

## Transcript - 5AA with Leon Byner - November 1, 2017

### David Knuckey, SA Association of State School Organisations (SAASSO)

#### Addressing school truancy

*(Byner: Students attending school, following up truancy has never really been an issue that South Australia has properly dealt with. Half of the students at some schools are absent more than a fortnight each semester ... is it because bullying is rife and some students fear for their safety? Is it the parents are so neglectful that they don't ensure children attend? The coroner had some very harsh words for Families SA ... who did not ensure that Chloe Valentine was going to school. She tragically passed on unnecessarily. The expiations planned ... could be up to \$750. The Lower House of course has passed it, the question's now in the Upper House ... David Knuckey ... are you in favour of this?)*

No, Leon, we're not; we're not generally in favour of fining parents ... there's a variety of reasons that children miss school ... there's too much absenteeism going on but there's a multitude of factors ... bullying is obviously the number one factor, school size, relationship with teachers, whether you're a special needs student, the socio-economic background, whether you're an indigenous student. These are the factors that impact on school bullying ... the parent issue not as big a factor as perhaps we've been led to believe if you look at the report released in Australia a couple of years ago. In terms of the work/life balance with parents where they're too busy ... by the time a child's 10 that doesn't show up as a factor at all. So fining parents with the assumption that that's somehow going to fix the problem just doesn't make any sense. I mean you mentioned Chloe Valentine and Libby Bell, with all due respect to the parents ... would the Government fining these parents have made any difference? *(Byner: ... if fining is not the way to go then what's the alternative?)* Well, things such as Dennis Hood's law is something I think we do need to look at. Certainly a survey we did showed that plenty of parents and educators are in favour of giving the Government power to actually prosecute bullies. *(Byner: So ... you're really saying that of all the things that might be the reason ... bullying is at the top of the tree?)* Research shows that bullying has one of the strongest associations with absenteeism in Australian schools, absolutely ... instead of fining the victim's parents let's look at perhaps doing something to prosecute or let's look at ... more in-school support to deal with it. Teachers need more training; teachers say they're not equipped to deal with it. Fining parents isn't going to fix any of these problems. *(Byner: So your remedy is what?)* Better resourcing for the schools, better training for the teachers ... rather than just assume that if a child doesn't come to school it's because the parent can't be bothered taking them, let's look at what the actual causes are. We've got the research; let's base policies on this research rather than just something that sounds tough like we'll fine parents ... let's also be honest – who's going to actually pay these fines? The families most impacted, are they really going to pay these fines? And if they don't, what happens then? Is the State Government going to start rounding parents up and putting them in prison for 90 days for not paying the fine?

### Chris Hamilton, Psychologist

*(Byner: Chris Hamilton ... what do you think of the idea of fining up to \$750?)*

Pie in the sky ... it's a knee jerk reaction; it's a simplistic attempt to paper over what I think is a significant issue ... *(Byner: ... what do we do to get kids to school? ... )* ... from my experience I can advise ... that the single factor that would make a major difference is if there were specialist resources in schools that had a more profound understanding of children's learning needs and also of the psychological and behavioural issues of children and an understanding of family dynamics because ... some of the cases that I'm involved in are ... beyond complex... they are almost impossible to conceive. So I wouldn't like to play

ready blame in anyone's basket; I would like to say that we need higher quality resources and we need an awful lot more ... that's probably what the Government knows but that would cost money and I guess that that's not what they're prepared to do and to do something simplistic like saying we'll fine them is ... nothing more than a manifestation of further political expediency. *(Byner: ... the bullying ... are the schools dealing with this properly or are there still many deficits in this?)* Many deficits ... what we have is in some places an entrenched culture of bullying. But it's not just in schools ... there's a very high correlation I'm quite persuaded between today's current sense of entitlement which pervades from the next generation of parents through to the children and so that entitlement, the assertion of rights then becomes ... my assertion of rights occurs at the cost of other people's liberty, safety and freedom. And so that's really in large measure what you're getting with bullying ... they're not sort of the old fashioned kind of bullying but ... very much an entrenched culture from the parents of ... today and therefore passed onto the children ... it makes it extremely difficult for the face to face teachers.

### **John Gardner, Shadow Education Minister**

*(Byner: John Gardner ... why do you oppose this?)*

Look Leon, we've been grappling with truancy and going around the roundabout on this for 15 years. Malcolm Buckby you'll remember was the last Education Minister in the Olsen/Kerin Government and he had a bill ready to go that would do a number of the things that the current Education Bill's doing. But you'd remember Trish White, Jane Lomax-Smith; we've been around this over and over and over again. The expiation notice, the speeding fine style approach to truancy, that's new. We've said for a long time that you need to increase the maximum penalties so that you've actually got a reason that if there are parents who are refusing to engage with the department they can be taken to court ... we've said that and the Government's agreed and that's now in the bill and that's going to be going forward, \$5,000 maximum penalty. That'll hardly ever be applied but it means that parents are forced to engage. The second thing is you actually need an increase in the resources ... truancy officers, the people whose job it is to engage with these families, to bring them in and have a family conference with the police if need be or whatever other services to get to the problem of why this child isn't attending school. There are only 22 across South Australia and we argued, we committed in fact more than a year ago that if a Marshall Liberal Government was elected we would increase by 50% those truancy officers. And in extraordinary coincidence last week the Government decided that we do need to increase the truancy officers and they worked out that it needs to be by 50%. So we've finally got agreement on that; the resources are going to go there so that those case loads can come down and those truancy officers can get family conferences together where we can address the causes and if parents don't engage they get taken to court and there's an intervention there. Those interventions are useful. A truancy fine, a \$750 fine applied like a parking ticket where it would just be applied, that would be so much easier for a school looking to clear a backlog to just apply that fine without the interventions that are actually going to be useful. It undermines, having a \$750 or less ... parking ticket style fine completely undermines the value of having those extra truancy officers, having real engagement, really getting into why those kids aren't at school. We need a tough policy but we need a fair policy and the parking ticket style arrangement is just going to add to the backlog of unpaid fines that are waiting to be collected the State Government writes off as debt. It will just undermine those families that have the fines applied and it doesn't actually require that the work be done between schools, the Education Department and those families where we have problems to address those real problems.