

SPEECH**TASMANIAN STATE SCHOOL PARENTS AND FRIENDS
CONFERENCE****19TH August 2006**

Firstly I'd like to acknowledge my parliamentary colleagues, the Minister for Education, Mr Bartlett and Mr McKim.

I'd also like to express my thanks to your president Jenny Branch and the State School Parents and Friends for once again allowing Members of Parliament to address this conference. Finally can I also thank the most important people in the room, all of the parents who have given up their time to be here today to discuss and debate the important issues facing education.

At last years conference I outlined the principles I was using to guide policy development for the State Opposition. I'd like to firstly remind you once more what they are and then touch briefly on some topical issues.

1. The most important person in the education system is the student.
2. Teachers need to be supported so that they can do what they were employed to do – that is teach.

3. Principal's must be supported to enable them to lead their schools.
4. The most important learning aid that a child can have is a supportive and engaged parent.

and finally

5. The best economic policy that that we can ever employ is to have a well resourced adequately funded education policy.

In relation to current issues which are topical I welcome the Minister's announcement of "Student at the Centre" which broadly fits within the first principle I outlined being that the most important person in the education system is the student.

I also welcome the Minister's recent adoption of two of our Liberal pre-election policies.

The first one being the review of the EL's curriculum and the language used in communication to parents. And secondly; The review of assessment and reporting which I hope will arrive at an outcome that sees one plain English, easy to read

report card that provides honest communication to parents about their child's progress at school.

However the one key issue that I want to briefly raise this morning and it is one that I understand you will be debating this weekend, and that is the policy of inclusion. Whilst I support the goal of integrating children with special needs into regular classrooms it is my view that the way we currently support children with special and/or additional needs, their parents and importantly our teachers is not providing the outcomes we would hope for. Now it would be irresponsible of me not to acknowledge that there are some successes because there are, however there are many failures as well. In my opinion we are failing many families, we are failing teachers and we are failing students regardless of their individual needs and requirements by not accepting that what we are currently doing is not working for all of them.

Prior to the election earlier this year the Liberal Party adopted the policy position of the need for a review of inclusion and behavior management in our schools especially our high schools. Last week again I called for a review of the way we manage and support inclusive education.

Jean Walker the President of the AEU who is with us today should be congratulated for having the courage to articulate in far greater detail than I have time to do today, similar sentiments to my own in her address to teachers at the AEU annual conference last week.

Parents, once fully informed of their options, should be able to choose whether or not their children are educated in a mainstream classroom or in a special school setting. However not all parents are offered that choice. And in many cases after initially choosing to send their children to a regular school they find that the school struggles to live up to their expectations in relation to both support and educational outcomes. Schools are finding regardless of the best will in the world that under the current model they can't cater for all children. Unfortunately the current policy, the current practices are not delivering outcomes that we can all be proud of.

Let me read you briefly an email comment I received this week from the parent of an autistic child.

“We need help now or the next three years will mean nothing to my boy cause he will be that far

behind they'll just write him off. This year is a write off already and I'm tired of banging my head against a brick wall".

I rang this mother and she told me....

"Our school has lost my son on three occasions. On days his aide is not with him he has walked out of his classroom and out of the school and has been found on the road. They don't understand that the fences aren't good enough. We want him to be included but more importantly we want him to be safe".

She also said, her sons teacher, who works tirelessly for her students has included in her class of 24 children not only her son who is autistic but another autistic child, as well as one with ADHD and another child struggling with diabetes related health issues.

Also this from a teacher in a special school who also has experience in a public school.

"Some included children are for worse off in a school system not set up to cater for them properly".

“Teachers find it upsetting that they can’t cater adequately either because of resources or experience”. And further

“Teachers are frustrated and feel guilty because they know they are not doing the best thing by the child”.

A recent survey of teachers by the AEU contained the question: which issues impact mostly on your abilities to carry out your professional responsibilities? The overwhelming response was inclusion and behaviour management.

In finishing let me say that I hope you will consider supporting our call for a review of inclusion. Visiting experts voice their opinions regularly on how well we are doing here in Tasmania with our education system. The Minister has quoted a number of experts himself in recent times. However, it is one thing to fly in for a visit and comment on a model of inclusion and call it worlds best practice, it is completely another to experience it daily. Just ask the mother whose son was found on the road three times, or the teacher frustrated because she can’t provide the level of support she wants to or knows her students require.

I hope you can support a review of the way we manage inclusion because we need to hear from parents and we need to hear from their children's teachers.

These are the voices that really count in Tasmania.
Thankyou.