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HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Federation Chamber

GRIEVANCE DEBATE

School Attendance

SPEECH

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Questioner
Speaker Snowdon, Warren, MP

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Mr SNOWDON (Lingiari) (19:12): Firstly I want to thank the parliamentary secretary for his contribution. It is a bit of a pity he could not read out the second reading speech in his hand today; nevertheless, that is a past event.

I want to talk about the failure of the Commonwealth government's measures on school attendance in the Northern Territory and note that the minister responsible—the Minister for Indigenous Affairs, Senator Scullion—has now vowed to impose sanctions on parents in remote Indigenous communities whose children do not attend school. He would know that there is a program he could be using as a model, which is not as punitive as he would like, but nevertheless does take action against parents in particular circumstances. I refer to Labor's School Enrolment and Attendance Measure, or SEAM, where the parents come within the scope of Centrelink when the child has 10 absences over a 10-week period. This seems to me to be an appropriate trigger to cause Centrelink to look at what is happening in terms of that school attendance.

That is not what is being proposed here, though. This is far more arbitrary and it appears to be policy on the run. What it does demonstrate is how the strategy from the minister, to boost remote school attendance in the more remote communities without sanctions, has failed to significantly improve attendance. The South Australian Minister for Education, Jennifer Rankine, has described Senator Scullion's plan to withhold welfare payments from parents of truants as 'policy on the run' to cover 'his embarrassment over his failure to improve attendance rates'.

The Northern Territory's latest available figures for 2014 show a decline in attendance after the initial spike. Santa Theresa was above 70 per cent and is now less than 70 per cent, and other communities in central Australia—Yuendumu and Tennant Creek—have gone backwards; Alekarenge, Ntaria and Santa Theresa have gone backwards, and \$46 million has been spent on this program so far. At the time it was introduced I, along with others, said that it would not work. We said it would not work for a range of reasons, not the least of which was the then Northern Territory government's policy of cutting expenditure on education and getting rid of classroom teachers at the very same time the Commonwealth had committed money for 200 extra teachers to teach in the bush. So what we had was the Commonwealth putting money in at the front end and the Northern Territory government taking money out at the back end, and taking school teachers out of classrooms in the bush, where they are most needed.

What we need to do—and we said this and continue to say it, and it has now been reinforced by very prominent educators I know in the education system—is encourage parental responsibility. The SEAM program would do that. Also, we need to identify community factors that negatively impact on attendance; use kinship connections to enhance attendance; maintain and make more inclusive programs like the Clontarf program for boys in schools, and develop an equivalent program for young women; and better management of the impact of increased attendance on classrooms. In regard to the latter, we know that what has happened in the past is that people who have been disengaged from the education system and come back into the education system after having not been there for some years, and in some cases not having been at all, are sometimes disrupting the whole way in which the school operates. We also need to staff remote community schools on enrolments and not on attendance, which is standard practice in all other states. This is so that teachers are not forced to attend to the higher needs and behaviour management of the irregular attendees, but have support in the classroom to work with them. We need to get additional classroom resources; get higher quality research into the classrooms and the remote communities in the Northern Territory, and other places, to see first-hand the current setup that guarantees failure through gross direct funding discrimination.

Experienced teachers with students in remote communities are telling me about their concerns with the current effort by the federal minister, Senator Scullion, to improve attendance in remote schools. One teacher told me that they undertook research into school nonattendance over 20 years ago and discovered that attendance at the time was a worrying 70 per cent on average across the remote schools in the Northern Territory. The current situation appears to be little better. The teacher now informs me that they work in a school with a good history of

attendance in the mid-70 per cent range. It is one of the schools that is involved in the urgent program involving the use of Commonwealth funded attendance officers, and it is now running below 70 per cent. This is a concern to all staff in the school and people generally in the school community.

The teacher discussed the concerns of that staff at the school, which he said were as follows. Who has determined that the attendance officers have the appropriate cultural linkages within the community? What training has been provided for these attendance officers? Who has determined the specific role they will undertake? What are the parameters of their day-to-day operations? Who will determine that it is acceptable that the attendance officers will force the re-entry of uninterested truants into effective classrooms, to the disadvantage of the regular attendees? What consideration has been given to the impact on ongoing programs? These questions have been raised by an experienced practitioner at the chalk face—to use an old school teaching term that I am very familiar with, but when I attend a classroom now I cannot find a chalk board or a duster, which makes me a little confused!

An honourable member: You probably cannot find a slate!

Mr SNOWDON: No slate and no abacus! What is more important for the future of communities—a well educated interested group of regular attendees, or a group made up of students who have been forced to participate and for whom attendance is not only a chore but also a chance to misbehave and disrupt an already effective program delivery?

Is a process of potential parent fines for student nonattendance going to make a difference without a strategy to re-engage those non-attenders through a transitional return to the classroom? We all want to see these young kids at school. We all want every young person in Australia to come out of the education system with a good educational outcome, which sets them up for opportunities in life, either for further training, so that they can get into the workforce, or to go off to university or wherever it is they might go. The important thing to understand is that this measure has yet to work. The problem is that the minister seems unwilling to accept the criticism and come up with changes that might be beneficial. I also might add that he has been less than able to confront the hideousness and the obduracy of the Northern Territory government in its attitude to the funding of school programs in the Northern Territory.

A lot more needs to be done certainly on the ground in classrooms from the teachers' point of view and we know that the current government's new thought bubble lacks any real coherence and any detail. We do need to do a lot more work with families and communities to encourage children to go to school. We do need to make sure that these young kids get the opportunities they richly deserve. But they ain't going to be helped by the Northern Territory government potentially taking a decision to cease high school education in a large number of schools in the Northern Territory, which is their plan. What they are effectively attempting to do will be to turn the clock back prior to the election of the Labor government in 2001 in the Northern Territory when they introduced for the very first time years 11 and 12 in remote schools in the Northern Territory.

Some might argue that it has not been very successful because we have not had high numbers of kids getting on to university. The fact, though, that they have got kids continuing in school to year 12 is a really positive outcome. What we are going to see now are kids at the end of year 6 or 7 potentially going into a post-primary education facility where there will be no coherence. They will end up effectively being alienated from the education system and, like the generations before them who were in that same situation, they will end up without any reasonable educational outcome or any real opportunity to get a job or move on to further training or a higher education.

We know that this government has done other things which go directly against their stated objective of getting young kids to school. They have abandoned the 38 family and children's centres, and by not renewing the MPA to fund them the government risks kids getting to school without the benefit of early childhood education and they are at a higher risk of falling behind from the beginning and disengaging from their education.

We all know what the education theorists tell us—engage young people as young as possible. We are hearing people talk about early childhood education and early childhood health and continuity and managing health and education through life. But what we are seeing with this government is a disengagement strategy for young kids so that when they get to school they are not properly prepared.

I just say to the government: rethink this strategy about remote education. Look very carefully at the SEAM project which was introduced by Labor. Do not take punitive measures which will actually disaffect communities

and make families turn off the education system. We need to be attracting kids into school, not alienating them.
(Time expired)