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Main Committee

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Education and Employment Committee

Report

SPEECH

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Speaker Tudge, Alan, MP	Question No.

Mr TUDGE (Aston) (20:07): I also rise to speak on the *School libraries and teacher librarians in 21st century Australia* report. I would like to make some brief comments in relation to it. Like the previous speaker, the member for McPherson, I was not a member of the primary committee that did most of the work in this area, a committee in the 42nd parliament. We, the present House of Representatives Standing Committee on Education and Employment, took most of their work and the findings of their inquiry and finetuned it. The purpose of the inquiry was to look into and report on the role, adequacy and resourcing of school libraries and teacher librarians in Australia's public and private schools. Specifically, the committee was to focus on the impact of recent policies, the future potential of school librarians and the factors influencing the school librarian workforce.

While libraries are just a small component in some respects of a school, the report was quite timely, because school libraries—indeed, libraries in general—are going through a period of fundamental change due to rapid technological advances. When we went to school, all of the information was contained physically at the library, and that is where you went. Maybe it was a little bit different for the member for Longman, who is sitting behind me in this chamber, but when I went to school that was the case. But these days a lot of the information is indeed online. Certainly at the secondary school level, in doing research projects and the like, students are searching online for their information and so do not necessarily have to go to the physical location of the library to find that information. And it is similar even at the primary school level. Increasingly, primary school students are accessing information through online media. That changes the fundamental nature, purpose, role, structure and staffing of libraries. So the report was timely in that regard in that it could examine a lot of those issues and determine therefore what the right policy responses should be to support the evolving nature of the school library.

I should point out, of course, that the federal role in school libraries is quite a small one. The federal parliament has no jurisdiction over employing librarians, it does not manage the schools, it does not allocate the resources as such—they are all the role of state and territory governments, in the case of state schools, and non-government authorities or non-government individual school principals in the case of the independents and Catholic school sectors. So we have to bear that in mind that, in terms of the recommendations which were made in this report. We cannot be overly prescriptive in the recommendations made, and can really only provide some high-level policy overview and some guidance rather than detailed prescriptions, which are rightly left in the hands of the school authorities or the school principals themselves.

Some of the issues which did arise in this particular report—you should see them if you just pick up a copy of the report and scan through it—included accessing the databases of resources, which of course is a very important thing, and not all libraries are equal in that capacity; different libraries have a different number of resources to be able to purchase the databases which the students are relying upon.

The issue of cyber-safety arose, inevitably, and that is an issue that arises in almost every single school setting. It is certainly something that I hear in my electorate from parents, teachers and school principals. There were issues around technical support for teacher-librarians, and how that is provided these days. There were additional issues that came up through the inquiry about the status of librarians these days, and how arguably that has declined—and therefore how that contributes to fewer applicants applying to be librarians, it contributes to retention issues et cetera. Indeed, it was even pointed out in the inquiry by a number of submitters who said that there is a bit of a vicious circle as well—if you do not have enough senior librarians and senior staff to then be able to train more junior librarians, you start to be faced with a real issue.

So this particular committee, as I said, was largely the work of the 42nd parliament rather than the committee which I was part of in the 43rd parliament, but we did agree to a number of recommendations. They were largely established in the earlier parliament but we also agreed to them. They picked up some of the issues which I have just outlined. Probably the most important recommendation I would highlight is the first recommendation, which is to fund the provision of a core set of online database resources which are made available to all Australian schools. The rationale, really, for the Commonwealth to be involved in doing that was a belief by the committee

that there would be economies of scale to be had by the Commonwealth being bulk-purchasers, if you like, of those databases. My natural inclination would be to leave it to the individual school principals to determine what databases they want, but I think there is some justification in this instance from a purchasing-power perspective.

Recommendation 2 was to develop a discrete national policy statement that defines the importance of digital and information literacy et cetera, which of course is relatively straightforward. It makes recommendations around the Commonwealth government initiating an Australian based longitudinal study into the links between library programs, literacy and student achievement. Again, it seems sensible to do further research into this to fully understand what the impact is on students' achievements. There are also some recommendations around the teacher-library workforce, in terms of doing some further research to understand what the gaps are and what additional training is needed. Finally there were some recommendations which concerned partnering relationships in terms of encouraging individual schools to partner with other schools and indeed for partnerships between states and territories to share learnings and best practice. Again, I think that is good common sense. Hopefully that would occur without necessarily the recommendation of a parliamentary inquiry to make it happen.

Let me conclude by reiterating the importance of the school library despite the changes that we see in today's school environment and despite the changes that we see in the broader community with the advent of technology. The library itself may have changed in terms of its focus and the technology and skills required; nevertheless it still has a very important place in Australia's schools. Hopefully the recommendations arising from this inquiry will further enhance the importance of school libraries in Australia's school systems.