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Education and Training Committee

Report

SPEECH

Wednesday, 25 November 2009

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

SPEECH

<p>Date Wednesday, 25 November 2009</p> <p>Page 121</p> <p>Questioner</p> <p>Speaker Sidebottom, Sid, MP</p>	<p>Source House</p> <p>Proof Yes</p> <p>Responder</p> <p>Question No.</p>
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Mr SIDEBOTTOM (Braddon) (11.13 am)—I am feeling a bit of angst at the moment because I am supposed to be in the House speaking on some other legislation. This is a very important report and I was really proud to be a part of it. It is just by coincidence that I too would like to congratulate the chair of the committee, the member for Cunningham, Sharon Bird, who is currently in the chamber. I also have my colleague the member for Makin, my friend Tony Zappia, and the secretary of the inquiry, Dr Worthington, in the chamber. That is terrific and I do thank them all very much for participating. I also thank the member for Gippsland for his contribution and support for the report and also for his interest in youth affairs. I know, like many in this place, he is very active about trying to do the right thing by his constituents and certainly by rural and regional Australia, so I congratulate him on that.

The name of the report is *Adolescent Overload*. It is a report of the inquiry into combining school and work, and into supporting successful youth transitions. That is exactly what it is. Mr Deputy Speaker, you and I have been on committees together for some time and I have prided myself on coming up with titles for committees. The member for Mallee is in the House at the moment and no doubt we will be discussing the name of our next report as well. But I was hoping this one would be called ‘The New Working Class’ or ‘The Working Class’, but I was outvoted. However, that is what the report is essentially about: students working and the important transition from the world of school to the world of work, as well as how we can go about supporting them. I think ‘delicate balance’ is the term we use for it. Chapter 3 is headed ‘School and work: a delicate balance’. Stephanie, a student from New South Wales, summed it up really well. On page 21 of the report she is quoted as saying:

It is very important to me to have a job—it means I am earning money—yet the HSC is also vital. Finding the balance is so important. I don’t think many people know how to do this.

That is really at the heart of our interest in this phenomenon—I think Australia heads the list worldwide in terms of students who are at school, particularly middle school and a little higher, and also doing part-time work—and it is a phenomenon that the member for Cunningham alluded to earlier. Maybe investigating some of the sociological reasons in comparative terms would have been really interesting, too. Anyway, many, many young people do combine work and school. I think the figure quoted in the report is something like 260,000 young people doing this, so it is really important that we have a look at the nature and extent of it and how we might be able to assist.

I think my colleagues would agree that, apart from the terrific aspect of getting around and meeting young people, and having many of them make submissions to the inquiry, the experience for most people was really positive. Some of them spoke with genuine enthusiasm and pride in what they did. What really struck me was when we were comparing our youth—and mine goes much further back than the very honourable member for Cunningham’s. I worked in a milk bar until they worked out that, apart from my arithmetic, I was not going that well. I was all thumbs and fingers on the cash register, so they moved me to the milk, but then I discovered the cigarette stand and started smoking, so I did not work there for long. However, the idea is that it was a rarity to have to go to work then—I certainly did not have to—and it was a very strange world to have young people where the adults were. However, that is not the case today; young people, as we learnt through this inquiry, are doing a full range of work with high levels of responsibility. I think that is where a lot of the pressure points are that a number of these students commented on.

Many students want to work for a whole variety of reasons, and I will outline some of the positive aspects listed in the report. One reason is to enhance a student’s confidence and self esteem, and it certainly seemed to do that for a lot of students that we met. Another is to contribute to their financial wellbeing. That included those who have to work to support their families and there were some pretty sad cases there. You could be looking at the body of a young person but into the eyes of someone who had already had a life experience supporting a family while struggling with school; it was quite moving in some instances.

For others of course it was to get some financial independence from their parents. Many said that they did not want to have to rely on their parents. It is funny, isn't it, that as they strive for financial independence the parliament over a number of years has increased the age of dependence to 25—and now we are negotiating about bringing it down again. But the reality is that young people seem to be becoming more independent a lot earlier in life but we have put the age of independence out further and further. That seems to be an incongruity between reality and what we are demanding of young people for financial reasons. Perhaps it is saving the budget bottom line, but I do not know how it is assisting people to meet the material needs that they deem necessary in their lives.

Regarding facilitating the development of social networks, the member for Cunningham gave some really good examples of how young people's world has been expanded. When we were at school we had our school friends but young people now have another world out there—I do not mean just the nightclubs—where they work and take up responsible positions.

I sometimes think—and it certainly came through from some of the discussions we had—that a lot of schools are not even aware of the incredible skill sets that a number of young people have because of their widening social network. What they can do often is not recognised. It is not on their reports and it does not seem to be recognised when references are written. It is as if the worlds of school and work are so totally separate that you cannot connect them. I think this report makes it very clear that we are dealing with a phenomenon where they are intersecting all the time.

The report says students will be allowed to gain useful knowledge and independence and exercise greater responsibility and self-reliance. Well, everybody in this chamber would acknowledge those very important life skills. Certainly the world of work allows them to do that.

Regarding the idea of instilling a work ethic and attitude, I hope there is work ethic and right attitudes at school, but paid work is outside the confines of school and that means they are getting a double dose. This is interesting. The criticism of young people often is that they do not have a work ethic, that they have an attitude problem. Well, they go to work and you hope they are increasing their work ethic and their positive attitudes to work there. Hopefully that is also happening in the schools, but some of the reference is that we are not succeeding in either place—that makes you wonder. Maybe our expectations are so unrealistic these days and we look back to a golden age when we think everything was perfect—

Mr Zappia—It was!

Ms Bird—We were perfect!

Mr SIDEBOTTOM—Look at us—this chamber is full of people with work ethic and, hopefully, worth ethic. I tell you what: a lot of the young people have got them both, and I think that bodes well for the future.

Finally, it is said that students will be enabled to develop work and organisational skills, including time management skills—indeed. Both my sons have had jobs and continue to work. One of them has excellent time management skills and the other one does not, so I think he needs some more work experience to develop those skills. But they are really important skills as we all know.

At page 24, the report quotes Dr Phil McKenzie from the Australian Council for Educational Research:

Working is a very positive experience in the main, as long as it is not an unreasonable number of hours or in an exploitative situation.

I reckon that sums up exactly what the students said about their experiences. They said they could handle the hours in the main as long as there were not too many. I think a lot of them said that about 20 hours were enough and that 15 hours were pretty reasonable. But also they wanted to be valued at work, and that leads me to some of the recommendations that this report makes. One of the main things that came out of the report for me was that employers—like everyone else in this world—enter into social relationships. In this case it is an economic as well as an employer-employee relationship, but in the end it is about valuing each other and what we do and, importantly in the work situation, about the customer.

Many employers that we spoke to were highly cognisant of the needs of young people in their dealings with young people and they were very fair. Some were not, but that was more out of ignorance than anything else. I suppose what the report is saying is: be aware of each other's needs—from the student's point of view, the

needs of your employer. And you have got to communicate. Likewise, there is a responsibility on the employer to communicate with their employees—in this case, young people. We found that, essentially, some form of compact between the two is really important. If we can do that in a non-onerous way for employers, then I think that is really important. That is the same as a recommendation in here that some form of formal recognition of the employment record and the characteristics and the value of that employee for the employer would be very useful. So communication seems to be at the heart of this—it is at the heart of life, isn't it? It is certainly at the heart of the workplace. When there are reasonable communications, then there is a good work experience, and I think that is really important.

We thank the schools very much, and I certainly thank my local schools. The committee were kind enough to come to Burnie, and we had the Burnie Chamber of Commerce on 21 April—a couple of days before a momentous event in world history, apart from Shakespeare's birthday—

The DEPUTY SPEAKER (Mr PD Secker)—Do you know when it is, Member for Braddon?

Mr SIDEBOTTOM—I do—it is the same day as my birthday, Mr Deputy Speaker! We had the Hellyer campus of the Tasmanian Academy, we had Latrobe High School, Penguin High School and Reece High School. I do thank them very much; it was a really good day.

An important thing to come out of that meeting was this: we asked, 'Do you officially record if your students work—part-time or whatever?' The essential answer was no. I do not know how many other schools are like this, but I think it is fairly fundamental that your school knows you are involved in the world of work. One, I would have thought it is pretty important to know your student anyway; and, two, it might be pretty important—as we enter into this almost case-managing, flexible learning mode that we are moving towards, and which is really important—to understand and recognise the skills and competencies that your students have before they get to school, particularly at the senior secondary level. That just struck me as being pretty fundamental because they are adding to the stock of the skills and competencies of your campus. Some said that they knew at the individual class level, but then you do not understand it from the generic level of the school—if you are looking at behaviour patterns of students and their work and so on. So I suppose what we are saying is that communication is at the heart of these social contracts. It is really important in terms of formal records that people have an understanding of what their students are doing outside of the classroom because it has a bearing on what happens in the classroom.

In summary, the title *Adolescent overload?* is followed by a question mark. I am not sure there was an overload, however. I think most students really got the balance right. They are definitely a new working class and I was really pleased that that description tends to fit the report. I thank all those who participated in this inquiry, particularly our chair, the secretary, my fellow members who took part and everyone who made submissions.