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Public Interest Debate

22 October 2019

SCHOOL CURRICULUM REVIEW

Ms SONIA HORNER (Wallsend) (17:17):

I thank the Government for moving this motion today.

Dr Geoff Lee: That's nice.

Ms SONIA HORNER: It is very timely. I will make five quick points about what I am going to touch upon—the notion of decluttering; the concept of "back to basics"; the contribution of Professor Masters; the renewed focus on mathematics, English and science; and educational opportunity. The member for Canterbury asked me if I was ready to speak today. I said that I guess I had about 18 years as a chalkie to get ready. I taught in Walgett, Kempsey, North Lakes and Kurri Kurri, and I did a couple of stints at Newcastle TAFE teaching modern history.

Dr Geoff Lee: A fellow TAFE teacher.

Ms SONIA HORNER: Yes, a fellow TAFE teacher. I will touch on educational opportunities. My brother was made to leave school at 15, like the rest of my family members. He was a bricklayer. He got his qualification as clerk of works and became a bricklaying technical teacher at Coffs Harbour. He became a head teacher at Singleton and then moved to Newcastle TAFE and became the schools manager for New South Wales before he died. I learnt a lot about TAFE through my brother—he was heavily involved with TAFE and loved it. TAFE is a wonderful organisation.

I will focus for a minute on opportunity because I agree with the Government on each of the points in this motion. Every teacher in New South Wales would say that we must make sure that every child who leaves school has the basics—reading and writing. It is definitely important that maths, English and science are a focus of the curriculum. For those who are not naturally inclined to the subjects of maths, science and English, once they learn how to read and write it is, of course, important that their creative skills are acknowledged. I will be really interested to hear how the Government and Professor Masters seek to declutter the education curriculum. I know that the many thousands of teachers in New South Wales will also be very interested to hear that.

I will talk about opportunity as well. Opportunity is very important when considering what the curriculum offers and what the education department in New South Wales offers. I was a child from a commission housing area and I went to a disadvantaged school, but when I first went to Walgett I saw that there were three tiers of education. There was the tier of the richer folk who sent their children to boarding schools. The less rich, or those who wanted to have their children around, sent their children to the local Catholic school. The poorest kids—the kids that I taught as a 22-year-old—went to Walgett High School. No-one could ever question that the kids at Walgett High School were the poorest kids in the region. They missed lots of opportunities that the kids who were lucky enough to have richer parents—the kids who were sent to boarding school—had.

One of the things that I noticed when I was teaching at Walgett was that all of the teachers were 22 or 23. The children at Walgett were not getting experienced teachers because experienced teachers were not going to Walgett. If we are looking at decluttering the curriculum and how we can change the face of education, particularly public education, let us take teachers along with us. While we are looking at the curriculum let us talk to teachers at Burke, Walgett, Maitland, in the inner city and in the western suburbs and ask them, "What do we need to declutter from the curriculum? What are you doing that you do not think best benefits the students?"

At Walgett the biggest problem was getting the kids to school. I do not think they saw the value in going to school, and I can understand why. So let us ask the teachers, "How can we give the students from the poorest families the opportunity to be at school every day?" Let us make sure that the poorest kids in our schools can read and write. Then let us look at how to improve the relationship between high schools and TAFEs so that students who want to do educational courses are encouraged and their decisions are not devalued. I think we are making a really good start. There is a long way to go, but I congratulate the Government on making a start.