

Agreement in Principle

Mr ANDREW STONER (Oxley—Leader of The Nationals) [10.00 a.m.]: I move:

That this bill be now agreed to in principle.

The Government Schools (Infrastructure Register) Bill would require the Director General of the Department of Education and Training to keep a register of government school assets, including all buildings and demountables. The register would comprise school status reports that outline the status of the capital assets of government schools and three-yearly school building plans for building and maintenance work in those schools. These reports will be tabled in Parliament and made available to the public on the departmental website. The bill proposes good management practices and basic management principles in relation to schools, as are certainly followed in the private sector but not by the Government. The state of school assets in New South Wales, particularly classrooms, school grounds and the like, is a key issue.

I do not pretend for one moment that the bill I have introduced today is original, or even of my own design. The Deputy Leader of the Opposition, who was formerly the shadow Minister for Education and Training and who did an outstanding job holding the Government to account in that portfolio, introduced similar legislation in 2003. But I think even she would admit that her legislation was not entirely original as it was driven by the recommendations of the Vinson inquiry into education. Good governments commission inquiries into issues of concern, collate the evidence, work with the community to develop solutions and then implement those solutions. Unfortunately, the lemma Labor Government is not a good government. It did the hard work in terms of establishing the inquiry and receiving recommendations from it, but has done nothing more since.

The modus operandi of the lemma Government is that any time there is a mistake or failure it commissions an inquiry to distract the public's attention. It then buries the inquiry's recommendations, and all its hard work is condemned to the dustbin of history. A fundamental finding of the Vinson inquiry highlighted the importance of school infrastructure. The report states:

Research suggests that the quality of physical space affects self-esteem, peer and student teacher interactions, parental involvement, discipline, attention, motivation and interpersonal relations ? 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.

We must put in place a system that protects school infrastructure precisely because school infrastructure influences and motivates not just the students who study within its walls but the wider community who see it as a symbol of the importance that we, as a society, place on education. Professor Vinson made two key recommendations. Recommendation 6.1 states:

That two indicators covering unmet needs with respect to school buildings, and the maintenance of school buildings, be constructed using existing data sources, as described in the text. The indicators should be maintained and published as an annual statistical series and incorporated in submissions for asset acquisition and refurbishment funding.

As I said earlier, they are good, basic management principles. Recommendation 6.2 states:

That a formula be devised on the basis of schools' emergency maintenance expenditures over the past three years, for weighting the maintenance component of the global budget of those schools with the greatest need. The extent of the weighting should be sufficient to significantly reduce the need for applications for supplementary funding.

This bill will do what the Labor Government has refused to do: bring into effect the long overdue recommendations of the Vinson report. There has never been a stronger case for keeping an assets register. On the same day that the lemma Government pre-briefed the media about its so-called big-spending Education budget, it was revealed that the Department of Education and Training has worryingly little understanding of where its assets are.

The Rock Central School, which is located in the electorate of the member for Wagga Wagga—it is a good school in a delightful community—and Young Public School, which is another good public school in country New South Wales that sadly lost a classroom to fire, were forced into a public brawl over the future of a demountable classroom. The Government sought to remove that classroom from The Rock Central School and send it to Young. Young Public School needed the demountable, but why should two country public schools be forced to haggle over a classroom?

Mr Daryl Maguire: Just appalling.

Mr ANDREW STONER: I agree. The Government finally resolved the problem by sending in the police on a dawn raid to allow the contractors to remove the demountable against the wishes of the school community. In the meantime we learned that there are 16 spare demountable classrooms at Belmont High School near Newcastle that local teachers have been requesting be removed. It is an absolute disgrace and symptomatic of the lack of any form of education assets register in New South Wales.

To make a ludicrous situation even worse, the Director General of Education and Training and the Minister for

Education and Training cannot decide who is responsible. While Michael Coutts-Trotter has stuck up his hand to take the blame, the Hon. John Della Bosca is attempting to blame regional education directors. The Minister's feeble response to the situation is that there is a difference between secondary and primary demountables. I challenge the Minister to telephone the parents and citizens association at The Rock Central School and ask them whether they would prefer to have a secondary demountable or no classroom at all. It would be foolish for us to believe the situation is a one-off mistake. Since I took on the role of shadow Minister for Education and Training, I have heard many stories of bureaucratic bungling.

They include an Independent Commission Against Corruption investigation into the Department of Education and Training for irregularities in the closure and sale of Beacon Hill High School. The shortage of classrooms at Oxley High School in Tamworth has forced the school of nearly 1,200 students to use old train carriages with leaking ceilings as computer rooms and for senior studies. Facilities at Macquarie Boys High School are being so run down that the school is near the point of closure. And in April 2007, two staff members were injured when a ceiling collapsed at Putney Public School.

In my electorate, where public education is absolutely critical to the small rural communities throughout the mid-North Coast, I have observed leaky roofs, windows that do not open despite the stifling summer heat, peeling paint, putrid toilets, mildewed walls, poor drainage— In my electorate, where public education is absolutely critical to the small rural communities throughout the mid-North Coast, I have observed leaky roofs, windows that do not open despite the stifling summer heat, peeling paint, putrid toilets, mildewed walls, poor drainage—which causes a safety problem for children—and dangerous sporting fields. I have been told of a snake in the sick room. I have observed a freight container being used as a sports locker, and the staff rooms for teachers are absolutely cramped and are totally unsuitable for the purpose. The *Daily Telegraph* education reporter, Maralyn Parker, could not have been more accurate when she described the Department of Education and Training as being like Fawley Towers.

Many will recall president Reagan's famous words—the nine most terrifying words in the English language—"I'm from the government and I'm here to help." In a similar vein, principals, teachers and parents now shudder at the mere thought of the name of the New South Wales Department of Education and Training. In past weeks we have heard about the department's heavy-handed approach to Crookwell High School, where it ignored the concerns of local teachers and parents. The department is sending an email to all principals to warn students not to engage in criminal behaviour, an action that reeked of the department trying to cover its actions rather than constructively resolving the issues.

The Premier has already indicated that the upcoming State budget will commit additional funds for education. If this is true I commend his decision. However, I warn the Premier that it is easy to spend the hard-earned tax dollars of the New South Wales public but it is much harder to spend it wisely. If the Premier wants to demonstrate his commitment to education in New South Wales, he needs to start down the long hard road of serious reform in the Department of Education and Training. He needs to institute proper business practices such as accounting for infrastructure and assets. There is no doubt that the Australian economy is strong and that the New South Wales Government will reap the rewards of its prosperity through record tax revenue. However, Australia's economic prosperity has little to do with the efforts of this Labor Government; it is the result of the tough decisions and responsible fiscal management of the Howard-Vaile Federal Government. The onus is on the Premier now to be responsible with his largess. It is nothing short of fiscal irresponsibility to pour money into a department that is broken. No responsible leader would provide additional funding for capital and assets to schools when the department has no understanding whatsoever of the current capital and assets. The message is simple: If the Premier wants bipartisan support for his foreshadowed big spending budget in education, he needs to instruct his Labor members to support this bill so that the money goes to where it is needed, so it is transparent to the community that it is being well spent. Our local schools are screaming out for that sort of investment, even a catch-up in the \$120 million backlog of school maintenance. There is an immediate \$120 million, but we need to know where it is going and for what purpose, and so does the community.

The bill before the House is not radical. It does not propose sweeping overhauls of education but rather a basic reform to a department that is desperately in need of help. I tell the Department of Education and Training that I am here to help. I know that members on the Government side will see the merits of this bill and will be very keen to support it. I look forward to that support because this bill will substantially increase the transparency and accountability of the Department of Education and Training. It will give New South Wales taxpayers the confidence they need that their taxpayer dollars have been put to good use.