




Speech By
Michael Berkman

MEMBER FOR MAIWAR

Record of Proceedings, 21 April 2021

MOTION

Schools, Free Meals

 **Mr BERKMAN** (Maiwar—Grn) (5.10 pm): This House often considers some pretty complex questions, but the issue we are dealing with right now is incredibly simple: should each and every child in Queensland schools have access to a free healthy breakfast and lunch? I dispute the idea that everyone does have that access, and the minister is wearing blinkers if she thinks that is the case. It is telling that so far the government has only ridiculed this suggestion, as though food for every kid who needs it is an unreasonable ask. All of the jurisdictions that have made the investment have learned that it is not only possible but also transformative.

Ms Grace interjected.

Dr MacMahon interjected.

Mr DEPUTY SPEAKER: The minister and the member for South Brisbane will cease quarrelling across the chamber.

Mr BERKMAN: Most states, including those of other Labor governments, are far ahead of Queensland. Victoria and New South Wales are rolling out really substantial schemes. The ACT is introducing a three-day-per-week trial. The data from Tasmania has demonstrated improved school attendance, while data from Victoria has shown improvements in children's moods and their ability to learn and socialise, higher grades, and more focus, concentration and drive in the classroom. These outcomes in other states speak for themselves.

Finland, which has a similar student population to Queensland, has had a universal free school lunch program since 1948. By operating at scale they have been able to provide free meals. Their government pays for it at a cost of \$4 per student. By making free breakfast and lunch available to every state school student on a universal basis, we eliminate the stigma—

Ms Grace: You are only talking 30 per cent. That is not true.

Mr BERKMAN: Making it available to them! Minister, take the ear plugs out! By making it available to each and every student, we eliminate the stigma and shame attached to means tested programs. Sure, there are going to be areas and schools that have greater need than others, but make no mistake: there are hungry kids in every school, whether it is due to poverty, substance misuse, mental illness or violence at home. We need a universal program that is there for every kid when they need it.

The minister has misrepresented the cost of our proposal before and again tonight. I want to make clear that we are not pretending it is cheap or easy, but, for about the same amount of money the government is spending on a new privatised ticketing system for public transport, I think it is more than worth it to save thousands of kids from hunger in amongst crushing poverty. We have seen this week that we are going to knock down the Gabba and build another one—just drop a billion dollars there. It is insane.

The lives of thousands of kids and families would be transformed by a program like this. One in five kids is affected. That is up to 100,000 kids who are missing out on breakfast every single day in Queensland. Foodbank is doing an amazing job with its limited funding, but it is not enough to ensure no kid goes hungry.

Despite mining corporations exporting over \$480 billion worth of resources in a decade, in that same period Queensland was the only state in which child poverty increased. That is a tragic embarrassment for us here in Queensland. We are asking the Labor government to choose food for hungry kids over profits for mining billionaires. That should not be a difficult choice, but they repeatedly take the side of their mining billionaire mates and Queensland kids suffer for it.

Our schools are underfunded to the tune of a billion dollars because the state government has only provided 69 per cent of the minimum recommended needs based funding of the student resource standard, as the member for South Brisbane has already outlined. Labor is directly violating its own policy, which commits to supporting 'the full implementation of funding of a needs-based resourcing model to ensure that all states schools achieve 100 per cent of SRS'. We are stuck at 69 per cent. Schools are receiving the second lowest proportion of SRS, above only the Northern Territory. This underfunding means larger class sizes, less support for our kids and more costs for teachers and parents. Families are already struggling to cover the government's shortfalls in school funding and are also struggling to make sure their kids get a healthy breakfast and lunch. Again, kids bear the brunt of the government's failure to act on this. All too often they lash out at their own circumstances.

This motion asks the House to consider a different approach for marginalised kids. A few days ago, at a convention attended by government ministers, a suggestion was made to put police in primary schools to deal with kids as young as five years old. That suggestion makes me absolutely sick and it should make everyone in this place sick. Kids need food, housing and care, not cops and prisons.

We know from evidence in Tasmania that a free universal school meals program would improve school attendance, particularly among the same cohort of kids who are otherwise likely to get involved with the youth justice system. Research from New Zealand has shown that keeping kids going to school is a hugely protective factor against youth offending, and the Atkinson report has identified similar.

Every member in this House, especially those in the Labor government, has a choice tonight: to commit to delivering a program that will ensure every Queensland kid gets the best chance in life or further punish—

(Time expired)