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Education and Employment Committee

Report

SPEECH

Tuesday, 24 May 2011

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Mr SYMON (Deakin) (20:36): I would like to start off by thanking the member for Robertson for a very good speech, which went to the depth of the report. She has really expanded on a lot of the issues in it. The committee inquiry went for a long time. I have had the benefit of being in both the last parliament and the present one, but the member for Robertson had to start about three-quarters of the way through the inquiry, and I think she has truly grasped the gist of it.

As a member of the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Education and Training in the 42nd Parliament, which commenced this inquiry, and a member of the Standing Committee on Education and Employment in the 43rd parliament, which concluded the report, I have no hesitation in commending the report to the House. I would particularly like to acknowledge the work of the member for Cunningham, Sharon Bird, for her work in chairing the committee in the 42nd Parliament and the work of the member for Kingston, Amanda Rishworth, for her work in chairing the committee and in concluding the report in the 43rd Parliament. Although the terms of reference at first glance may seem quite limiting, this was one of those inquiries where the more questions were asked the wider our scope seemed to get. Because of the change of parliament, the inquiry actually went longer than planned. But I am very pleased, standing here tonight, to be able to say that we completed the job we were given, and I think the committee as a whole completed it very well.

The inquiry's schedule for hearings took us to every state and territory. There are vast differences between the state and territory systems, which we saw in our travels and heard about from witnesses. No two states or territories were the same but, having said that, there was nowhere that I would give a pass mark to. Everywhere we travelled we heard of the problems of teacher librarians in the system and with the resourcing of libraries, and in most cases it was a long-term trend that was heading down.

There were exceptions, however. I found the exceptions quite surprising, but on reflection they are probably not. We found that private sector schools overall greatly valued teacher librarians and used teacher librarians as a selling point to attract parents to their schools. It was a fairly simple argument that they put to us, and it came from many sources: having teacher librarians in our schools improves our results. I do not doubt that. Having heard from so many teacher librarians, their associations and various other groups during the inquiry, and seeing international evidence as well, this issue came up time and time again. Whereas some state systems were inclined to use teacher librarians as relief staff if a teacher was sick or could not attend class for some reason, that certainly was not the case in the evidence that we heard from the private schools. As a better qualified person than a 'standard' qualified teacher, if that is the right description, the teacher librarian has knowledge above and beyond, and to be put into a position where you can be called away from your job at any time to go and mind a class because someone is not available really undervalues the profession. I would also like to say that we took some very good evidence from the various professional associations. One thing I would really like to highlight in my time here is the summation of what a teacher librarian does, because many people do not quite understand. They think, 'A teacher, a librarian—maybe it's someone who files the books.' That really undervalues the profession in a huge way. The summation of what a teacher librarian does I will leave to the words of the Australian Library and Information Association. I think they got it quite right in their submission to the inquiry. What they said was:

Teacher librarians support and implement the vision of their school communities through advocating and building effective library and information services and programs that contribute to the development of lifelong learners …

The teacher librarian is both an educator and an information manager with integrated understandings from both areas. Professional staff qualified in teacher education and librarianship (teacher librarians) are responsible for both shaping and reflecting the school's objectives with respect to library and information programs and services.

As an integral partner in the school's teaching and learning team, the teacher librarian has a role in the planning, implementation and evaluation of education policies, curricula, learning outcomes and programs, with particular reference to the development of learners' research and information literacies.

I think the key words in those few paragraphs are 'information literacies'.

As we conducted the inquiry, it became more and more apparent that the way many schools teach has changed rapidly in recent years. Information literacy now includes the digital world. We found too often that it was taken for granted that teachers and their students would know by instinct how to research on the internet. We heard large amounts of evidence as to why this was not the case. It was very interesting to hear that in many cases the role of a teacher librarian directly suited the role of a digital gatekeeper for information. I must say, I had not thought of that at the start of the inquiry, but by the end of the inquiry I was quite convinced that this is a new and expanded role for teacher librarians. It probably builds the case more than ever for having teacher librarians in greater numbers in as many schools as possible. There will always be the small schools that have only two dozen students where it is not going to be feasible to have a full-time teacher librarian, but there are many schools of hundreds or a thousand plus students where it should be an absolute necessity. The report certainly goes into some of those areas and the reasons why.

Talking of digital literacy, I have a school in my own electorate, Ringwood Secondary College, which did something that was at the time fairly new. It has caught on so quickly it is not notable anymore. In 2010 all 300 of their year 7 students were required to have an iPad instead of textbooks. From memory, I think they actually had one textbook and everything else was on the iPad. That is a 300-strong army of iPads, if you like, that need looking after from the school's point of view as well as the student's—someone to guide what goes on and how they are used. That is not going to happen without someone who has knowledge and understanding of where the information comes from. That was in 2010, and I note that in 2011 there are many schools in my local area that now have iPads as part of their school equipment. I am sure that in the next couple of years it will become a very standard item. It is good from the student's point of view—they do not have to carry around a schoolbag with a dozen or so textbooks in it—and it is good from the school's point of view because they can update texts as they go through the year. That is one of the great points going forward where teacher librarians can be a real asset to any school. There are, of course, many other things that they do, and I am not going to go over everything that is recommended in the report. I thoroughly agree with all 11 recommendations in the report, and I certainly recommend that report for reading by the wider public and especially the education sector.

Further to that, we heard a lot about access to online libraries and the price that schools had to pay to be able to do that. In many cases it was quite an exorbitant fee for not a whole lot of use. We heard evidence that school libraries could spend 25 per cent of their budget subscribing to an online database, and you cannot expect many schools to do that. There is a resource called Electronic Resources Australia that offers a very wide range of data and can be accessed across all schools. I think one of the key recommendations of the report was that governments at both levels put money and resources into allowing schools to be able to access that at a bulk rate as cheaply as possible. I commend the report to the House.