a fantastic and outstanding job, but then again I am a little biased.

An honourable member: Good principals.

Mr STEWART: Great principals leading great teachers with great kids. This is about choice and this does need a little bit of tinkering. The tinkering that the Grammar Schools Bill will do will be to replace the existing Grammar Schools Act with modern legislation that meets the contemporary needs of our grammar schools in our communities. In general, the bill maintains the current regulatory regime for grammar schools with some important reforms. These reforms: remove the power to establish future grammar schools, provide flexibility for board appointments to facilitate board transition and rejuvenation, reduce red tape while maintaining financial accountability, and enhance board autonomy for the conduct of board business. This is an exciting bill.

Grammar school boards are currently fixed at seven members—three of whom are elected by a school community and four who are nominated by the minister. Clause 14 of the bill also provides for board membership of three elected members and four members nominated by the minister. However, the bill proposes to reform the membership of the boards by providing that, at the request of the board, an additional two board members may be nominated by the minister. Board members appointed by the ministerial nomination may be appointed for a shorter term than the four years at the board's request. This is an interesting component because this is about looking at how the boards actually do their succession planning and, more importantly, how they get a mix and broader range of people involved in their particular boards. As the explanatory notes state, these reforms are considered necessary to 'meet the contemporary needs of grammar schools and support succession planning', with the reforms supporting 'boards to maintain an appropriate skills mix and corporate knowledge, especially during times of board rejuvenation'.

The bill also enables the minister to request a criminal history report under clause 21 before deciding if a person is disqualified from becoming or continuing as a board member. Clause 22 provides that a criminal history report must not be disclosed except to the extent necessary under the bill or with consent. A board member who is convicted of an indictable offence must give notice of the conviction to the minister under clause 23.

During its inquiry into the bill, the committee identified an amendment should be recommended in regard to the board member disclosing their conviction of an indictable offence. We have heard this already in the chamber this evening. An amendment should provide that notice of the conviction must be destroyed after it is no longer needed, and the information cannot be disclosed unless it is necessary to perform a function under the Grammar Schools Act, it is authorised under another act or otherwise required or permitted by law, the person consents to the disclosure, or it is disclosed in a form that cannot identify the person.

The second aspect of this bill is around financial accountability. In these days, that is one of the crucial aspects of any school or any institution. The current act contains prescriptive financial accountability requirements and meeting procedures. The minister has already explained—

For example, the act mandates the types of accounts the board must maintain and includes prescriptive procedures that must be undertaken before borrowing state funds. The bill does not replicate these prescriptive requirements. This bill reduces red tape on grammar school boards, without reducing the oversight of grammar school viability.

I can hear from here already the Townsville Grammar School board sighing relief with that aspect.

Consistent with all statutory bodies, grammar schools are governed by the financial management arrangements prescribed by the Financial Accountability Act and the Statutory Bodies Financial Arrangements Act. Consequently, the bill proposes to remove the prescriptive additional requirements regarding: procedures before borrowing; establishing and maintaining a general fund, a trust fund and a loan fund; and auditing accounts.

The bill retains the requirement for a grammar school board to immediately advise the minister if there are any significant concerns regarding the financial viability of the school. The bill also regains the authority for the minister to give the board directions if necessary in the interests of the school's financial viability, and to appoint an administrator if the minister believes the school is not financially viable or is in danger of becoming non-viable. The committee sees this as being a positive step to ensuring grammar schools remain viable and continue to provide an important education alternative to the communities in which they serve.

Finally, in line with the contemporary approach for the state to provide secondary education in Queensland, the bill does not provide for any new grammar schools to be established. This would not preclude the establishment of a new private school under the Education (Accreditation of Non-State Schools) Act. However, any new schools will not be established as grammar schools.

I will take this time to acknowledge the Townsville Grammar School, which has been around since 1888. I would also acknowledge the principal, Richard Fairley, who has been there since 1998. He is doing an exceptional job in Townsville with his students there. As we have heard, this school provides an alternative source of education, which is almost as good as state schooling. The explanatory notes state—

No grammar schools have been established since 1892 and it is no longer considered necessary for the State to retain the power to establish new grammar schools in the future.

Clause 51 prohibits the establishment or operation of a non-grammar school with a name that includes the word 'grammar'. However, clause 69 enables two non-grammar schools—Anglican Church Grammar School and the Sunshine Coast Grammar School—to continue using their names. A grammar school must continue to operate under the name in clause 6 of the bill.

I believe that these changes to the Grammar Schools Act are necessary to modernise the current legislation. We all acknowledge this evening the vital role that grammar schools provide right across our state as an alternative form of education. I therefore commend this bill to the House.