



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



**HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES**

**BILLS**

**Australian Education Amendment Bill 2014**

**Second Reading**

**SPEECH**

**Thursday, 2 October 2014**

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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## SPEECH

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**Questioner**  
**Speaker** Neumann, Shayne, MP

**Source** House  
**Proof** No  
**Responder**  
**Question No.**

**Mr NEUMANN** (Blair) (13:05): The Australian Education Amendment Bill in part establishes a mechanism to enable the Minister for Education to make payments to schools for reasons prescribed by regulation. The mechanism is put into effect through the insertion of a new subclause, section 69A(1), into the Australian Education Act 2013.

The Australian Education Act came into effect on 1 January 2014 and regulates Commonwealth funding to Australian schools. The education minister has said the first task of the new section 69A(1) mechanism will be to facilitate payments under the government's Indigenous boarding initiative announced in the 2014-15 budget. This provides \$6.8 million in what the minister describes as interim support for non-government schools with more than 50 Indigenous borders from remote or very remote areas, or where 50 per cent or more of the school's boarding students are Indigenous and from remote or very remote areas. The government has yet to establish eligibility requirements for this initiative or the funding amounts eligible schools may receive. However, it is stated that it will have an intention to do so before the end of the year. We are yet to see the specifics but we look forward to that.

Access to these schools can benefit some Indigenous students from remote areas. In my electorate of Blair, we have two fine independent schools which accept boarders—Ipswich Grammar School and Ipswich Girls' Grammar School have both taken significant steps in recent years to increase the number of Indigenous boarders. I understand there are currently 20 Indigenous boarders at Ipswich girls' grammar and 53 at Ipswich grammar—its sister school.

At Ipswich grammar, enrolments of Indigenous students have increased steadily since 2000. In 2013, about six per cent of the school's population was Indigenous. These young men come from diverse communities, such as western Queensland, rural and western New South Wales and the Torres Strait. Ipswich Grammar School has reported encouraging progress in terms of retention and completion rates for these students.

I have spoken to Indigenous boarders from Ipswich Girls' Grammar and Ipswich Grammar School who have told me that, invariably, their experience is favourable. Many intend to go back to their communities to work and contribute. Some have also told me they intend to stay in south-east Queensland. However, the funding for non-government boarding schools cannot, and should not, be the only support offered to Indigenous students. Every child deserves the best education we can give them, no matter from where they come. We should not just cherry pick.

This initiative is just another example of the government's singular focus on getting Indigenous kids to school. It is not concerned, really, about what happens when they get there. That is someone else's problem—maybe the state or territory. The government has ripped away \$46 million or more from the Remote Jobs and Communities Program to fund a truancy army in remote Australia. The results, according to Senate estimates, are patchy and erratic at best, and are unsuccessful at worst. We agree that every child should go to school. This is fundamentally important. However, we remain concerned about what happens when a child sits at the desk or in the classroom.

Consistently, conservative state and territory governments have ripped away money and resources from schools without a word of criticism from the education minister federally. We know that quality early education is critical to giving kids the best start in life. The previous federal Labor government invested hundreds of millions of dollars to the National Partnership Agreement on Indigenous Early Childhood Development to make sure that Indigenous kids would get the best chance in life by establishing 38 children and family centres around the country. These centres provide culturally appropriate early education to children and support services to their parents and to some of the most vulnerable families in remote and regional areas, capital cities and provincial towns in this country. The Abbott government has abandoned these centres, refusing to fund them when the national partnership expired on 30 June this year. Many centres face the real prospect of closure. As Shadow minister for Indigenous affairs, I visited many of these centres.

We understand that kids need a little extra help getting the best educational outcomes if they come from disadvantaged backgrounds. That is why Labor's Gonski school funding model provided a special Indigenous loading to ensure that those schools were properly resourced to provide the best possible education for Indigenous students. Despite claiming to support this school funding initiative prior to the election, we have seen the government abandon it. We welcome the extra support for those few Indigenous kids who will benefit from the boarding school education but we remain deeply concerned about the majority who will not get the support.

Every child deserves the best education we can give, as I say. However, in reality, \$6.8 million of funding announced for this initiative is a very dim flicker of light for Indigenous people. This government has ripped over half a billion dollars from Indigenous programs in the 2014-15 budget and refuses to tell Indigenous communities and service providers where these cuts will hit—whether it is a \$125 million cut from Indigenous health programs; \$15 million from the peak representative body, National Congress of Australia's First Peoples; and \$9.5 million from support for Indigenous language, taught so often in these schools when Indigenous children attend.

Recently, of course—when you cannot ignore Indigenous education—there were the cuts to the Indigenous Tutorial Assistance Scheme. This helps universities assess students who go to early childhood education centres, primary schools and high schools, and who, we hope, will come from these boarding initiatives here before this legislation and go to university. Under the former federal Labor government, there was a 26 per cent increase in Indigenous students going to and graduating from university. But this government has cut the funding. Universities will now be forced to competitively bid under the Indigenous Advancement Strategy, with no guarantee of funding. On top of the \$5.8 billion in cuts to higher education, this calls into question the Abbott government's commitment to Indigenous education. To make matters worse, of course, the announcement of the ITAS cut took place on the eve of the competitive grant round being put so that those organisations had about a month in which to submit the application under the IAS.

Indigenous community leaders have expressed their concerns about the Abbott government's cuts, particularly in relation with Indigenous education. What we have seen from this Prime Minister, who claims that he is the Prime Minister for Indigenous affairs, is, in fact, a year of disappointment for Indigenous people around the country. And, of course, we have seen the cuts to front-line services. He has a minister in the Senate who claims that is not happening. But we know there have been cuts to front-line health services, legal services and welfare services. But the government refuses to accept responsibility for the cuts. All we have seen from them is to object, obfuscate and fabricate in relation to the claims.

On 16 September, the Indigenous affairs minister claimed that the \$165 million cut to the community-controlled health services and health services around the country was, in fact, a cut. During question time on 22 September, the Prime Minister joined his minister in the land of fantasy in response to my question about the possible closure of children and family centres. The Prime Minister said:

I defy members opposite to justify this charge of broken promises. Overall funding for Indigenous programs goes up.

The evidence can be found in budget papers No. 2—pages 184 and 185—which clearly shows a cut in Indigenous funding programs of \$534.4 million. If the Prime Minister and the Minister for Indigenous affairs were genuinely interested in this budget's impact on Indigenous Australians they might read the recent Menzies Centre for Health Policy report. The centre concluded, not surprisingly that Indigenous people would be hard hit by the budget. Adjunct Associate Professor Dr Lesley Russell of the centre said:

Already among the poorest, sickest and most marginalised, Indigenous Australians are hit twice: by cuts to specific programs totalling \$603.0 million/5 years and cuts and changes to a wide swathe of general programs in health, education, welfare and legal services.

Together these will exacerbate Indigenous disadvantage and set back the already difficult task of Closing the Gap.

This is from a Prime Minister who claims he is the 'Prime Minister for Indigenous Affairs'.

The establishment of a mechanism under this legislation to begin payments under the Indigenous Boarding Initiative is just one component of this legislation before the chamber. Subclause 62 subclause (2) item 33 of the bill also modifies the transitional funding rules for independent special schools to index their funding by at

least three per cent per year. Without this change, according to the government, about 38 independent special schools face quite significant cuts in 2015.

The education minister briefly touched on this issue in his second reading speech, and appears to connect the prospect of these funding cuts to:

... errors and oversights that have become apparent since the act became operative on 1 January 2014.

The education minister mentions:

Currently, the safety net in place will disappear and these schools will have their funding immediately reduced to the schooling resource standard from 1 January next year because the current work with the states and territories to develop nationally consistent data has not yet been completed.

The 'safety net' the education minister says will disappear, as if he had nothing to do with it, is in fact Labor's More Support for Students with Disabilities program that the minister refused to continue to fund. The \$2.4 million required to prevent a funding cut to these independent special schools is needed until:

... the revised student-with-disability loadings are available.

Here, the education minister refers to the extra funding, or loadings, available to students with a disability under Labor's Gonski school funding reforms. The disability loadings were one of six disadvantage loadings created by these reforms. I mentioned another—the Indigenous loading.

Adding a disadvantage loading to the base student funding amount to meet the actual needs of a student was a fundamental aspect of Labor's school funding reforms. In government Labor set an interim disability loading of 186 per cent of the base payment for students in mainstream schools and 223 per cent of the base payment for students in special schools for 2014. The interim loading will allow the time necessary to establish the true level of need for students with a disability in consultation with the states and territories. This would directly inform the development of a nationally-consistent disability loading from 2015. A fair and equitable learning to students with disability is essential for them to receive a quality education.

For a while, prior to the election, the coalition gave the impression that it wholeheartedly recognised and supported these loadings. In fact, the period of coalition support for the Gonski reform package had a precise start on 2 August 2013. Just a day earlier, the education spokesperson and now minister, described the Gonski reforms in his typical fashion: he called them a 'conski'. As the seconds ticked down to the 2013 election, political reality started to bite. The coalition said that they were on a unity ticket with us as the Labor government. They said that you could vote Labor or coalition and that you would get the same funding outcome.

In fact, if there were any doubt in the minds of voters, this is what they said, quoted in *The Australian*:

We will honour the agreements that Labor has entered into. We will match the offers that Labor has made. We will make sure that no school is worse off.

It was all a bit unedifying, because they felt completely shamefaced. They had brochures all around the place, they had leaflets about it but they backflips when they got into government. We have seen that.

But that backflip is actually typified by the budget. We heard the member for Bass actually refer to increases in funding by the coalition. It is almost as if the budget overview 2014-15 never penetrated the other side of the chamber. I want to quote from it—and this is not our document, this was prepared by the coalition government in the actual budget. The overview of the budget—and I am quoting from page 7 of the overview:

In this Budget the Government is adopting sensible indexation arrangements for schools from 2018, and hospitals from 2017-18, and removing funding guarantees for public hospitals. These measures will achieve cumulative savings of over \$80 billion by 2024-25.

So what they are actually doing, in effect, is cutting \$30 billion from our classrooms over the next decade, ripping away the fifth and sixth years of the Gonski funding. They are failing to deliver the Gonski agreements and letting the states off the hook in relation to their contributions—the national partnership arrangements.

So let us not hear sanctimony and unction from those opposite in relation to this, because they are part of a government that has let down Indigenous students and let down non-Indigenous students. They are part of a government that has ripped away \$30 billion in school funding. And they claim to believe in equality of opportunity and justice for all—what a joke they are!