



## **SPEECH**

# **CRAIG EMERSON**

**Member for Rankin**

### **The School Assistance (Learning together - achievement through choice and opportunity) Amendment Bill 2006**

**21 March 2007**

**Dr EMERSON**—The Schools Assistance (Learning Together—Achievement Through Choice and Opportunity) Amendment Bill 2006 will increase funding for the Investing in Our Schools Program by \$181 million over the four-year period from 2005 to 2008. I certainly welcome that increase in funding, as I welcomed the Investing in Our Schools Program.

In the area of Logan City, most of which falls within my seat of Rankin, we have been very successful in applying for grants under the Investing in Our Schools Program. Most of the grants that have been sought have been successful. I have been delighted to provide letters of support in most cases, and we have therefore enjoyed a lot of success in improving the infrastructure of our schools. For those who do not know Logan City, in large part it is not a wealthy part of Australia. Unemployment in Logan Central is around 16 per cent. In fact, in that part of Logan City which is highly welfare dependent, the unemployment rate has risen in the last couple of years whereas in other parts of Australia it has fallen. While I welcome the fall in the unemployment rate in other parts of Australia, it is a matter of great concern that unemployment in Logan Central and suburbs such as Woodridge and Kingston is around 16 per cent and has been rising.

The only way of dealing with that problem of unemployment is to reform our education system. Mr Deputy Speaker, you will have heard me speaking on many occasions about the imperative to improve our education system, to break that cycle of dependency and despair by giving all young people, especially those from disadvantaged communities, a decent opportunity in life. Education is a key that opens two doors—one leading to prosperity and a strong economy and the other leading to opportunity for all in a fairer society. We can as a parliament do no greater service to our community than to improve the education opportunities for young people.

I acknowledge that the Investing in Our Schools program makes a contribution to improving education opportunities. It does so by improving the physical environment, the facilities that are available to students, which makes their study and their concentration at school that much easier. The sorts of projects that have been undertaken include reading spaces outdoors at Rochedale South State School, for example. That sends a message to the young children there that reading for pleasure is a really good thing to do, and it makes it just a little bit easier. Other programs include air-conditioning. In the middle of summer in

all parts of Queensland it gets pretty hot, and that affects the ability of children to concentrate. Therefore providing some funding for air-conditioning in at least one or two rooms, whether it be the library or some other refuge to which the children are able to go during the hot hours, is a very good idea. I commend the government again for providing support for those sorts of projects. Shade cloths are another example of a response to the long hot summers that can occur in Queensland.

So without hesitation I support the Investing in Our Schools program and support the extra funding that is associated with this legislation. It is a pity, as Labor has pointed out, that the maximum funding for particular schools is now going down from \$150,000 to \$100,000, but I am not go to be miserable and churlish about that—\$100,000 sure beats nothing. Those extra funds are most welcome.

I reject the government's criticism of state governments, especially the suggestion that the government of Queensland is not playing its part in improving the education opportunities of young people in the Sunshine State. It certainly is doing so. It has improved early childhood education opportunities and it has a 'learn or earn' program that is being implemented to ensure that as many young people as possible are able to stay on and finish year 12 or its equivalent through vocational education. All of that is very worthy and is essential to lifting productivity growth and therefore prosperity in the future and to ensuring that we have a much fairer society.

I want to draw attention to the contrast, however, between the position that successive Labor governments have taken on the broader issue of providing education opportunities and encouraging younger people to go on and finish high school or its equivalent in vocational education and the government's attitude towards these matters. The Prime Minister has said on a number of occasions now, including most recently in an AAP report, that Labor governments made a tragic mistake during the 1970s and 1980s in encouraging young people to stay on and finish year 12 and then go to university. It was not a tragic mistake at all; it was essential to the fairness and to the prosperity of this country that those changes were made. When the Prime Minister was Treasurer in the Fraser government, only 36 per cent of young people went on to year 12. That is around one in three. The Prime Minister seemed to think it was a pretty good ratio that one in three young people would go on to the final year of high school.

Successive Labor governments in Canberra—the Hawke and Keating governments—worked to offer income support for parents in disadvantaged communities so that they could afford to keep their children in school, and they also worked to improve the attraction of education to those young people. The consequence of that was that the proportion of young people who went on to year 12 more than doubled, from 36 per cent to around 75 per cent, under Labor. Sadly, under this government, reflecting the attitude of the Prime Minister that it is unimportant that young people should go on to the final year of high school, year 12 completion rates have actually fallen over the last two years. The Prime Minister thinks this is a good thing. He thinks that it is great that young people leave early and then go and do a trade.

Labor strongly support vocational education. We support trades as a career. We recognise that there are young people who feel that they are not cut out for the academic pursuits of going to university, and that is why we support vocational education. This support has always been forthcoming from Labor but has not been forthcoming, I must say, from the Howard government. The previous Minister for Education, Science and Training, now the

Minister for Defence, spent his entire period as education minister fighting with the states over vocational education and never wishing to complete a new agreement with the states. So no such agreement was ever reached.

I am sure that the then education minister was trying to impress the Prime Minister that he was really a true-blue Liberal because true-blue Liberals like to have fights with state Labor governments. The consequence was no agreement and, ultimately, the dismantling of ANTA, the Australian National Training Authority. The state Labor governments and the federal Labor opposition wanted to see the completion of a new funding agreement between the Commonwealth and states, but the Commonwealth, under the then education minister, now the defence minister, played the blame game for all it was worth, saying to the states: 'It's all your fault.' As a consequence, the Commonwealth never completed a new agreement for vocational education. If you really want to be confused, listen to the government on vocational education. During a debate at the dispatch box here a couple of weeks ago the Minister for Workforce Participation said to me, 'I don't know why Labor is so obsessed with training. We should have young people leaving school without any training.' So we have the Minister for Vocational Education and the Prime Minister saying that Labor is a obsessed with having kids going on to university and they should actually be obsessed with training and then the Minister for Workforce Participation saying, 'I don't know why Labor is obsessed with training.' The government, as we have seen in the last couple of weeks, is in disarray. It does not have a view on the value of vocational education when one of its ministers is actually arguing that Labor is obsessed with training and that what should happen is that young people should leave school early and not engage in training.

**Mr Bartlett**—What rubbish!

**Dr EMERSON**—It would be worth the next speaker, the member for Macquarie, who has just interjected, having a good look at the *Hansard* of the minister alleging that Labor is obsessed with training and that young people should just go straight into the workforce. This was the debate over withdrawing the pensioner education supplement for a selected category of disability support pensioners. Why on earth would you withdraw the pensioner education supplement for disability support pensioners? I thought the government was arguing that more disability support pensioners should go back into or participate in the workforce. Okay, if that is the argument, fine, give them the capacity to do so by giving them a little bit of support—and remember the pensioner education supplement is a small amount of money—to allow them to get the skills to re-enter the workforce or enter it for the first time. But we have had the Minister for Workforce Participation saying that the pensioner education supplement should be denied to such people and Labor should be supporting disability support pensioners going into the workforce but not acquiring the necessary skills to make them attractive and competitive in the workforce. The member for Macquarie would do very well to have a look at that particular exchange.

The fact is that education is the greatest investment that we can possibly make. I do note here again in relation to another part of this legislation that there is an amendment to provide around \$9½ million for the Literacy, Numeracy and Special Learning Needs Program to continue funding for the program in 2008. Previously no funds were allocated for 2008. Of course, Labor supports that. We have said so many times that the key to dealing with disadvantage in this country is to improve the literacy and numeracy of young people—disadvantaged young people whose parents perhaps may not have had the same literacy and numeracy training that others have had and so you get this cycle. As a result of

that the child may not get the tuition at home and therefore need early childhood development and early intervention to help them with literacy and numeracy.

Labor fully supports that and that is why Labor Leader Kevin Rudd announced in January a range of initiatives under the heading of 'the education revolution'. Kevin Rudd understands the importance of these measures in breaking that cycle of dependency. Labor fully supports any measures to improve literacy and numeracy in this country. In fact, I can indicate that the Reading Recovery program was implemented in Queensland. People ask, 'What happened under Kevin Rudd when he was in the cabinet office in Queensland?' I can tell you something very good that happened under Kevin Rudd when he was in the cabinet office in Queensland: the Goss Labor government implemented the Reading Recovery program, which has proved very effective in identifying young people, through the year 2 and then the year 5 diagnostic net, at a very early age who are experiencing difficulty with literacy and numeracy. Those children who are caught in the net are identified and then given extra remedial support.

So we do not need any lectures from this government about the value of literacy and numeracy support. What we do need, however, is to ensure that our teachers are fully capable of providing the best education possible to our young people. I do pay tribute to the teaching profession, because it is a profession that overwhelmingly is full of dedicated people—dedicated to improving education opportunities for young people.

There it is a debate going on at the moment about merit based pay arrangements for teachers. It has long been our contention that we should be trying to locate the best teachers in the most disadvantaged schools, because that is where they can do the most good. The education minister, of course, has been saying that there should be a performance based pay system and that that system should be partially funded by the Commonwealth. That is something that in principle we can find some comfort in, but the Treasurer of this country finds no comfort in it at all, because he has rebuffed the education minister, saying that the states can handle all that. So it is back onto the blame game. If we do not have the best teachers in the most disadvantaged schools, it is all fault of the states.

The education minister and the Treasurer are going to have to sort this out. I fear that the Treasurer is going to prevail, because he controls the purse strings, but it is a very good idea that we do everything we can to ensure that the most disadvantaged in our community benefit from having the best teachers. If that involves some sort of merit based pay system, then I am all for it. There is no perfect system of merit based pay; that is generally acknowledged. If you base it, for example, on the marks that kids get at school, intuitively that seems a bit appealing, but then of course you can find a situation where a teacher teaches the test in order to get the kids' marks up in order to get the merit based pay. Another proposal is for the principal to decide the merit based pay of various teachers within a particular school. Again, at first glance, that seems to be a pretty good idea. It does, however, raise issues of tensions within the school as some get merit based pay and others do not. It is not perfect system either. Another possibility that has been mooted is that parents and students decide which teachers should get extra remuneration for their performance. You can see again that there would be some appeal to that but also some pitfalls.

The point I am making is that there is no perfect system of merit based pay, but it is an argument that we should have. It is a debate that we should have in this country, because otherwise we have a system of teaching where the only basis of getting extra pay is years

of experience rather than actual performance or merit. I think that that is a debate whose time has come, but it is a debate which has been stifled on the government side by the Treasurer's proclamation that there will be no federal support—no Commonwealth support at all—for a merit based pay system of teaching in this country. That is a great pity.

I will finish where I began in terms of support for the Investing in our Schools program, but I also want to point to the dramatic differences between the attitudes of the coalition government and the Labor opposition toward education and completing year 12.

The OECD released a major report last year, as it does every year, called *Education at a glance*. It is a very large document that compares the performance of various OECD member countries, but it had a special section, as these reports tend to do. The special section in the 2006 edition is about the importance of finishing high school. That OECD report said that the completion of high school is now the minimum education requirement for young people to participate in the workforce through their working lives. What the OECD is really telling us is that everyone is moving forward at different paces, but the problem is a lot of countries that were behind us are moving forward at a much faster pace than Australia and the consequence will be that, while this government is sitting around playing the blame game in the federal parliament, other countries are going to whiz by us. There are already about eight countries that have high school completion rates above 90 per cent. Australia's high school completion rate is around 70 per cent—maybe 75 per cent depending on which measures you use—but the problem is it is falling. The Prime Minister thinks that is good. Let's understand this: the Prime Minister thinks it is good that young people drop out of school early because he says, 'They'll get a trade.'

I released some statistics from the ABS which confirmed that young people who go to university get paid much more through their lifetime than young people who do not finish year 12 and drop out early. Their lifetime prospects are so much better. This is the great divide between us and the coalition, which does not have its heart in investing in education. I acknowledge the value of this particular program, but only through the election of a Labor government will we truly have an education revolution in this country.