

COOMANDOOK AREA SCHOOL – 27 Nov 08

Mr PEDERICK (Hammond) (15:29): I wish to bring to the attention of the house a matter causing grave concern for the community in my hometown of Coomandook. While I speak here of this specific community, it is not unreasonable to think that this situation and others like it may be occurring around the state.

The Coomandook Area School is typical of most schools around rural South Australia. It serves a widespread community consisting mainly of farming families and others used to making the best of what they have and getting on with the job. I attended this school myself for most of my school life. Rural communities like Coomandook are renowned for being patient, resilient and self-sufficient but they cannot do it all on their own.

I want to relate the details from a letter sent recently from the school's governing council to the education minister, a copy of which was sent to me. Eight years ago the department decided that the school had too many buildings and ordered the removal of the junior school building. The council's concerns as stated in the letter are:

- *The junior school block was earmarked for removal eight years ago and still nothing has been done about taking it away or demolishing it.*
- *During the past eight years no funding has been provided by the Education Dept to maintain the building.*
- *No funding has been allocated by the Education Dept to modify our existing buildings to accommodate our junior school children in another part of our school.*

This raises many serious issues for the school community, most importantly health and safety. It is obvious that the building is unsafe for staff, students and visitors. Wood rot is rampant, resulting in unsafe flooring, insecure windows and easy access for dust and vermin.

Birds, bees and flies enter at will, as there are no screens. Air-conditioners are old and inefficient. Lack of proper maintenance raises the possibility of Legionnaires' disease. Carpets are filthy. There is no point in sweeping anything under them, as the government appears to be doing.

The most unpleasant and threatening problem is caused by mice, which have open access as a result of holes and gaps in the timber building. Mice faeces and urine are ever present, in all manner of books and equipment but, most disturbingly, in school bags. Any child who has not carefully sealed his or her lunch box and properly closed their school bag is likely to find their food contaminated. The letter details the associated risks: salmonellosis, leptospirosis, Seoul virus and Murine typhus. A further side effect is that snakes have proliferated, inside and outside the building.

The governing council has stated clearly and unequivocally that it is no longer prepared to accept liability for any future problems, as the situation is beyond its control. This is premised on the following facts:

- *The department has stated the building needs to be removed.*
- *It has not provided any funds to demolish or remove it.*
- *It has not provided any alternative area for the junior school.*

The council has demanded the department declare in writing that the duty of care to staff and students rests with it.

Like most rural communities, the parents and friends group takes great pride in the school. Having been advised that the building's removal was imminent they raised funds for playground equipment to occupy the vacant space. The department's years of dithering have deprived the children of a new playground—the equipment for which is currently gathering dust and mouse droppings in a private shed—and disheartened the community who worked so hard to make it happen.

The community's frustration is tinged with anger at the way the department has handled this fiasco. The governing council understands that a quote to remove the building

was withdrawn by the contractor, probably on realising the enormity of the task and the lack of salvage value. The council also believes a subsequent re-costing of the job has been done and assumes the department has baulked at the amount.

But what price children's safety?

What price the health and safety of teaching staff?

What price a reasonable quality of life for the school community?

And what price school pride and department reputation?

This has gone on long enough. I challenge the Premier, who will no doubt find a way to talk up how much he cares about country SA, and his education minister, who needs to lift her city-centric gaze above the roofs of metropolitan super schools, to get down to Coomandook and explain to its citizens just why their health, education and wellbeing have been ignored.

This situation is a prime example of this government's miserable and disgraceful neglect of at least one-third of the state's population. You can bet that whatever money is needed to rectify this shameful state of affairs is earmarked for pork-barrelling in the increasing number of seats this government faces losing in 2010.