




Speech By
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MEMBER FOR TRAEGER

Record of Proceedings, 25 October 2023

EDUCATION (GENERAL PROVISIONS) (EXTENSION OF PRIMARY SCHOOLS IN REMOTE AREAS) AMENDMENT BILL

Introduction

 **Mr KATTER** (Traeger—KAP) (12.30 pm): I present a bill for an act to amend the Education (General Provisions) Act 2006 for particular purposes. I table the bill, the explanatory notes and a statement of compatibility with human rights. I nominate the Education, Employment and Training Committee to consider the bill.

Tabled paper: Education (General Provisions) (Extension of Primary Schools in Remote Areas) Amendment Bill 2023 [1744](#).

Tabled paper: Education (General Provisions) (Extension of Primary Schools in Remote Areas) Amendment Bill 2023, explanatory notes [1745](#).

Tabled paper: Education (General Provisions) (Extension of Primary Schools in Remote Areas) Amendment Bill 2023, statement of compatibility with human rights [1746](#).

The primary policy objective of the education bill, as put forward by the KAP, is to address the need for increased access to designated secondary education services in remote Queensland communities, triggered by the year 7 transition that was put into this House when I was first elected—a \$900 million endeavour that left stranded a lot of communities that do not have a high school. I think we were just, as usual, an after-thought in that process when it was rolled out.

Specifically, the bill seeks to mitigate a longstanding issue impacting remote Queensland families who, as a result of living in a community where the Queensland government does not provide a high school, are left with a suite of often unsatisfactory options for their children when it comes time for them to commence senior schooling. In these cases, the options available to families include enrolling their child in a boarding school often hundreds, if not thousands, of kilometres away from their family homes and loved ones; enrolling their child in a distance education provider; or relocating to a town or city where a high school facility is available in order to keep the family unit together. That is all compounded by the lovely little factor—and I am being very sarcastic here—of the enormous costs of flights. If you are anywhere in the Traeger electorate west of, say, Hughenden and you are travelling to Mount Isa to get the Qantas flight to Brisbane, or other places, where your kids need to go for secondary schooling, you incur crippling costs associated with that.

Remote families have reported damaging impacts due to these circumstances, citing the psychological impact on these children who are very young when they are sent away from their family for the first time. Some of these kids are 12 when they are forced to move away from their home. I went to school a year early, so I would have been 11 if I had lived in one of these towns. They are sent away from their home for the first time against their will and before they are emotionally ready. There are high and sometimes unaffordable costs of boarding schools for a lot of these people. There are challenges associated with distance education learning, including social isolation. There is also the decline of small, remote communities that suffer population drift to larger communities as a result of inadequate educational service provision.

One parent in particular from my electorate to whom I spoke last year raised concerns about the vulnerability of kids who, under the current system, are shipped off to boarding school at the age of 11 or 12. She said it is a case of either sending the kids away or moving the whole family, potentially ripping a significant cohort of people from the town. It also affects the primary school if there are younger siblings still enrolled there. This is happening time and time again and it wreaks havoc on rural schools, many of which have only a small enrolment number to begin with.

At a community meeting to discuss this issue in Ravenswood in 2022 I was informed that the local school had lost five students this year as they transitioned from year 6 to 7. This meant half the school was gone. Leading up to that, one of the people affected was Mark Pritchard and his family, from a very well-known generational family in Charters Towers. He loves the place and it broke his heart that as he chose to live at Ravenswood he was losing his kids in those earlier years when they could have stayed at home. We are talking about years 7, 8, 9 and 10. That is a lot longer for the kids to live closer to their parents and be brought up in that family environment.

It weighs heavily on me to hear multiple conversations right across the electorate like we heard in Ravenswood. That was fairly interesting. Further to that, the mine manager in Ravenswood said, 'This is actually a problem for us.' I hope the resources minister is listening to this if the government is serious about having a permanent workforce and families in these towns to fill the jobs. He said, 'This is a real problem for us. We had a few families from Townsville who said they would move to Ravenswood, but their kids were in the nine- to 10-year-old bracket and they said it's not worth it. They said, "If we bring them out here they will be here for two years, just settle into the school and then we have to send them to Townsville or Charters Towers and we will have to look at moving again ourselves. It is just not worth the disruption."' That does not encapsulate the entire problem, but it is so insidious. It affects all parts of our industry, not just our community composition.

I need not belabour how destructive the government imposed population decline—or neglect—in rural and remote communities can be. Unlike my electorate of Traeger, Brisbane, which is bursting at the seams and expects to welcome two million residents in the next 20 years, all my towns and cities are projected to go backwards. Flinders Shire Council is expecting a 20 per cent decline up to 2046; Winton, which is no longer in my electorate, 24 per cent; Barcaldine, 18 per cent; and Maranoa, 13 per cent. I notice the banners from the Cairns regional parliament depicted the projected population. I am sure a lot of members were pleased to see 10 per cent, five per cent or 20 per cent in their electorate. Mine was minus 0.9 per cent. That is for a number of reasons. It is not just that people do not like living out in the bush; it is that the opportunities are not there.

We heard references to UNESCO and gulf net-fishing bans that are going to smash Karumba, which coincidentally is one of these towns that does not have a high school and so would benefit from this bill. We are battling on every front. This is another front that we would like some help with. That is why we are introducing this bill. It is very important that this bill is passed so people in these bush towns can keep their kids at home longer.

While the issue that this bill seeks to address is long standing, the situation has become more acute and the impact on families more severe since 2015 when the year 7 transition into high school was implemented. That is when parents started actively saying, 'Hang on. Why can't we do this? I am sure there are better ways to do this.' That resulted in children as young as 11 and 12, as opposed to the previous age of 13, entering high school. In the case of remote children, their families are being forced to face these difficult circumstances. Julia Creek was one of those places. There is also Georgetown and Karumba in my electorate as well as Ravenswood, which I mentioned previously.

This bill seeks to empower those remote communities and families to seek improved local educational access where practically needed. Through the bill, powers and importantly responsibilities are provided to the relevant minister to expand up to year 10 the educational offerings of existing primary schools in relevant locations and under certain circumstances. The bill outlines that upon a written request from the local community through their local government, the minister is obligated to expand the offering of an existing primary school up to year 10. Where critical mass does not make this economically feasible—that is where there are fewer than five students seeking to enrol in years 7 to 10 in the coming year—the minister and the department must reach an agreement with the local government whereby the department facilitates the establishment of an educational learning facility similar to the Julia Creek Learning Facility—that facility is in place already for years 7 to 10—or the Thargomindah Remote Secondary Learning Facility for years 7 to 12 in that local community where they have taken matters into their own hands.

For background, the Julia Creek Learning Facility was established in 2015 following an agreement between McKinlay Shire Council, the Department of Education, Mount Isa School of the Air and Julia Creek State School, a process that I was very much involved in at that time. At the Julia Creek Learning Facility students enrolled in years 7 to 10 are able to complete their schooling through the

Mount Isa School of the Air curriculum at a designated learning space at the Julia Creek State School. The facility is staffed by a teacher aide for 30 hours a week to supervise and to assist students in their learning. The Mount Isa School of the Air principal and business manager manages this staff member, consulting with the Julia Creek State School principal as required. The costs associated with the centre are covered by the McKinlay Shire Council. It is pretty disappointing that a local government authority for a town of a few hundred people is covering the cost of education because of gaps caused by the state government. We are talking about small numbers. It is fairly modest financial support, but these poor little councils are forced to take matters into their own hands.

The Thargomindah Remote Secondary Learning Facility was established in 2012—earlier than the one in Julia Creek—and functions in the same manner. As I understand it, that council is quite well endowed financially so they are in a good position to take matters into their own hands. That facility was a result of collaboration between the Bulloo Shire Council, the Department of Education, the Charleville School of Distance Education and the Thargomindah State School. The students at this learning facility are able to access year 11 and 12 studies through the Brisbane School of Distance Education. The costs associated with the centre are covered by the Bulloo Shire Council. Neither learning facility arrangement impacts on the entitlement of state and/or federal financial support for families who choose to send their children away to undertake their secondary education at boarding school.

Let us break this down. The struggling communities that we represent in these far-flung areas of the state feel no-one cares about them and they feel they are often forgotten. They are battling with cost-of-living pressures—and try to get insurance in some of these towns or get a loan from the bank to buy a house. Now they have the added expense of trying to send their kids away to boarding school a year earlier.

A mum in Georgetown does not want to part with her kids that early. Anywhere else in Queensland the kids can walk or ride their pushbike to the nearest state school and get their education. We do not have that privilege in these areas. Some may say, 'There is the Spinifex Residential Campus in Mount Isa. You could send your kids there.' I guess that is an option, but I think it is unfair and highly inequitable to insist that that is the only option.

Parents in Georgetown say, 'There is nothing wrong with the school of distance education curriculum.' I have had a number of conversations with teachers in this space who say, 'These kids will not be disadvantaged.' We could almost say that they would gain an advantage by having the security of staying at home. A lot of these kids love their hometown of Julia Creek. They do not want to leave. They love being with their parents. They love being able to ride their motorbikes on the weekend. They love the lifestyle. That is why they move there in the first place. If we rip that away from them it is not good.

I grew up in Charters Towers but went to boarding school. It broke some of the kids' hearts being in Charters Towers away from their bush setting. Maybe it was good for some of them, but there were a lot kids begging to be at home. There are a lot of people who live in the country who do not own stations. They are not wealthy. They cannot send their kids to expensive boarding schools. It becomes problematic for them to try to get the necessary education for their kids.

I turn to the government and say, 'Do you want to look after these impoverished people in these towns?' They are not the wealthy ones who can send their kids to boarding school. We are talking about battlers in the towns of Thargomindah, Julia Creek, Karumba, Georgetown and other remote towns. Are we going to look after these kids or are we going to throw them away like we have thrown away the industries in a lot of these country towns? Are we going to ignore that this happening and let them fend for themselves?

People could argue that we already have the tools to do this now. Julia Creek took matters into its own hands. They should not have to. McKinlay Shire Council does not have education as part of its responsibility. Education is the responsibility of the state government. The government funds education and takes a lot of money off taxpayers to deliver those programs. I am sure we could find a little fat somewhere in the education system, and I am sure we could find a lot of it in the south-east corner. We only need a tiny skerrick of it.

They could occupy buildings that already exists. We have been suffering from population decline in schools so the government took year 7 out of primary school. Logically, there is space in these school buildings. We are talking about only five or 10 kids, maximum. We could easily accommodate these kids in the existing buildings. I will tell members a secret; they are already doing it now in some schools. The goodwill of some teachers results in them saying, 'Let the kid do his distance education in the room and we will turn a blind eye to it.' They know that is the best outcome for the kid. It is already happening so why not endorse it and let us help ourselves.

We should not have to help ourselves. The government should be doing everything for us. We are trying to meet the government halfway by saying, 'Let the councils play a role in this'—although they should not have to. They will be using their resources. We need to empower people to look after their own kids and keep the families in town.

The ICPA have acknowledged the problem and said that most of their support is typically focused on making sure kids can get to boarding school. They acknowledge that there are some kids who do not fit that mould and do not want to go and some families that cannot afford it. We need to look after them as well.

In these little towns we have the station owners. We have someone who owns the grocery store. There will be grader drivers who have a few machines and contract to the council. A lot of the kids want to do nothing more than get on the grader that dad drove for the council and do the same. He does not need to go to boarding school to do that and nor do his parents need to spend 30 or 40 grand a year to send him to Charters Towers, Townsville or wherever when we have a cheap option to deliver his education within a competent school of the air and state school system in these towns. We have some wonderful teachers in some of these towns who could oversee this and would like nothing more than to help with this.

It can be done now, but councils should not have to take these matters into their own hands. It should never have been the case that Thargomindah funded and set this up themselves. It should never have been the case for Julia Creek either. We should not have to come on bended knee to beg, borrow and steal to come up with solutions in the community. It should come from the top down. The government is funded very well to deliver education to kids in all of Queensland and not just to those who live in a town where there is a secondary school campus.

It might not sound like much and this issue might not make the headlines, but I can assure members that it is a very painful issue for some parents. I captured a video of one parent from Einasleigh who came up to me to talk about this not knowing that the KAP had been talking about this for years. She said, 'Rob, we have to send our kids away. Can you do something about this? My boy would have to go away at 11. He is too young to be going away. We would love the opportunity to deliver the school of the air program here.' She was talking to me about something that we were already working on. I could replay that conversation probably four or five times over in the last number of years of doing this job. That is a pretty big number when representing remote communities. Other people have arrived at exactly the same conclusion.

I have had informal discussions with a number of people in the education system who have said that they could more adequately cater for the education needs of these kids. More importantly, this is very much about playing a role. That is why the KAP is strong on this issue. It is about playing a role and putting some stopgap measures in place to stop the bleed of population to the coast and the metropolitan areas.

We keep hearing the government talk about housing problems in South-East Queensland. Guess how the government could fix some of that? This is not going to fix all of it, but we need to stop people in our rural communities moving to the coast. Those rural areas already have a lot of housing that could be done up, but we need to start with the health facilities and education facilities or we are never going to be able to help with those problems and it is only going to exacerbate the issue. That does not seem to be a problem for this government because we keep coming in here every week battling for things that are killing our areas. Here is something really modest that the government could help us out with. The cost we are talking about here would help to fund one teacher aide for a handful—say, 10 or 20—schools in remote Queensland towns so that there is a teacher aide helping to deliver a school of the air curriculum in a classroom that is already inhabited and where there would be plenty of space to expand for another five or 10 students where necessary. It is the most modest of effort that could be made by the government.

We really appeal for people to put their guns away on this issue. We can all be the father of success here and do something good for the people of rural Queensland by supporting a bill that is targeting the heart of some of these issues that are seeing that migration of people out of our rural towns to the coastal and metropolitan areas. These are the areas that we have to target to try and keep people there. I implore the committee to do a good job of taking consultation on this bill into those rural communities. All rural MPs should do their best to bring people to these hearings because it is not a great proportion of the people of Queensland but a very important proportion of the people of Queensland. It is going to be very hard to go out and find someone else to run the service station or the pub at Einasleigh if those parents move away because their kids cannot get an education or to find someone who will drive the grader for the council for critical maintenance on the roads. It will be very

hard to replace them if we keep making it too hard for them to be based there and educate their kids there. It will be very hard at Ravenswood mine to get a permanent workforce and live up to the rhetoric that we want a locally based permanent workforce. None of that happens if we do not do things like this.

We are bringing this to the parliament in good faith. We hope that the government and the opposition seriously consider this bill. We implore them to have a good look at it and to do something. While it might seem like it is small, it would be something that could have a really big and deep impact in rural areas of Queensland.

First Reading

Mr KATTER (Traeger—KAP) (12.51 pm): I move—

That the bill be now read a first time.

Question put—That the bill be now read a first time.

Motion agreed to.

Bill read a first time.

Referral to Education, Employment and Training Committee

Mr DEPUTY SPEAKER (Mr Krause): In accordance with standing order 131, the bill is now referred to the Education, Employment and Training Committee.