



EDUCATION AND INNOVATION COMMITTEE

Members present:

Mrs RN Menkens MP (Chair)
Mr SA Bennett MP (via teleconference)
Mr MA Boothman MP
Mr MR Latter MP
Mrs DC Scott MP
Mr NA Symes MP

Staff present:

Ms E Booth (Principal Research Officer)
Ms C Heffernan (Executive Assistant)

PUBLIC BRIEFING—EDUCATION (STRENGTHENING DISCIPLINE IN STATE SCHOOLS) AMENDMENT BILL 2013

TRANSCRIPT OF PROCEEDINGS

WEDNESDAY, 28 AUGUST 2013

Brisbane

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Committee met at 1.02 pm

CHAIR: Good afternoon and welcome to this public briefing to support the Queensland parliament's Education and Innovation Committee in its examination of the Education (Strengthening Discipline in State Schools) Amendment Bill 2013. Thank you all very much for your interest in this inquiry and for your attendance here today. Before we start, I ask that mobile phones be switched off or set to silent. Members of the media who might be recording proceedings are asked to adhere to the committee's media guidelines. This briefing is being recorded and transcribed by Hansard and will be published on the committee's web page.

I am Rosemary Menkens, the member for Burdekin and chair of this committee. With me today are: Mrs Desley Scott, Deputy Chair and member for Woodridge; Mr Mark Boothman MP, the member for Albert; Mr Michael Latter, the member for Waterford; Mr Neil Symes, the member for Lytton; and Mr Steve Bennett MP, the member for Burnett, via teleconference. Emily Booth, our principal research officer, is with us too. Mr Ray Hopper MP, the member for Condamine, sends his apologies for not being here today.

On 20 August 2013 the Queensland parliament referred the Education (Strengthening Discipline in State Schools) Amendment Bill 2013 to this committee for detailed examination. Our task is to consider and report back on the policy intent to be achieved by the bill and the application of fundamental legislative principles. The report is due by 9 October 2013. If passed, the bill would strengthen discipline in Queensland state schools. Principals would have stronger powers and more flexibility and autonomy when making decisions about student discipline. The grounds for suspension and exclusion would be broadened and the administrative burden faced by principals when addressing problematic behaviour would be reduced.

Whilst the committee is not swearing in witnesses, this briefing is a formal process of the parliament and parliamentary privilege applies to all evidence presented. Any person intentionally misleading the committee is committing a serious offence. Although this briefing is public, you are able to request through me as chair that any material or information you provide be kept private and you can object to particular questions. You might also wish to take questions on notice if you do not have information at hand. The details about how witnesses are to be treated are contained in schedule 3 to the parliament's standing orders—instructions to committees regarding witnesses. I welcome representatives from the Department of Education, Training and Employment.

ROSENGRAVE, Ms Robyn, Director, State Schooling Operations and Strategy, Department of Education, Training and Employment

SMITH, Ms Jean, Principal Advisor, State Schooling Operations and Strategy, Department of Education, Training and Employment

STREATFEILD, Mr Brian, Assistant Director-General, State Schooling Operations and Strategy, Department of Education, Training and Employment

VOEVODIN, Ms Eryn, Senior Advisor, Legislative Services, Department of Education, Training and Employment

WATTERSTON, Dr Jim, Director-General, Department of Education, Training and Employment

CHAIR: I now invite Dr Watterston to address the committee.

Dr Watterston: Thank you, Chair. Thank you for the opportunity to brief the committee on the Education (Strengthening Discipline in State Schools) Amendment Bill 2013. I propose to provide the committee with a brief outline of the background to the bill, an overview of the amendments contained in the bill and information about the consultation process undertaken for the bill. I will keep my opening statement brief to allow the committee time to ask questions about the bill.

This bill stems from the Queensland government's education reform plan announced in April 2013—Great Teachers = Great Results. Strengthening discipline in state schools is one of 15 strategies developed under this initiative. Discipline plays an important role in a high-quality education system; in providing students with a safe, supportive and focused place to learn. Strengthening school discipline also accords with one of the central tenets of the Great Teachers = Great Results action plan, which is to boost school autonomy. This bill confirms and bolsters a principal's authority in the school as to matters of school discipline—empowering school leaders to make decisions about how to run their school.

Chapter 12 of the current Education (General Provisions) Act 2006, which I will refer to as the Act, deals with the good order and management of state educational institutions, including suspension and exclusion processes. It was identified by departmental officers, in consultation with state school principals, that current disciplinary processes presented principals with a number of obstacles in implementing strong school discipline.

The present chapter 12 sets out only a limited range of formal disciplinary strategies that principals can use to address student discipline. This approach restricts the principal from developing strategies that are cognisant of community expectation or tailored to the circumstances of the individual student. The absence of alternative early discipline intervention in the current provisions has also contributed to a strong reliance on suspension and exclusion options. In addition, there is an overprescription surrounding the disciplinary processes that are included. For example, detentions may only be implemented for 20 minutes of a lunch recess or for 30 minutes after school. Such restrictions limit a principal in addressing and responding to a student's challenging behaviour.

In its current form, chapter 12 also sets out detailed processes that principals are required to follow when making suspension, exclusion or cancellation of enrolment decisions. This associated red tape places undue administrative burden on principals and consumes their valuable time. It can also add to unnecessary delay in decision making. The bill strengthens school discipline by addressing the obstacles that I have outlined and, in doing so, aligns with the reforms of Great Teachers = Great Results. The bill amends the Act by: inserting a head of power for principals to control student discipline; increasing the period of short suspensions; expanding the grounds for suspension and exclusion; streamlining disciplinary processes; and reducing red tape around suspension, exclusion and cancellation of enrolment decisions.

I go to the head of power. The bill inserts a general head of power into the Act for principals of state schools to control and regulate school discipline. This confirms a principal's authority in the school as to matters of school discipline and gives principals a clear, broad, flexible head of power to impose disciplinary interventions appropriate to their local circumstances. This also enables principals to develop and implement a greater range of disciplinary interventions than are currently available under the Act. For example, community service interventions and discipline improvement plans are two innovative disciplinary strategies that can be utilised under this new broad head of power.

Community service interventions are where a student performs work or service under appropriate supervision arranged by the principal. Discipline improvement plans are written agreements outlining strategies for behaviour management. It is anticipated that these approaches would be employed as an early response to student misbehaviour so that suspension and exclusion action would then only need to be considered as a behaviour management strategy of last resort.

The new head of power will also remove restrictions currently placed around detention. Instead, the new head of power gives principals maximum flexibility in determining the response to inappropriate behaviour. This is reinforced in the bill by the clear expression that the student disciplinary measures can be carried out on non-school days and after school hours.

The bill does not prescribe the processes principals are required to follow when they adopt a disciplinary strategy. Instead guidance will be provided in the department's policies or procedures. The bill gives me, as director-general, a clear power to make policies or procedures about this discipline. Principals must comply with any such policies or procedures for student discipline.

I turn to increasing the period of short suspensions. The bill extends the period of short suspensions from up to five school days to a maximum of 10 school days. Consistent with the current position under the Act for short suspensions, a student suspended under the amended provision will not have a right of review of these decisions. This will serve as a strong signal to students and parents that inappropriate behaviour will not be tolerated and reinforces the authority of the principal in the school.

I turn to expanding the grounds for suspension and exclusion. The bill expands the grounds for suspension and exclusion to cover conduct occurring outside the school, provided the conduct adversely affects, or is likely to adversely affect, other students, the good order and management of the school or where the attendance of the student at school poses an unacceptable risk to the safety or wellbeing of other students or staff. The bill also strengthens a principal's ability to respond as appropriate when a student is charged with or convicted of certain criminal offences by including these as specific grounds for suspension and exclusion respectively. Long suspensions, exclusion decisions and cancellation of enrolment will be reviewable by the director-general. Review by the Queensland Civil and Administrative Tribunal remains available for the most serious disciplinary action, namely exclusion from all state schools.

There is a requirement on the principal or director-general to take reasonable steps to provide students who have been suspended or excluded with an educational program. Case managers will continue to be assigned to students who are suspended with a proposal to exclude, or excluded, to assist them to reengage in their education.

I turn to streamlining disciplinary processes and reducing red tape. The bill simplifies and streamlines the suspension, exclusion and cancellation of enrolment processes and provides flexibility for principals to adopt processes that meet the need and reasonable expectation of school communities. An example of streamlining is that exclusion decisions will no longer involve the principal supervisor. Principals will generally be able to be responsible for exclusion decisions in their school. Then I, as director-general, will Act if it is inappropriate for the principal to Act—for example, if bias precludes it or where the exclusion is from more than one state school.

To ensure the timeliness of the exclusion provisions, the bill introduces a time frame in which exclusion decisions must be made. This time frame is 20 school days for a principal and 30 school days for the director-general from the date a proposal to exclude notice is given to the student.

The bill reduces red tape. Current requirements under the Act require principals to invite written submissions prior to excluding a student. The bill removes this requirement. It is not proposed to dictate how principals communicate with students and their parents during these processes. This provides principals with flexibility to deal with matters in a way that suits the individual student's circumstances. Nevertheless, as previously stated, guidance will be provided to principals in policy documents to ensure that their decision adheres to natural justice when making discipline decisions. The bill requires that principals comply with DETE policy and procedure.

The bill also enables a suspension to commence immediately upon a principal verbally notifying the student of the decision. This will facilitate immediate responses to student behaviour, with written notice to be provided as soon as practicable to confirm the nature of the decision. Students must be given a notice of all suspension, exclusion and cancellation of enrolment decisions.

In terms of consultation, a range of consultation strategies were used to inform the policy development around strengthening state school discipline and the development of the bill. The consultation strategies included four two-hour meetings with the Principals Reference Group in May, June and July of 2013; four Education Queensland Stakeholder Group meetings made up of P&Cs Qld, the Queensland Teachers Union and principals associations on 30 April and the 14 May 2013; a dedicated inbox for school personnel to provide feedback and input; and a series of eight webinars for school personnel from April to June 2013.

The Principals Reference Group and the Education Queensland Stakeholder Group provided input to the changes that were needed. They received the consultation copy of the bill and an opportunity to provide feedback on it. School personnel had the opportunity to hear about the proposed reforms and were invited to provide feedback on the changes needed during the webinars or via the dedicated inbox. I am pleased to offer assistance to the committee members today with their inquiries about the bill. Thank you for the opportunity again to brief you.

CHAIR: Thank you very much, Dr Watterston. I will begin the questions if that is okay. I note that the bill aims to reduce the number of students who are suspended or excluded. I am wondering if you could give us the numbers of students who were suspended or excluded in 2012. Would you have those figures?

Dr Watterston: I will hand over to Ms Rosengrave.

Ms Rosengrave: Yes, we do have the numbers for 2012. In total, for student disciplinary absences, we had 64,324 absences. These can be categorised, with the majority of them being short absences—that is, one- to five-day suspensions. So there were 54,524 short-day absences.

suspensions; there were 7,220 long suspensions—and that category is for six- to 20-day suspensions; there were 1,331 exclusions; and 1,249 cancellations of enrolments. These occurred in 2012.

CHAIR: That is a lot of students, isn't it?

Mrs SCOTT: The policies and procedures are not going to be included in the bill. I am wondering whether we might be able to see the draft of those before they are actually in train. Is that a possibility?

Ms Smith: Yes. The policies and procedures are almost drafted. We have had two meetings now with the Principals Reference Group for them to have a chance to have input into those. There are some further changes to be made following that feedback. But I think then they could be made available.

Mrs SCOTT: That would be very helpful, I think.

Mr LATTER: Just to follow in the same vein, in terms of the policies and procedures that are not being included in the bill, could you identify some of the key policy items that we might expect to see in that document?

Ms Smith: The policy documents contain information on each of the different types of school disciplinary absences. So around suspension it has a procedure that principals will follow when carrying out an exclusion or a suspension. On that there are detailed steps to ensure that natural justice is at the forefront. We have used the Queensland Ombudsman's guide to good decision making as the basis for that. So it would take a principal through the steps of how they gather information about what happened, how they would make the decision, what materials they use, what facts they find from that material, and then it guides them through giving the reasons for that decision. Linked to that is the OneSchool management system, which is the school and student management system. That will have particular rules in it so that principals must adhere both to the legislation and to the policy and procedures.

Mr LATTER: Thank you. I note your comments earlier about the extent of consultation that you have had in the lead-up to the creation of this bill. Through that process, could you identify any key points of concern that may have been raised by stakeholders and subsequently how you have addressed those concerns?

Ms Smith: The key concern would have to be red tape. They consistently talk to us about the burden of some of these processes. So we have made sure that they have actually had the opportunity to see everything we are proposing and have had input into it. We met with them just last week. Again, they thought there were some more things that we could do which would actually support them to cut red tape. So that has been their major concern, and we have been working through that with them.

Mr LATTER: To follow on from that, in terms of the policies and procedures—I note the upfront consultation—are there any plans to roll out some kind of training to assist principals to come on board with this new direction?

Dr Watterston: There are plans to assist and facilitate the implementation of the new policies and regulation that go with this bill. You will also be aware that we have just instituted discipline audits in schools. Feedback from schools that have undertaken those audits has found them incredibly useful in terms of examination of current processes that are in place but also learning from best practice from the auditors and sharing strategies that already work in schools. There is a big focus on discipline and management within our school system to try to minimise suspensions and exclusions and make them more dedicated to proactive remedial strategies. So, yes, in terms of both strategies, we will offer support and training for principals but we will continue to manage those discipline audits and go back to the schools that have been audited in 12 months time to make sure that there have been learnings from the process.

Mr LATTER: Thank you.

Mr BOOTHMAN: The bill allows for students to be suspended when charged with a serious offence which means that their guilt may not have been proven. Under normal criminal law, a person is presumed innocent until proven guilty. A lot of parents in my electorate will say, 'Hold on, my son is innocent. He is denying he ever did this,' but he could be suspended without factual evidence. Can you justify that?

Mr Streatfeild: Principals do not make those decisions lightly. The policies and procedures that Jean alluded to, in terms of taking them through the process of what information they gather and the process that they use to make their decision, protect from some of that happening. But we

do not work from the point of view of proof beyond a reasonable doubt. Principals make decisions on the basis of the balance of probabilities of what occurred. I think that understanding is necessary from the point of view of the community understanding how principals make decisions and what they are held accountable for.

Mr BOOTHMAN: Thank you for that.

Ms Voevodin: I can elaborate a bit more about the basis for a charge and suspension. First of all, you have to remember—I think this is what Brian was alluding to—that these are not mandatory obligations imposed on the principals; it is at their discretion. The charge related grounds for suspension is not to be confused as a ground for exclusion itself. It is just for a charge. So that is another thing that you need to remember as well.

In terms of the basis for a charge, there are two tests that apply. One is that it is a serious offence. That picks up the definition that is already in the Act and it picks up the serious offence provisions in the Commission for Children and Young People and Child Guardian Act. So these are high-level, very serious offences. We are talking attempted murder, rape—those sorts of offences. The other test a principal would apply is that it is another offence, not a serious offence, where it is not in the best interests of the school community for the student to attend school while the charge is pending.

So there is a test that mitigates the concerns that you raise—that being charged means that you are automatically suspended. There is a test that the principal has to be satisfied with in employing a suspension. Aside from a serious offence, there has to be a real impact on the school community that needs to be at play. In other terms we are talking about, yes, the suspension lasts until the charge is ‘dealt with’. Now ‘dealt with’ picks up the various outcomes that could happen in a criminal justice process, including that the charges can be withdrawn.

The other thing to remember is that there is capacity for the principal to end that suspension early if those circumstances are required. That is all detailed in the bill. I could probably take you through that if you wanted me to or are you happy with that high-level explanation?

Mr BOOTHMAN: Yes. I suppose the second part of my question is: is there any right to appeal?

Ms Voevodin: There is the right to have the suspensions reviewed by the director-general, and that is for what could be loosely termed long-term suspensions—so, working on what the bill does, that is the increased suspension period from 11 to 20 school days—and charge related suspensions, if I could call them that—long-term suspensions is not what the bill calls them, but that is what I will call them here. There is a right of review to the director-general on that basis. Also, the way the Act works is that parents can also make submissions and reviews, so there is that capacity as well.

Mr BOOTHMAN: Thank you.

Mr SYMES: Under the policy will we see detentions, for example, for an hour after school on a Friday or three hours on a Saturday—similar to what the independent schools, such as Churchie, have adopted over the years?

Dr Watterston: The answer to that is that it enables individual schools to tailor discipline solutions that suit that context. I cannot predict how many schools will take up these options, but it is the provision of these options that gives flexibility. So it could well be that certain schools for particular reasons will want to invoke this at different times. We are already aware of schools that have been flexibly piloting some opportunities to do this. Again, the purpose of the changes in the Act is really to give schools greater flexibility and to enable them to think about whether those solutions would be possible. So it remains to be seen.

Mrs SCOTT: I am just thinking about areas where you might find quite a high number of disadvantaged families or dysfunctional families where parents are just not encouraging their kids in education and trying to bring that respect back for the teaching profession and principals. Do you consider that there are sufficient number of staff at those to be able to engage with students at a very intensive level to try to get them to follow the principal and teachers’ direction to try to curb what may then lead to suspensions and so on? I am just wondering about that whole dynamic within the schools and whether you consider that there is sufficient staffing.

Dr Watterston: By ‘sufficient staffing’ do you mean pastoral care type staff?

Mrs SCOTT: Yes, or whatever the principal decides is going to be the mainstay. Sometimes you need to work with an entire family.

Dr Watterston: Absolutely. I think your question is a generic one wrapped around the changes to this Act, but it is a really good focus because the purpose of these changes to give flexibility to all school principals is really about trying to minimise the time students spend away from school. So giving them flexibility and options is really aimed at lowering the number that we gave you at the beginning of this session today.

In answer to your question whether I think there are enough staff within a school, I do but the answer is that it is not particular staff who have that role. For a school's discipline to be effective, it needs to be a whole school process. You need to engage all staff in consistent practices, and those practices have to be based around supporting the child and understanding what those challenges are that they bring with them when they come to school. I think your question goes to the essence of what a good culture is that underpins a school. Surprisingly, suspensions do not necessarily relate to the level of socioeconomic catchment. There are schools in really challenging areas that hardly ever suspend.

Mrs SCOTT: And mine have just picked up their game a huge amount in Woodridge. It is fantastic.

Dr Watterston: Sure. To refer back to my previous answer about the discipline audits, what we have been hearing from the auditors that we have appointed who are school principals and school based personnel, in some cases, in terms of the preliminary findings from those audits are that schools are really concentrating on the area that you are talking about. In the past where a school has focused discipline on particular teachers or leaders within the school, that is where it often goes awry. It is a whole school collaboration in trying to make sure that all issues for students are addressed. I think you have focused on the right issue that matters.

Mrs SCOTT: Will alternative flexible education facilities such as BoysTown, YMCA, Flexi School and Kingston College, which has a continuing education centre where more mature students who might have left school a couple of years ago come back for a second chance, continue to receive adequate support to be able to re-engage?

Dr Watterston: Excellent association with this bill, because being new to the department what was readily apparent to me straightaway was that it is okay to have flexibility around disciplinary procedures and to be able to identify ways to make the school a safer environment for everyone, but there needs to be alternative opportunities for students who do not fit the mainstream which are often identified through these processes. So we have currently instituted a consultancy across the whole of the state—independent, Catholic and government alternative settings. What we are trying to do is identify what those programs are and where they are so that all schools can have access to providing those opportunities. This is not a disciplinary procedure or a way of moving students out of the mainstream, but there needs to be viable and focused programs that suit the needs of all students. With any discipline process, we need to make sure we have opportunities for people to continue to learn. Your point is well made. So, yes, the resources will continue but we are looking to provide greater provision, I suppose, to enable all schools to have those options.

CHAIR: I would imagine that that would be more difficult in our regional and rural areas?

Dr Watterston: Absolutely. That is part of the audit; to be able to map where these programs are located so we can see where the gaps are and look at some kind of provision to enable all schools, no matter where they are, to have options and to create viable learning environments for all students, so you are right.

CHAIR: Because even though in some cases they are small communities the same issues are often always there.

Dr Watterston: Absolutely. Having been a principal of rural schools, I can tell you that it only takes one minor incident to change the whole culture of a school in a very short period of time. It is something I am acutely aware of and we are certainly looking to address that situation.

CHAIR: Along similar lines, for students who are suspended or excluded but more particularly those who have received a suspension, what sorts of educational options are available, particularly if they are on a long-term suspension?

Mr Streatfeild: The principal is required to provide an educational program for students. Once again, that depends on what is available in the area. As Jim was saying, across different parts of the state there are different programs available. In some areas there are alternative program provisions available for students to attend. In other areas it means that the student has to be provided with work that they undertake at home and there is some checking from the school

principal at the school and a case manager who checks in with the student to find out how they are going with their work and whether they are staying on task. So that covers the broad range of options that you see across the state.

CHAIR: So there is case management of whether they are actually doing some work at home. They are not just living it up in their suspension.

Mr Streatfeild: As much as we can, yes, that is right.

CHAIR: I understand that. Do you have any more questions, Desley?

Mrs SCOTT: Is there going to be a strong emphasis on the primary area? I know in times past at one P&C I had a group of mums approach me to tell me they had at least half a dozen young boys in grade 6 who were creating a huge issue. When you are talking early intervention, you want it early in the primary school years to make sure that goes right through so there will be fewer and fewer problems in high school. Is that where you are aiming to instil all of those good habits within the early primary years right through?

Mr Streatfeild: In the range of programs that Jim talked about across the state, there is a growing trend for early intervention. One that has emerged at the Gold Coast is at Coral House, which is focused on P-3. A group of 20 primary schools have got together to share resources and provide a provision where mainly prep school students who are having difficulty fitting in are able to get help and intensive support for a period of time and then return to the school situation. Quite a number of success stories are emerging out of that work. They employ a psychologist, a teacher and a teacher aide, and they are getting some good results. The schools are giving resources to it. So that is a sign of the success that they are receiving from the program and seeing the changes in the kids at prep. So, yes, there is a trend at the moment for those interventions to go down into the primary years because we know that is where we can make a difference.

Mrs SCOTT: My area has a very high proportion of Pacific Islander, Maori and refugee students. The refugees and migrant children are in intensive learning support, but if you take the Samoan community a lot of those children have two second languages because their Samoan is not good and thus their English is not good. There seems to be very little remedial work for them. If they start to fall behind in their education they then lose interest in school and that can create a problem. I have always advocated some Samoan classes for them so that their mother tongue improves and they can then progress to better English language because it can be a problem.

Dr Watterston: I think your comments go to the heart of the conversation we are having around discipline. It is rarely because students come to school and decide they are going to mess up to a degree that will impact on the school. It usually is about the reasons that you are talking about—the challenge that students bring in terms of being able to learn from a literacy point of view. As you have said, they are having trouble not just in the English language but also in their native tongue. I guess the issue that needs to be borne in mind by all school principals is about going to the root of the problem that is creating the behaviour and seeing behaviour as a symptom rather than the problem. I think our principals are skilled in that, and I think the changes to this Act enable them to be more flexible about how they deal with the individual needs of students. Keeping them later in an afternoon or having them longer during lunchtime where they can be spoken to and worked with I think gives people opportunities to deal with those root causes.

CHAIR: Are there any further questions?

Mr LATTE: Dr Watterston, I understand that this is really driving towards reducing the number of exclusions or suspensions but acknowledge that in the short term there may be an increase particularly in short-term suspensions. I say that leading into my experience in this space, which is that often it can be just as important and just as difficult to manage parents in this space as opposed to children. Given that with short-term suspensions or day suspensions there are no rights of appeal, how do you propose to manage the parents in that space?

Dr Watterston: The purpose of these changes is to give what we call autonomy but I prefer to call empowerment to the local level and to principals. I just heard in a speech last night that school leadership is 80 per cent about relationships and 20 per cent about relationships. That really is the essence. To refer back to my previous answer about the underlying causes and what needs to be done in a school in terms of their behaviour management policy, the focus on communication is absolutely essential. What we are trying to do is teach behaviour. We are not just trying to manage the misbehaviour. It takes a family as well as the school leadership team and teachers to ensure that that behaviour improved.

It would be folly for a principal to consistently exercise his power without really strong underlying communication and confidence for the parents about the person being able to make these decisions. We have performance management processes around the whole of school performance through leadership. We will clearly take into account the way behaviour is managed and the feedback we are getting from communities. There are opportunities for us to work with leaders if these things are not working in a way that is productive in enhancing the current level of suspension and exclusion.

It is not a specific answer. This provides flexibility, but we still need to manage performance and we still need to look at data and evidence to make sure that this is in the long term reducing recidivism in terms of students being consistently suspended. But you are right: occasionally when a new principal goes into a school sometimes to enforce discipline standards for a short period of time suspensions can go up. Usually—and certainly in my experience—that is a very short period of time and it creates a culture where people understand where the line in the sand is and creates a level of self-discipline amongst students, which is probably what we are looking for. But certainly we would not be expecting over the long term that this would do anything but reduce suspensions and exclusions. As I said, it is based on communication, it is based on relationships with primary caregivers and all staff in the school to make sure that the best interests of the students are at heart.

Mr BOOTHMAN: I have one more question. One of the schools in my electorate of Albert unfortunately has an unfounded bad reputation. I get a lot of parents saying, 'I don't want to send my children there,' yet it is completely unfounded. I have been to this school on many occasions. The teaching staff are wonderful. They work extremely hard. Is there any support that the department can give through policies that could help these types of schools? Previously they have had a problem with discipline with some of the students, but is there any support we can give these schools to shed that tarnished reputation so parents will actually say, 'We would love to send our kids to that school again because it is a really great school.' My question is: are there any policies or support that the department can provide to help?

Dr Watterston: There are a number of ways that we support schools, and I am certainly familiar in other jurisdictions of schools that have suffered from a similar undeserved reputation. We have assistant regional directors within each region that work directly with schools and work with the school leadership team about improving performance and addressing issues, such as the one you described.

I have already alluded to the discipline audits that we have in terms of trying to not only improve discipline procedures within a school, but to improve the communication around those discipline procedures. We also have a communications branch in the central office which is also available to individual schools in terms of getting the messaging right. But really the best way of doing that, I think, is in strong and regular communication with parents. The best way for a school's reputation to improve is by word of mouth, and usually the people who have expert knowledge of that environment are the ones that are able to pass that message on.

It really is, I think, about principals making sure that their procedures and the way they manage discipline is completely transparent and it is communicated and it is consistent, and I think that is where sometimes those reputations come unstuck, if you like, where people cannot see the consistency and are not aware of what is in fact being done behind the scenes. So it is a holistic answer, but there is not really one particular strategy that will improve that reputation. But I have seen reputations turned around really quickly when, as I said before, there is a whole school focus and people are well aware of what it is that the school puts up as priorities to make those changes.

Mrs SCOTT: I am just thinking of the young people who might be suspended who then do not want to engage in any alternate schools and things like that. Have we any ability to go beyond that stage, or are we going to see young people who have burnt their bridges at school, have been excluded and are not cooperative with any of the alternates that we have?

Mr Watterston: I will get Brian to give you the Queensland context.

Mr Streatfeild: One of the programs running across regions is the Youth Attainment and Transitions Program, and that is a resource that regions use in partnership with schools to undertake strategies such as reengagement officers. So across some regions we actively have teachers who are employed to find students who are in that position where they are not engaged and to support them in transitioning. It might be transitioning to work or training or to an alternative school environment. Because sometimes they find it difficult to connect with those opportunities,

they do innovative things like meet with students in McDonald's to talk to them about their case and provide them with alternatives and then connect with the family. So they are some of the innovative practices that are emerging to support those young people that we are seeing.

Mr Watterston: I was in Rockhampton yesterday and saw a wonderful example of best practice where the central regional office has put together a team that is now reviewing school attendance records five times a year and is being able to pick up students from all grades that have disengaged and are in danger of disengagement. They are working with all of those 800 students just in Rockhampton alone to prevent that disengagement and also finding additional options. Some students and parents lose engagement with the school, and to have that outside. But Education Queensland's focus has provided impetus for those people to look at alternatives and for the regional office to be able to work with the school. As I said, I have been around this profession for a long time, and it was absolute best practice and a good example for us to look at scaling up about how we make sure that we identify those students early and deal with those issues to prevent the disengagement, but when they do disengage and fall through the cracks, that we are able to pick them up and give them other chances.

CHAIR: Also Steve Bennett who is on teleconference, do you have any questions you would like to put?

Mr BENNETT: Through you, Madam Chair, I would just like to pass my thanks to the departmental staff there this afternoon. Michael and Mark picked up on some of the things that I had questions about, and they were very well answered from my perspective. At this stage my questions were answered, thank you, Rosemary.

CHAIR: Do we have any further questions, members of the committee? I would like to thank you very, very much for coming and for attending and briefing us today. The information that you have provided I know is going to assist us a great deal, as you saw from the enthusiasm of the questions.

I would urge all those who have an interest in the work of the Education and Innovation Committee to subscribe to the committee's email subscription list via the Queensland Parliament's website. I now declare the briefing closed.

Committee adjourned at 1.49 pm