

DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION — VIOLENCE POLICIES REVIEW

Statement

HON CHARLES SMITH (East Metropolitan) [5.35 pm]: I rise briefly this evening to draw the attention of members to some further issues within our education system following the recent revelations this month that almost 1 000 incidents of assault or physical threatening behaviour against public school staff, including teachers, have been reported since the beginning of this year. According to figures released by the state government, since the start of this year there have been 945 reports of kicks, pushing and shoving, elbowing, grabbing to punch, biting or headbutting, intimidation and physical threats in our schools. Of these incidents, 293 involved weapons. Medical assistance was required in one out of every five reported incidents. The Minister for Education and Training has stated that she wants to undertake a review of existing policy and procedures and put forward measures to prevent and respond to incidents of violence and aggression. I strongly welcome the minister's interest in classroom discipline and hope that this review will be undertaken swiftly and that all options will be considered. I note that the State School Teachers' Union of WA wants to streamline the process to expel violent students, which has been described as onerous in its present form. The union has also stated that it wants to change the current imbalance in the system whereby perpetrators are given more consideration than students who do the right thing. I support this cause and hope that the minister will take it seriously and implement real changes. Often schools seeking to deal with violent and currently troublesome students are tied up in excessive red tape and regulations that prevent them from acting effectively and swiftly. Moreover, we have allowed a situation to develop in which some disciplinary measures serve more as a reward than a punishment for out-of-control students. I also support the State School Teachers' Union in its call for parents to support tougher discipline in the face of rising violence. The State School Teachers' Union president, Pat Byrne, has made the observation, and I quote —

“Quite often the parent will come into the school and supports the indefensible behaviour of the student. There is a very, very different attitude from a large number of parents from what there was 15 years ago and certainly from when I was at school.”

I have long argued that parents need to be more accountable for the behaviour of their children. Often, bad parenting is behind the bad behaviour of these troublesome students. Parents who defend the appalling behaviour of their children are clearly part of the problem. Unfortunately, this is part of a wider cultural trend in our society in which feral behaviour is increasingly tolerated and people avoid taking personal responsibility for their own actions and behaviour.

What needs to be done? I believe the state government needs to recognise that, yes, we have a growing number of bad parents in the community and that social and behavioural standards are degenerating. We need to look at ways to restore and emphasise notions of personal responsibility and accountability, and respect for others and for order. We also need to reshape the culture in our schooling system and dispense with failed, New-Age, progressive educational fads in which teachers are encouraged to act more like personal learning facilitators than figures of authority. We know that undisciplined classrooms result in lower academic achievement. Levels of noise and disorder reported in Australian classrooms are among the highest in Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development countries. This certainly goes some way to explain the shocking decline in our educational rankings relative to that in other developed countries. According to the OECD's latest Programme for International Student Assessment results, Australian high school students are up to two school years behind their peers in science, reading and maths. A recent United Nations report card ranked Australia thirty-ninth out of 41 advanced countries when it comes to quality of schooling. This is an alarming trend that will only worsen without a major rethink of current teaching methods and an end to the politically correct approach to discipline. As OECD research proves, a more cost-effective way is to focus on improving classroom behaviour. We also need to reform the school curriculum.

Dr Kevin Donnelly stated —

It's no secret, under ALP governments state and Commonwealth, that schools have also been forced to adopt a politically correct, dumbed-down curriculum that ignores the basics and that preaches a politically correct view of subjects like English and history.

Traditional approaches to learning to read, involving phonics and phonemic awareness, asking students to memorise poems, do mental arithmetic and learn times tables by rote have long since been abandoned as a result of failed fads like whole language and personalised learning.

As a result, thousands of children leave primary school unable to read and write and incapable of subtracting, multiplying and dividing numbers. Universities have long since introduced remedial classes in essay writing and mathematics, and lecturers complain that many undergraduates are incapable of undertaking academic studies.

Hon Alannah MacTiernan interjected.

Hon CHARLES SMITH: Thank you, minister.

It is clear to me that trendy educational fads have come at the expense of the basics. It is difficult to see how we can foster well-rounded, informed, conscientious, highly skilled young citizens who are aware of their place in society and the world when we teach left wing jibber-jabber in our schools. Our sinking education standards should be ringing alarm bells.