




Speech By
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MEMBER FOR ASPLEY

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GRAMMAR SCHOOLS BILL

 **Ms DAVIS** (Aspley—LNP) (4.10 pm): I rise to speak to the Grammar Schools Bill 2016. From the outset, I would like to acknowledge the diversity of education options that exist in Queensland and commend our very hardworking educators who are incredibly passionate about their job and the children they teach. Our teachers bring their very best ideas and innovations to our education system every day, and I thank them very much for their dedication.

In Queensland we now have schools that are empowered to make decisions which are the best ones for them and for their community. Queensland independent public schools, of which there are a number in the electorate of Aspley, have greater flexibility to promote innovation and increased performance through managing their planning and review processes, and determining staffing arrangements and processes which best suit their individual circumstances. Like our independent public schools, so too are grammar schools a vital part of the school system in Queensland. We must always aim to provide even greater opportunity to be prepared to go even further in building on the system so that every child receives the very best education possible and, importantly, one that caters to their individual needs and aspirations. If we are to truly succeed, we must begin to build an education system which is fit for the future. We must turn our attention to policies that give a renewed focus on learning outcomes, ensuring we get the basics of literacy and numeracy right in our primary schools, ensuring children stay engaged in the education process from the very beginning and throughout their educational journey, and we must find new and better ways for opportunities for students to develop the core knowledge that underpins everything else.

The purpose of the Grammar Schools Bill 2016 is to replace the existing Grammar Schools Act 1975 with more modern legislation. It sets out a number of objectives to meet the present-day needs of grammar schools. Whilst the bill removes the ability to establish new grammar schools, it does go to reducing red tape and removing certain prescriptive requirements around financial accountability currently imposed on existing grammar schools.

There are currently eight grammar schools across Queensland which were originally set up as partnerships between the government and local communities. Between 1863 and 1892, 10 grammar schools opened around Queensland. The first grammar school opened in Ipswich, and Rockhampton Girls Grammar School has the honour of being the final grammar school to be established. I had the great pleasure of meeting the current Principal of Rockhampton Girls Grammar School, Christine Hills, at the recent ICPA conference in Alpha where I learnt and heard about the great things which are happening at the school now and their plans for the future. I thank Christine for her very kind invitation to visit the campus, and I look forward to doing that in the very near future. Rockhampton is home to another grammar school. It was wonderful to meet the Principal of Rockhampton Grammar School at the Independent Schools Queensland parliamentary reception that was held during the last sitting week, and I too thank him for extending an invitation to me to visit that great school.

It has been 120 years since Rockhampton Girls Grammar School was opened, and much has changed in that time. In those early years it was the children of gentlemen and the wealthy who were able to access grammar schools. Scholarships were offered on an individual basis until 1883 when the first scholarship examinations were held. The early curriculum for grammar schools was based on a traditional English approach including classical subjects of Latin and Greek. Grammar schools, along with all non-state schools, are governed by the Education (Accreditation of Non-State Schools) Act 2001, the E(ANSS) Act, which regulates the commencement and functions of non-state schools to ensure high standards of education while ensuring public confidence in the system.

As I mentioned, the bill before us today covers three key areas. The first relates to membership. 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. I note that this change is supported by key stakeholders including the Association of Independent Schools. Furthermore, changes will allow board members to be appointed for fewer than four years. These changes are proposed to better prepare for succession planning of the board but also allow flexibility so that any emerging issues can be addressed by the appointment of board members with specific areas of expertise. This will provide for a more responsive mix of board members to deal with those contemporary issues. I would say that, whilst we should always ensure that the appropriate checks and balances are applied to a nominated person's suitability, it needs to be balanced with the timely consideration of that nomination. If the intent of allowing shorter terms of appointment of board members to address emerging issues is to be achieved, then a protracted assessment period of their nomination will defeat that purpose.

This is not a contentious bill. However, the committee did determine that there was a need to address an issue around the proposed power of the minister to request a criminal history report before deciding if a person is disqualified from becoming or remaining a board member of a grammar school. The concern was not so much about the power of the minister to make such a request but the lack of safeguards around the information once received and what happens to it after it is no longer required. I note that the committee raised concerns in relation to the lack of safeguards around protecting information regarding a board member's conviction for an indictable offence and made a recommendation to that concern. The LNP accepts this recommendation, and the minister, as provided in her contribution, will be introducing an amendment to address this issue.

During a briefing on the bill—and I thank the minister for providing the departmental briefing to me—I sought clarification as to how criminal history information would be provided to the relevant agencies and departments and what procedures would be undertaken to ensure that safeguards to protect that confidential information could not be compromised. I have now received that advice. If those procedures that were provided are implemented, I feel better assured that this confidential information will be treated appropriately. Whilst provisions around membership in the new bill were generally supported, one submission raised concerns about there being inconsistencies from board to board.

Secondly, 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 will still require a grammar school board to immediately advise the minister if there are any significant concerns regarding the financial viability of the school. Under the proposed new bill, the minister can give the board directions if necessary in the interests of the school.

The committee report noted that, like statutory bodies, grammar schools are governed by the financial management principles prescribed in the Financial Accountability Act 2009 and the Statutory Bodies Financial Arrangements Act 1982 so the changes to the bill will still maintain the financial rigour through the other relevant legislation.

As I have already said, this bill does not allow for any new grammar schools to be established. While this change is supported by the Association of Independent Schools, it was noted by one submitter that there is a lack of parental choice in high-quality secular education in Queensland. I would say, though, that the rollout of independent public schools here in Queensland has provided new ways of providing autonomy in schools to reflect the local needs and aspirations of school communities in a secular setting. This LNP initiative has seen 130 independent public schools established in just three years, and we are very proud of that on our side of the House. While the new bill removes the ability to establish any new grammar schools, independent public schools do give greater choice and control for schools to deliver education that best supports their students' needs.

Overall, I note that the committee found no issue with the consultation process for this bill. I would like to thank all members for their consideration of the bill, particularly my LNP colleagues—the deputy chair and member for Broadwater, and the members for Albert and Buderim. I would also like to thank those who made submissions on this bill.

The minister has referred to correspondence that she has received with respect to introducing amendments that address the issues of redress but are outside the long title of the bill. She may not have been explicit at that, but I am aware as I have received some correspondence regarding that. I think the minister's view of that is probably appropriate at this time. The LNP also is absolutely disappointed to learn and to know that young people who should have turned up at school feeling safe were instead dreadfully abused by those people who should have been protecting them. I think the amendments that were proposed to me via email could probably be raised through the process currently dealing with the issue of statute of limitations. I would encourage anyone who is interested in doing so to make a submission on those bills and to look more broadly at issues around institutionalised child sex abuse.

I will wind up my remarks on this bill by saying that educating our children should always be a priority. Providing choice in quality education options to parents and carers is something we should always encourage in the very strongest of terms because at the end of the day our children absolutely deserve it.