



Government School Assets Register Bill.

Second Reading

Mrs SKINNER (North Shore) [10.52 a.m.]: I move:

That this bill be now read a second time.

This bill requires the Director-General of the Department of Education and Training to keep a register of government school assets. The bill defines assets as all buildings, including demountables. The register is to comprise reports on the status of the capital assets of government schools, to be known as school status reports, and three-yearly plans on building and maintenance work in those schools, to be known as school building plans. School status reports and school building plans are to be prepared by the director-general, included in each of the annual reports of the Department of Education and Training, and made available for inspection, free of charge, on the web site of the department. I will outline details of these two components of the register in due course, but first I will explain why the Coalition has introduced this legislation. By necessity, I will be brief because I have only five minutes before this debate will be adjourned. However, I will return to it at a later time.

This legislation is necessary because Professor Tony Vinson—who conducted the inquiry into the provision of public education in New South Wales—states at the beginning of his report in explaining the reason for his examination of buildings and amenities:

The ways in which buildings impact upon human life range from the purely functional to the aesthetic. These qualities are as important, if not more so, to a satisfying and productive life within schools as they are in other institutions.

The Vinson report suggests that "maintenance and refurbishment of the education estate has been neglected and fitfully managed", and it refers to "substandard conditions in which teaching and learning are being attempted". During the course of the inquiry, Professor Vinson and members of the inquiry team visited 140 schools. Of those visits the report states:

So far as the majority of teachers, students and parents are concerned, the maintenance and refurbishment of the education estate has been neglected and fitfully managed for such an extended period that the tag "povo" aptly describes its standing relative to the private sector. The direct observation of conditions in more than 140 schools and the numerous submissions received on this aspect of school life—

a sample of which is included in the report—

have left the inquiry in no doubt about the frequently sub-standard conditions in which teaching and learning are being attempted.

The report accepts that the Department of Education and Training uses building standards for new and extensively refurbished schools that are consistent with international standards. It notes that the presumption of the authorities:

... appears to be that a combination of two things, a sustained application of the new standards and the continuance for a decade of current levels of budgetary support, will bring the system to an acceptable standard.

The report continues:

The Inquiry has no reason to doubt that if the aforementioned two conditions are fulfilled, there will be a major improvement to school buildings and amenities. However, that judgement rests on informed surmise rather than any quantification of the backlog of capital works in terms of explicit criteria.

The report notes that the measure of unmet needs would be possible using existing data. It states:

Essentially, what would be involved would be the aggregation of information about individual projects that have been found to have a degree of merit short of gaining the priority needed to access available funds. The use of such information for budgetary planning purposes would enhance the rational consideration of the portfolio's claims for asset acquisition and improvement funds at both the State and national levels.

In other words, unmet need data could be used for policy purposes and monitoring progress towards the currently stated goal of bringing buildings and facilities up to an acceptable standard.

Before providing some examples of conditions found by members of the inquiry team, the run-down state of schools

highlighted in the media in recent weeks, and my own personal observation of schools badly in need of repair, renovation or replacement, I draw attention to several points made in earlier chapters of the Vinson report. They include the observation that teaching and learning can be enhanced or retarded by the presence or absence of appropriate physical conditions; the school community's spirits can be uplifted or depressed by the presence or absence of well-designed and well-maintained buildings; good building quality and maintenance are associated with improved academic results; the quality of physical space affects self-esteem, peer and student-teacher interactions, parental involvement, discipline, attention, motivation and interpersonal relations; and the quality of school buildings and their surrounds can also be a potent symbol of the regard, or otherwise, in which public education is believed to be held by governments and the community.

Much media attention has been given recently to the run-down state of public schools. A quick glance at recent media reports of the poor shape of our schools tells the story. I am only going to highlight them now; I will come back to details of these when this debate resumes after the winter break. Ashtonfield Public School was promised a new school this year, but that has not been provided. At the special education unit of William Stimson Public School at Wetherill Park the toilets are dangerous, and teachers have to wash children's toileting aids in the hand basin. Waniora Public School is termite infested and leaky. North Newtown public school has a leaking roof that has caused a number of problems, including a flooded after-school care area and rotting doorways.

I could go on, but I know that this debate is about to be adjourned and I would prefer to return to these very important matters following the winter break. In the meantime, I ask members of the community and members of Parliament to go out and gather information about the state of their local schools so that the Government can understand the real importance of this legislation. If members of the public are made aware of the details of the state of our schools there will be strong bipartisan support for this legislation. I commend the bill to the House.

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