



NORTHERN TERRITORY
***of* AUSTRALIA**

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Member for Fong Lim

HANSARD EXTRACT

SCHOOL ATTENDANCE OFFICERS

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- resourcing schools appropriately so that they can offer engagement programs and initiatives that keep kids in schools
- putting communities at the forefront of decision-making for their children through local decision-making agreements such as the Groote Archipelago Local Decision Making Agreement.

Collaborative and community-driven solutions are needed to get Territory students engaged in our schools. On top of policies to help raise engagement and attendance in remote schools, the former Labor government invested in the education sector by negotiating and securing the \$1bn Better and Fairer School Agreement in partnership with the Australian Government to fully and fairly fund all the 153 public schools across the Northern Territory.

We provided \$40m towards on-country learning initiatives to boost attendance and engagement in all 46 Central Australia schools. We increased the Back to School vouchers for Territory families from \$50 to \$200. We reinstated and supported school-based police program across 13 NT Government schools, which was cut by the CLP Giles government, and we provided \$300,000 to every school for upgrades under the Building Better Schools program.

Those were some of the initiatives the former Labor government invested in because we know education is a critical component in ensuring all Territory kids have the skills and knowledge they need to get the best start in life.

Sanctions are a legitimate mechanism to encourage families to assist their children to attend school, but we must also differentiate between voluntary disengagement and non-attendance resulting from causes or factors outside of the child's or family's control. I look forward to seeing the CLP's policy in relation to this.

The CLP government and its minister for Education need to come up with a better plan for education that is not just about punishing families and forcing children and young people into classrooms without the right supports. This is why I echo my Labor team's position and oppose this Bill in its current form. It enshrines truancy officers into legislation and brings punitive measures in focus, further disadvantaging low-income families and Aboriginal children and families who live remotely.

Dr RAHMAN (Fong Lim): Mr Acting Deputy Speaker, might I begin by congratulating you on your promotion to the Chair. You are the one member of the Assembly who I am seldom able to make eye contact with, and it is delightful to see your face in front of me for a change.

I reaffirm sentiments expressed by the Member for Port Darwin and thank the Member for Fannie Bay for sharing with us the benefit of her professional experience in the education sector. It is important to remember the experiences we have had outside this place and bring to bear the benefit of our wisdom and experiences, whether that be in the private or public sector and other organisations. We are lucky to have a diversity of opinions in this room and are blessed to have a respectful debate on these issues.

I hear a debate genuinely interrogating policy, which is a welcome development. It is important that we respectfully agree to disagree on things, and that is possible to do. One thing that none of us disagree about is the importance of education.

Education is the key to long-term futures for young people as well as society at large. There is, for once, no need for me to exhaustively cite the academic literature in respect of anything to do with the virtues of attending school.

I am fortunate to represent urban schools with extremely positive school attendance rates. I was recently at the school board meeting for Stuart Park Primary School, which is near and dear to me. I commend them on how successfully they encourage kids to come to school. Likewise, Haileybury Rendall School has fantastically positive school attendance rates. In both those places, the attendance rates are high for students of every disposition and background, including those who identify as an Indigenous cohort.

They are two fine and high-performing schools in urban areas. I take on board the points made by members of the Chamber that we need to provide incentives for people to want to attend school and make it an attractive place to be, making learning a positive experience.

It is my heartfelt belief that the Education minister is committed to making those things happen, but we are here today to discuss ...

Mrs Hersey: I am.

Dr RAHMAN: Thank you, minister. I believe with sincerity that you are committed to those aspirations.

I return to why we have risen today: to speak about a specific Bill with a specific remit. I will confine my remarks to reflecting on the remit of the Bill. Prior to doing so, I note that I was the beneficiary of the fantastic, high-quality public education in Darwin at five different primary and secondary schools. I am extremely grateful for that educational privilege and hope that future generations can benefit from educational opportunities, the likes of which I was afforded.

I will note in the same breath that, sadly, attendance figures at the school I attended are not what they once were. There is the rub; that is why we are having this discussion. How can we improve school attendance and reduce disengagement?

The proposed reform constitutes a clear measure by the government to encourage regular attendance in compulsory education and reduce disengagement. Enshrining the school attendance officer position in legislation will ensure the role of attendance officer is defined, which is also a positive development.

As the Member for Fannie Bay reflected, the ability for the Education department's CEO to now appoint authorised officers under the Act is maintained, and that reinforces a multifaceted system of support which factors in a range of roles, methods and tools that are required to address disengagement, truancy and absenteeism. The amendments, to my understanding, will make the issuing of infringement notices under the Act safer and more efficient, but not the de facto standard.

We reflected on the fact the national school identifier has been incorporated in this legislation, and I think it is an appropriate place for it to be included, contrary to what has been said previously. Updates to the regulations will ensure schools can collect the information required to support the national rollout of the school identifier, which will occur in 2027. Once implemented, the unique identifier will enable the tracking of students across jurisdictions and provide a safeguard for students at risk of disengagement from education.

These are the purported key aims and features of the Bill. I believe they are reasonable aspirations within the Bill's remit.

A charge was made that this Bill fails to address complexity. It may be the case that this Bill is unable to solve all problems in our education system. Fair enough; time will tell. However, I am happy to support an affirmative action by the Minister for Education and Training in this space. I am grateful for the fact that we are constructively making a move in a positive direction, and I am willing to give the Bill my support on that basis.

There were reflections in prior debate about carrot and stick. I am happy to be clear about this. I will not launch into talking about rights and responsibilities, political philosophy and John Locke, but I will say this: the balance has been lost on carrot and stick in lots of areas of civil society in the Northern Territory. That is why we see levels of social and economic dysfunction, the likes of which we have previously not been a party to. I do not think anyone in the government is contending that we are anything but a government that is committed to being tough on crime and will reaffirm that actions have consequences. The government is willing to stake its governance on the statement that we believe actions have consequences and that we need to restore the balance of carrot and stick.

Withholding welfare payments in isolation, indeed, may or may not strongly correlate with improving attendance. But let us be clear: this is not a measure in isolation; this measure of restoring a balance of rights and responsibilities is consistent with the totality of this government's legislative agenda to date. All that we have done here since October testifies to that fact.

School attendance officers alone may not be enough to improve the precarious state of public education. Good things are happening in public education. Good people work in public education. This government wants to support them and our young people in attending and enjoying school because educational futures are the key to uplifting our economic and social futures.

Even if school attendance officers are not a silver bullet at this juncture, on the advice I have on good authority, I believe that they may help.

On that basis, I commend this Bill to the Assembly.