



1983

PARLIAMENT OF TASMANIA

PARLIAMENTARY STANDING COMMITTEE OF PUBLIC ACCOUNTS

REPORT ON
EDUCATION DEPARTMENT:
SCHOOL SECURITY AND CLEANING

Laid upon the Tables of both Houses of Parliament

The Committee was appointed under the provisions of section 2 of the Public Accounts Committee Act 1970 (No. 54).

MEMBERS OF THE COMMITTEE

Legislative Council

Mr Batt
Mr Gregory
Mr McKay

House of Assembly

Mr Barnard (Chairman)
Mr Davis
Mr Lyons

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REPORT

EDUCATION DEPARTMENT: SCHOOL SECURITY AND CLEANING

SCHOOL SECURITY

At page eleven of his 1982 Report, the Auditor-General expressed considerable concern at losses of cash and property in schools:

In reporting on the high incidence of thefts from schools and colleges in 1980-81, I stated that I had referred my concern to the Under Treasurer on 31 July 1981, drawing attention to the fact that, in addition to the theft of cash and property, considerable damage is often caused by illegal entries. I also observed there was always the risk of fires being lit with a resultant loss of buildings and consequential major impact on the State's finances. I suggested that, in view of the potential risks and the possibility of major claims on the Government Buildings Fire Insurance Fund, it would be advisable to have the Education Department re-examine its policy in this matter in consultation with the Police Department.

On 1 December 1981 the Under Treasurer advised me of the Education Department's policy for the installation of fire detectors and alarm systems and stated that having regard to the limited finances available he considered the Education Department was acting responsibly in its approach to the problem.

I have now to report that in the twelve months period to 31 July 1982 I have received advice of a further 326 illegal entries to schools, colleges and other Education Department properties throughout the State (South 180, North 70, North-West 54, West 17, North-East 5) which represents an increase of 33.6 per cent over the previous corresponding period (244). In several instances the same schools had been entered regularly, e.g., Bridgewater Primary (14), Rosebery District High (12) and Claremont High (7).

As detailed in a later section of this report losses by theft and vandalism together with fire damage in respect of Education Department buildings and equipment in the 1981-82 period amounted to some \$1.8 million including \$1.5 million damage to the Rosetta Primary School which was destroyed by fire (cause uncertain) on 26 February 1982.

The marked increase in the burden of cost being borne by the State as a result of theft and vandalism is a clear indication of an extremely urgent need to improve security of the millions of dollars of State funds invested in these buildings and their equipment.

The Committee heard evidence from the Secretary of the Education Department, Mr Mulcahy, on the incidence of vandalism and theft in schools. He said that if losses from fires at Rosetta and Montagu Bay Schools was deducted 'the picture does not look quite so bad'. Extensive police investigation of those two fires failed to find any cause. It is not known whether arson or accident was responsible. The total amount of loss known to have resulted from vandalism and theft during 1981-82 was \$91 000. This represents about \$307 per school, whereas patrol services have cost the Department of the order of \$155 000 per year. What the losses would have been without this protection is not known, but there have been recent instances of patrolmen catching vandals in the act of lighting fires which could have caused hundreds of thousands of dollars worth of damage.

The Education Department supplied the Committee with extensive details of the operations of patrol services which it is not necessary to report here. The Committee is satisfied that various steps that are being taken will lead to improvement.

One point is that the amounts of cash stolen are very small. In 1980 from sixty-two illegal entries, \$1 699 was stolen. There were forty-nine illegal entries in 1981 when \$1 985 was stolen. Usually when schools are robbed the safe is damaged beyond repair. Replacement costs \$1 200 per safe. The Secretary of the Department said 'we have a Departmental policy to ensure that schools keep only a minimum amount of cash on hand and we ask schools to try to do their banking daily so that if there is a robbery only a minimum amount of money will be stolen'.

It seems very obvious to the Committee that there should be a *requirement* for daily banking after school. It should then be cheaper and quite feasible for schools not to have safes at all.

The Department is now interested in having security considerations given more attention in the design of school buildings.

It was put with emphasis to the Committee that vandalism is usually the work of groups of school age children and it is most undesirable for cases to be reported: Publicising vandalism to get the community to understand the problem is a good thing, but it apparently does not pay off to give a particular incident some publicity because it gives somebody the idea of doing the same thing somewhere else.

The Committee recommends that the Minister seek the co-operation of the news media in suppressing such stories as they do with certain other types of 'nuisance' occurrences, such as bomb threats.

TENDERS FOR SCHOOL CLEANING

The cleaning business in Tasmania is very competitive and as a result of this complaints go about the community concerning the letting of contracts by Government. The Committee having heard some of these complaints decided to enquire into the procedures followed by the Education Department. The Secretary, Mr Mulcahy, gave evidence that while most Departmental properties are cleaned by day labour, there are seven contracts for larger properties — three colleges in the North-West and Rosny and three administrative centres in the South. Where contractors can be used it is far cheaper than day labour. The main reason for this is that staff do not have to be carried over the school holidays. Also, the Department does not become stuck with a poor worker. On the other hand, of course, four of the seven contracts are let to the one firm, a large concern which also operates interstate. However, as the Committee was told in evidence, price is the really important factor when contracts are let. The Tender Board examines tenders for price, record of services and the relationship between price and the time to be worked to maintain the premises satisfactorily.

The firm which has four of the contracts was the lowest tenderer in three cases. For the fourth contract, the firm was the second lowest tenderer. The Committee saw the written explanation by the Director-General of Education to the Minister. The principle reason given for rejecting the lowest tender — which was by far the lowest — was that the number of man hours to be spent daily was only five, whereas the Tender Board had established that the minimum time required would be fifteen hours per day. The Committee found no reason to doubt that the system of tendering for cleaning is proper.

It was stated in evidence that while the past performance of a contractor is taken into account, if another tenderer's price were cheaper the Department 'would find it difficult to retain a previous contractor simply on the basis that he had been doing a good job; otherwise there would be no point in going back to public tender'.

As a way of providing some stability in the industry the Department is extending the terms of contracts from two years to three. It was admitted that this is somewhat inconsistent in that while there is public tendering, the Department is still concerned with the irrelevant matter of continuity of employment. However the Committee in considering this aspect concluded that the longer term could tend to attract lower tenders because of this continuity.

If the work done by a contractor is unsatisfactory the Minister has the power to terminate his services. The process is that the school principal makes a written complaint to headquarters which then takes the matter up with the contractor. When the term for a contract expires and fresh tenders are called, the principal produces a reference for the previous contractor. The weakness that we see in this is that if a contractor's performance over say the first two and a half years just scrapes in, so that the principal never quite goes to the length of making a written complaint, a good reference could result from a markedly improved service over the last six months. We therefore recommend that each institution which employs contract cleaners be required to report each six months.

Committee Room No. 3,
Parliament House, Hobart
8 September 1983

M. T. C. BARNARD, Chairman