

**SOCIAL SECURITY AND VETERANS' ENTITLEMENTS LEGISLATION
AMENDMENT (SCHOOLING REQUIREMENTS) BILL 2008**

Comments by KEITH A LOCKHART

Improving School Enrolment and Attendance through Welfare Reform (SEAM).

SEAM introduces conditions on the receipt of income support payments whereby parents are obliged to ensure their children of compulsory school age are enrolled in school as well as to take reasonable action to ensure children attend school regularly.

GENERAL

The intent of the Bill is to ensure the enrolment of children at school or an approved alternative and for them to attend regularly. This is an admirable objective.

The outcome of the Bill is to place penalties on those parents/ grandparents/ foster parents who are unable or unwilling to ensure the pupil/student attends "school".

It is realised that there is a convention in respect to the drafting of legislation but the wording of this Bill is more convoluted than usual and hence has the capacity to create variable interpretation by the reader, in particular those responsible for school level implementation.

COMMENTS.

It is imperative that the first point of contact by the school administration, in respect to truancy, be the parent. This early contact must not be ignored and may just be able to go some way in resolving the issue. I am unable to identify where such a strategy is considered in the Bill and feel that anything, which the Bill does to dilute this contact, would be unacceptable.

The Bill appears to rely on a number of assumptions, which may not be reliable.

The Bill gives no credit to the fact that State/Territory Education Authorities already have in place legislation regarding truancy and parent/guardian responsibility. Whether those authorities choose to exercise existing power is another matter.

The progress towards some consistency in education legislation and policy across Australia is slow and the simple matter of compulsory attendance age still varies across the States and Territories. This will pose significant problems.

On a first read it appears that the Bill presumes that those responsible for the pupil/student enrolment and attendance are all in receipt of some form of assistance, of course that is not always the case.

There is some recognition of non-government schools but it is hard to imagine that non-systemic school management would consider having a public airing of their students' non-attendance records.

Does anybody really think that by reducing a person's financial assistance that the parent/guardian will somehow be empowered to the extent of being able to convince a reluctant student to attend school?

In current times there are many examples of grandparents assisting in the care either partly or wholly of the pupil/student and in many cases they step in when the child is difficult for the parent to cope. Why grandparents would put in jeopardy the financial assistance, such as the Aged Pension, they currently receive is a mystery.

Over the years there have been studies undertaken in many countries about the reasons for truancy. They include;

- Irrelevance of the courses offered.
- Pupil/Student harassment or bullying.
- Marginalisation because non-standard clothing and other visual evidence of the poor financial circumstances of the parent/guardian.
- A family in poor financial circumstances tends to move their place of residence far more often than a family which if financially sound which may result in lack of "school uniform". It may also start a loser syndrome.

- The inability of the parent/guardian to fund excursions or trips and other costly items, particularly for secondary students.
- Role models tend to drawn from those who were also habitual truants.

In this brief submission, I have not delved into the problems faced by indigenous or non-English speaking families as the complexity of those issues leads me to believe that this Bill will do nothing to provide a solution and may add to the problem.

Parents/Guardians need support not just in funding and certainly not in removing funding from the household that is struggling to cope.

The current situation provides little if any incentive for school administrators to devote scarce resources to the issues surrounding truancy.

I consider that one way that may assist schools to tackle the problem would be to provide funding to employ and train “Home School Liaison Officers” who would be able to make early contact with the parent/guardian and assist them to develop strategies to reduce truancy.

It is difficult to believe that there exists empirical evidence, which supports the proposition that by removing or suspending any form of financial benefit from the parent/guardian results in increased attendance at school. It is even more difficult to believe that the introduction of this Bill is one of the first “educational” initiatives of the Federal Labor Government.

KEITH A LOCKHART

2nd October 2008

“Schooling is an interruption in what would otherwise be the chosen lifestyle of the student.”