



Speech By
Tracy Davis

MEMBER FOR ASPLEY

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EDUCATION AND OTHER LEGISLATION AMENDMENT BILL

 **Ms DAVIS** (Aspley—LNP) (11.40 am): I rise to speak to the Education and Other Legislation Amendment Bill 2016 and advise the House that the LNP will not be opposing this bill. There are four objectives of the bill. The first objective is to make the preparatory year of school the first compulsory year of school education in Queensland, and there is very strong research to support a prep year of school. The research clearly shows that the preparatory year does provide an environment for children to engage in a positive learning experience which can underpin a lifetime enjoyment of learning. International research has shown that prep year can provide an environment for the social and emotional development of children. It provides an environment to develop their cognition and general knowledge, language development and communication and early mathematical understandings. It can also assist with a child's health and physical wellbeing but, as I said earlier and very importantly, it can provide a positive disposition to learning.

Like me, I am sure that all members have had the wonderful experience of visiting their local schools and seeing firsthand the preppies enjoying being part of big school. Prep teachers do a wonderful job and play a very important role in the education and development of our littlest students. As we celebrate Teacher Aide Day tomorrow we should also acknowledge the important contribution of our prep teacher aides and indeed all teacher aides in our schools. We all remember a special teacher but, given tomorrow is Teacher Aide Day, I want to acknowledge a wonderful woman—Andrea Thompson, who was a teacher aide at Aspley State Preschool. Preschools of course were the predecessor to prep and my three now adult children had the fantastic opportunity of having the artistic and generous Mrs Thompson as part of their educational journey. I know that there are many Mrs Thompsons in our schools today and it is important that we acknowledge them for the invaluable contribution that they make in our students' lives and I hope they all get very spoiled tomorrow.

Not all children have the opportunity to attend big school and have those daily personal interactions with other students because of where they live. I understand my colleague the member for Warrego, who is a passionate advocate for children who live in rural and remote areas in Queensland, as are all members of the LNP, is going to speak to that later, because many of those children in more rural and remote areas are distance education families and may be on School of the Air or accessing mobile kindy. I look forward to hearing the member's contribution because she is very passionate about ensuring that children who are unable to access a normal school campus have every opportunity to have the best educational experience possible.

The term 'compulsory prep' could more accurately be defined as certain conditions that must be met before a child can be accepted into grade 1. These include completing a prep year in Queensland or a prep equivalent in another jurisdiction. There is provision in the bill for children not developmentally ready for school and for parents seeking to delay entry to school due to distance of travel and where a child attends boarding school. These exemptions allow for some flexibility for families and principals in

determining a child's readiness depending on the child's individual circumstance. There is also a provision for children who are registered as homeschooled a year before enrolling in grade 1 in a state or non-government school.

We know from current information the current level of attendance for prep sits at around 97 per cent. In 2015 approximately 400 children in the state schooling sector did not attend prep prior to enrolment in year 1 and of those approximately 17 per cent were Indigenous and 63 per cent were from metropolitan areas. I would ask the minister to advise the House the cohort of children who make up the remaining 20 per cent. For example, are they children from regional Queensland who have limited prep options? For the benefit of those families, could the minister advise what might be done to address that with these changes? I ask the minister to also advise if we can expect to see any real movement above that 97 per cent mark for attendance given the number of built-in exemptions that have been afforded in this bill, or is this 97 per cent expected to be the ceiling? Whilst there is a consensus of views that children starting prep benefit long term, I would note that the committee was not provided with evidence that making prep compulsory will lift the rates of attendance any higher than they already are and I would be interested to hear from the minister how the department will be working to improve those attendance rates.

I also note that the bill continues to enshrine the minimum age limit for which a student must commence schooling at six years and six months. I would ask the minister to clarify what options will be available to education officials, principals et cetera if children are enrolled in prep and parents then do not send their children to school given that prep is now compulsory. The LNP is absolutely committed to providing all Queensland children with access to a first-class education, and this starts with a prep year experience for them. Indeed, it was the LNP shadow minister in 2006 that first proposed the introduction of full-time teacher aides for prep in Queensland schools and then the LNP in government committed to boosting teacher aide prep hours across Queensland for prep classes, so the LNP does have a very proud record in supporting a preparatory year here in Queensland.

The second objective of the bill is to improve regulation of the teaching provision in Queensland, including by providing a contemporary and streamlined governance structure for the Queensland College of Teachers and improving the disciplinary framework and strengthening the ability of the college to protect the safety and wellbeing of Queensland students. Prior to the bill coming into the House I had the opportunity to meet with the QCT which spoke to me about the changes that it believed would enhance its work as the regulatory body for the teaching provision here in Queensland and the issues that it raised with me and spoke to me about are reflected in the legislative amendments that we see here in the bill. As reported by the parliamentary committee—

A 10 year review of the Education (Queensland College of Teachers) Act 2005 (College of Teachers Act) highlighted the need for improvements in the College's governance structure; teacher disciplinary framework; and areas of the regulation of the teaching profession that deal with the notification of allegations of child harm and regency of practice requirements for teachers.

The bill also makes a number of minor amendments to lower the regulatory burden to the college, including the requirement to issue a registration card. There is a reduction from 17 to 15 members of the teachers college board that will remove the provision for a nominee of the Queensland Public Sector Union and providing one nominee of the minister instead of two. The bill removes the mandatory requirement for the college to impose specific returning-to-teaching conditions on teachers wishing to renew their registration and instead ensures teachers meet nationally agreed regency of practice requirements under its general condition power in the College of Teachers act. The college's internal disciplinary committee will also be renamed as the Professional Capacity and Teacher Conduct Committee, the PC&TC Committee, as part of this bill. Amendments will also allow the college to enter into voluntary practice and conduct agreements with teachers for PC&TC matters that require minor disciplinary actions as there are many cases where in minor disciplinary matters the teacher recognises that the behaviour was wrong and accepts the proposed disciplinary action.

One of the more contentious changes in the bill enables the college to consider a broader range of information to decide if there are grounds for disciplinary action. By removing the section that defines disciplinary information, it enables the college to consider any information as the basis for practice and conduct proceedings. As the committee reported, the college will be able to investigate disciplinary issues or child safety concerns reported about a teacher in the media. However, submissions by the department said that the college must still have a reasonable belief that a ground for disciplinary action exists before taking disciplinary action against a teacher. That would prevent the college from acting on rumour or innuendo. I note that the minister referred to that, but I am keen to hear from the minister as to what checks and balances will be in place to ensure that that is going to happen.

The bill also seeks to improve the responsiveness of the college to protect children from harm. The House knows how very passionate I am about ensuring that all of our children are as safe as they possibly can be. 'Harm' is defined in section 7 of the Education (Queensland College of Teachers) Act as—

... any detrimental effect of a significant nature on the child's physical, psychological or emotional wellbeing.

The committee reported advice from the department that there have been concerns that there are some circumstances where the current act does not allow the college to act soon enough to protect the interests, safety and wellbeing of children in schools. Currently, a teacher's registration may be suspended if the college reasonably believes that the teacher poses an imminent risk of harm to the children. Clause 18 of the bill clarifies that harm can be caused by a single act, omission or circumstance, or a series or combination of acts, omissions or circumstances. Although we would all agree that complaints be dealt with carefully and appropriately, it is not clear how the changes will address vexatious complaints—how they will be handled and how expeditiously they will be finalised. I seek the minister's advice on how they are going to be handled.

The third objective is to introduce a statutory debt recovery mechanism to recover state and Commonwealth funding paid to non-state schools in excess of their entitlements. According to the explanatory notes, in 2014 the Queensland Audit Office conducted a performance audit of the oversight of the state recurrent funding program for non-state schools and estimated that \$1.5 million in funds were overpaid to some non-state schools owing to the overcounting of student numbers. In order to address that, the bill introduces a formal statutory process for the recovery of state and Commonwealth government funding to non-state schools in excess of their entitlements.

The final objective is to strengthen oversight of non-state schools by enabling the Non-State Schools Accreditation Board to disclose relevant information with law enforcement agencies and to reduce red tape for non-state schools by reducing requirements for the provision of school survey data. The Non-State Schools Accreditation Board works with the governing bodies of non-state schools for accreditation and funding purposes. The explanatory notes and the report of the committee state that the board needs to be strengthened to provide the accreditation board and its auditors with the ability to report suspicions of criminal activity such as fraud—overclaimed enrolments—the use of school funds for non-educational purposes, or the siphoning of funds to outside of Australia. Currently, the accreditation act does not allow for the accreditation board and its auditors to report their suspicions to the Queensland Police Service. This amendment allows for the information to be shared with the appropriate agencies to ensure that any fraudulent or other criminal activity is mitigated.

I turn now to the committee report. There were seven submissions to the committee and one supplementary submission by the Queensland Teachers' Union. All of the submissions were supportive of each of the main elements of the bill. One reservation was put forward by the Catholic Education Commission surrounding the funding for non-government prep year students. I have spoken to them about this matter. I understand that this issue is not directly related to the workings of this House and that the department of education addressed these concerns. Although it remains an issue for the Catholic Education Commission, I think that it is important to acknowledge the strong commitment of non-government schools, including Catholic schools, to delivering quality prep education.

In closing, I would like to thank the committee for its examination of the bill, in particular my LNP colleagues the members for Broadwater, Albert and Buderim. I would also like to thank the secretariat, the departmental officers and, of course, those who provided submissions to the committee. Delivering a quality education for our children should always be a priority. The prep year provides the platform for our children to reach their potential, turn their aspirations into reality and be contributing members of our community. I look forward to hearing the minister's responses to my concerns in her closing remarks.