

# TRANSCRIPT

## LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL LEGAL AND SOCIAL ISSUES COMMITTEE

### **Inquiry into the State Education System in Victoria**

Shepparton – Wednesday 17 April 2024

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John Berger

Georgie Crozier

Moira Deeming

David Ettershank

Wendy Lovell

Sarah Mansfield

**WITNESSES**

Jodie Fleming, Executive Officer, and

Louise Pearce, Board Chair, and

Sally Matheson, Education Benalla Program Manager, Tomorrow Today.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, Louise and Jodie and Sally for coming in and joining us with the inquiry today. I will quickly read the information and then we will go straight into it. We are running a bit behind time. Again, thank you for coming in. I just want to quickly read this regarding informing us.

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Could you please state your name and the organisation you are with, please.

**Louise PEARCE:** I will start. Tomorrow Today. My name is Louise Pearce. I am the Chair, and it is a voluntary position.

**Jodie FLEMING:** My name is Jodie Fleming, from Tomorrow Today, and I am the Executive Officer.

**Sally MATHESON:** I am Sally Matheson. I am the Education Benalla Program Manager from Tomorrow Today.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you so much. I will open up if you can do a quick opening statement regarding what you want to say.

**Louise PEARCE:** Okay. I will start. Tomorrow Today is an independent community foundation, and we work on the premise that education is made up of three components – families, schools and community working together. We have been in place I think since 2007.

**Sally MATHESON:** 2010 was the Education Benalla –

**Louise PEARCE:** 2010 was the education program. The foundation was set up in 2007 in response to the Vinson report, and since 2010 we have been running education programs to support our young people from nought to 24. We run a variety of programs. I think you would have read our submission. We have got lots of things to leave with you if that is helpful about some of our programs.

We really operate on a mix of funding. We were set up with some funding from the Department of Education in the early days to get us started with a group of community people who were really passionate about trying to do something in their local community – two ladies standing at the school gate saying, 'We've got to do something in our town. There's a lot of disadvantage, and we've got to step up.' So those two ladies are still involved. They have both got OAMs for their work, so we are very proud of the work they have done. They are very inspirational.

Over the years we have had a lot of philanthropic funding to support our programs, and every year it is a challenge. How can we sustain our funding when we know we are making a difference? In the last two years we have had some government funding again, and we are hopeful for some more ongoing funding to fund sort of the backbone of our organisation. We try to get as much of our money to go into the programs that we deliver to the point that we have purchased the premises where we operate out of. It is a –

**Sally MATHESON:** Court.

**Louise PEARCE:** court – thanks, ladies – and so we run a lot of our programs out of there, and we rent out a few of the office spaces to cover our admin overheads. We are quite self-sustaining in that regard. We will talk as we go along about some of our programs, but we have had some good outcomes for our young people.

We also provide a great opportunity for our community to contribute. Often volunteers do not know how to get engaged – where can I help? – so we have lots and lots of people volunteer at different levels through our organisation, whether it is working with our year 9 students as mentors in our Connect9 program or they might go to the kindergartens and do reading buddies with some of the kids. There are a range of opportunities for volunteers to work with us. We have a call for volunteers every year, and we do really well. It is about the whole community working around our young people and taking some responsibility to look after our own community. We are a disadvantaged community. We are hoping to raise that through our Education Benalla programs and our relationships with our community and our schools. So hopefully that is a bit of an insight into what we do.

**The CHAIR:** Jodie or Sally, do you want to make any comments at all?

**Sally MATHESON:** The Education Benalla program, as Louise said, is based on three foundations – education equals families plus schools plus community working together. We have four objectives within our program so that all Benalla children start school ready to learn, and we are now about to commence a new program starting with antenatal support for families and engaging community volunteers to support families from birth through the first thousand days of life.

We also work with literacy and numeracy, and we hope that our outcomes in literacy and numeracy will exceed the state average. Within those programs we are running education with parents around how to increase literacy support for children. We are about to launch the Benalla imagination library, which is based on Dolly Parton's Imagination Library, within our community, and our community has been well supported through the school readiness funding to roll out that program with four-year-old preschoolers. We also work with kinder pals. Kinder pals go into our preschools every week. They are trained volunteers, and they read with children every week and engage children in rich oral language discussions around books and also oral narratives so that they can talk about what has been happening in their own lives and retell stories from their own lives. We have reading buddies that go into our schools and work with students in years 1 and 2 who are falling below benchmark for reading levels. It is not an intervention through a teacher, it is actually a buddy who is a trained volunteer providing that nurturing support. Where children may not be heard reading at home, there is someone in the school that will hear that child read at least twice a week.

Then we work on children's wellbeing. We have our mentoring program that Louise spoke about. We also provide funding support to help children engage in sport and recreational activities in the community, because we know if children are connected to something outside of school they are more likely to stay engaged in their education, and it provides them with positive role models through other adults within the community.

We run a program called Full Impact. That is working with young people aged 11 through to 19, and that is allowing young people to have agency over activities that happen for them in our community. We have a core group of 18 young people who are engaged in that group, and they are called 'the squad', and they run things in our community, such as a clean-up Benalla day, where they coordinate everything to do with that activity. We have just had a street art festival in Benalla where they have coordinated some activities for young people to engage in to enjoy art within our community in Benalla. We have got a come-and-try day coming up this weekend, and that is an opportunity for our local sports and rec clubs to come together to allow families to try before they buy. And at that day our Full Impact squad are running an obstacle course for young people to engage in. So it is all driven by young people, giving them that power to have influence over other people's lives in our community and do things that they are really passionate about. With our come-and-try day, for those children who may not be able to afford to engage in the sport and rec and have a healthcare card or a pension card, we can certainly help support to fund those activities for young people to be engaged in those special things outside of school.

Then we are also increasing the aspirations of our community for young people to succeed in the workforce and to go on to further study and training. We have a future work steering committee, and that committee meets bimonthly. That meeting brings together our schools and business community; we have tertiary education providers and local council come along; and local apprenticeship providers come to that meeting, and we all

work together to improve outcomes for young people. The benefit of being a community-based foundation is we can be the glue that brings people together to improve outcomes for our young people.

An example of something that that committee achieved is that back in 2018 we realised that many young people in year 10 were not completing work experience. We had one school that was very proactive in town, and that was the private school in town. They were taking all the places, and the state school was running work experience at the same time. So the proactive school were getting in and getting all the places first, and then across the town we only had 30 per cent of our young people completing any form of work experience in year 10. If they are not getting that taste of the workforce, they do not have the aspiration and spark to go on and succeed. That committee came together. We got the schools to negotiate over their weeks. We came together as a community, looked at the students' career action plans and approached 80 local businesses and said, 'You may get a cold call from young people seeking work.' We explained to the workforce in Benalla not just the benefits to the young people but the benefits to business of taking a young person in for a week and what that can do for the business. As a result, we moved from 30 per cent to 98 per cent of young people completing work experience just by tweaking things by actually coming together and talking.

Another example is how we have come together within the early years space. We really rely heavily on the Australian Early Development Census data – the AEDC – and we run a forum every three years in partnership with the Department of Education and also local government. We bring together local early years professionals to talk about the results in Benalla and to talk about actions to move forward. That is where really the spark came from when we identified that antenatal support is a missing piece in what we are offering in Benalla, and hence we are about to launch this new program for antenatal support in our community.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you. I might just throw for questions to the panel.

**Louise PEARCE:** Sorry, there is one more program we did not mention – our PEEP program. It is our biggest program. It is our parents as early educators program. We run about 14 of those groups every week in Benalla. They are facilitated playgroups for parents and their preschool-aged children. Eighty per cent of all Benalla's children attend. They are referred from maternal and child health. We have got trained facilitators. They might come in and speak about sleep or eating problems or speech or getting your children ready for school. So we are educating the parents and building parents' capacity to understand how important their role is to get their children ready for school and ready to learn. The children go into the playroom next door, and we have got trained early education providers who look after them, so they can come and go if they need to, the babies. It just connects parents – new parents particularly, who can be quite isolated – with other members in their community, so when their kids start school there is somebody at the school gate they know and have met and they have got some other connections in the community. That is probably our biggest program, and none of us mentioned it.

**Sally MATHESON:** It is, yes.

**Louise PEARCE:** Our biggest, and it is just a great program. Everybody knows about it. There are a number of parents who find it too hard to come, or from their disadvantage, I suppose, they are nervous about coming, so we have got an outreach program where someone goes out and works with them one on one and tries to draw them in. It is a very successful program, based on a UK model.

**The CHAIR:** Okay, thank you. Aiv, do you want to start?

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** Sure. It has been a really long day, the hearing today, and we have all got to race off to Echuca this afternoon, so just in the interests of the committee's time I am going to send you a range of questions on notice, if that is okay, for you to respond to.

**Louise PEARCE:** Sure.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** Thank you so much for coming in and talking about the breadth of programs that you are involved in. It is really amazing, so thank you again.

**The CHAIR:** Renee?

**Renee HEATH:** I think what you are doing is absolutely outstanding, and I guess these questions also might be on notice if that is what we are doing. I would love to know more about the strategies you are using to raise the standard of literacy and numeracy, because obviously we know that education is your ticket to choice and that circuit breaker, and if there are any of those strategies that could potentially be used somewhere else. And then I guess just a comment, really – it is so good that kids are getting their love of reading from a young age. I just would love to know about what the training is for those volunteers. And I think this may have actually been in your submission, but I cannot remember: have we seen a change in the outcomes in local schools as a result? But I think I will pass on to my colleagues.

**Louise PEARCE:** We have recently had a formal evaluation done, so we can pass on all that information.

**Renee HEATH:** Yes, I saw that.

**Louise PEARCE:** And we have also got this book here. We could leave you with some things with a bit of background for you.

**Renee HEATH:** Amazing. Fantastic, thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Ryan?

**Ryan BATCHELOR:** Thanks, Chair – an amazing program. I have still got my copy of *Dropping off the Edge* sitting on my bookshelf, and it is just great to see, for someone who has been interested in this policy area for a reasonable while now, the through line of report, organisation, impact. Because we do not often see that, and often research gets done and it sits on shelves, it is so gratifying to see it actually translating into change in the community.

A couple of questions: for the preliteracy screening that you do, there is a quite alarming decline in the 2023 cohort in the report. I am wondering if you have got any thoughts about why and what you are going to be looking for in terms of trends here. Obviously, one data point does not make a trend, but it is something to think about. I might start there, and then I will ask a further follow-up question.

**Sally MATHESON:** Our feeling is parents were really busy during COVID and a lot of the tension was placed on older children in families because of the schooling-from-home situation and the younger children were missed out on. Also, children are being placed onto screens a lot more. If both parents are working at home, they give you a screen. That will keep you busy. The screen is not a book to interact with. Our local library did shut for some time during COVID. We did still run PEEP during COVID. We ran it online, but of course it is not the same running it online as actually having that interaction and being face to face with a book.

**Ryan BATCHELOR:** This prescreening that you are doing, is it separate to the AEDC data?

**Sally MATHESON:** Correct. Yes.

**Ryan BATCHELOR:** Good. Interesting. I was also involved in getting the AEDI, the predecessor, funded nationally, so it is again great to see the tool being used exactly how it was designed to be. What I am interested in is: are you linked in at all to the work that is now being done in year 1 literacy? So there is the foundational year 1 literacy knowledge testing that is being done, which was last year upgraded to include an element of understanding about phonics. You are clearly doing preliteracy screening, and there is an emerging tool that is only a year old now for year 1s. I am just wondering whether that is capable of being integrated into the sort of analysis that you do.

**Sally MATHESON:** Absolutely. So we gather that task. We have got an MOU with the local P–12 college where we do share data, and we are able to access their data for prep, year 1 and year 2 levels, because that is where we are working with volunteers and also with direct programs.

**Ryan BATCHELOR:** So through that integration with the school you will be able to get a bit of a through line from the pre, really those very early years, right through to the earlier part of primary school.

**Sally MATHESON:** Absolutely. Yes. And our approach is all based on the science of reading. I am a trained speech pathologist. My co-worker is a trained primary school teacher with over 30 years experience, so yes, we have got very experienced staff working within the field.

**Ryan BATCHELOR:** Amazing. Well, I am sure we will at some point in the future come back and check how it is all going, because I think it is a really interesting model of having an integrated community – preschool with maternal and child health, really, and from that point right through the early years of school. It is kind of like the ideal model, and it is great to see it working. So I look forward to seeing more.

**Sally MATHESON:** Great. Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Melina?

**Melina BATH:** Thank you. I am not going to short-circuit this, because I think you are so valuable. First of all, I heard about you back in 2016, when Steph Ryan raised your work, Tomorrow Today, and I know my colleague Annabelle Cleeland is a very strong supporter of you. I just want to put that on record. I wrote ‘It takes a village to raise a child’, and you are the living, working example of that.

Now, for those watching at home, the Australian Early Development Census is a nationwide census, and in your report you talk about developmental vulnerability of one or more domains, and they are listed in that document. But in 2012 you were at a 31.1 ranking, and the average Australian was 22 and the average Victorian was 19. Jump forward to 2021 and you are now better than the average Australian, so the average child has got so much better by your intervention. I wanted to put that on record.

I am interested in funding, because looking and understanding, you mentioned that you have philanthropic funding. You have had some Vic ed funding. How are you surviving, and what do you need to survive? Because clearly, with demonstrated data, you are doing an amazing job for your community, with your community, in collaboration with education services, parents, teachers and tertiary. But what do you need for funding? Because you cannot evaporate, otherwise the work you are doing will evaporate, give us a recommendation, please.

**Jodie FLEMING:** Long-term funding so that we can continue to make a difference to those educational outcomes of children. I think organisations like ours are very difficult to sustain because funding is often fragmented across different services or departments.

**Melina BATH:** Which bucket are you getting it out of at the moment from the state department?

**Sally MATHESON:** Secondary school reform.

**Melina BATH:** Okay, so the education department. Have you written to the minister saying –

**Louise PEARCE:** Yes.

**Melina BATH:** In this current –

**Sally MATHESON:** Yes.

**Melina BATH:** Just for understanding. Do you still get federal funding?

**Jodie FLEMING:** No, not currently.

**Melina BATH:** Okay, and otherwise it is philanthropic.

**Sally MATHESON:** Yes, and local donors.

**Melina BATH:** And local donors. So ongoing funding –

**Louise PEARCE:** So probably about a third is government funding at the moment.

**Melina BATH:** Okay. That is not a lot, really, for the value. And a quantum, have you provided to government a quantum?

**Louise PEARCE:** We have.

**Melina BATH:** Do you want to put it on record while we are here or do you want to not?

**Louise PEARCE:** I have got that written down somewhere just in case you asked.

**Melina BATH:** You can take it on notice if you like.

**Jodie FLEMING:** \$1.9 million, wasn't it?

**Melina BATH:** \$1.9 million, over how many?

**Jodie FLEMING:** Three years.

**Melina BATH:** So \$600,000 a year to run this program to make such a difference in the community.

**Louise PEARCE:** It would provide us with backbone funding, and then the philanthropics are happy to work with us, but they do believe that the government has got a role to play as well. They are happy to partner with us, and we have got some forward funding promised from philanthropics. They are very supportive of us, and they sit on our committee.

**Melina BATH:** It is a very good investment. I just want to talk about your skill matrix. Sally, you are a speech therapist. You have got former educators – teachers – there. If we were to roll this out to another – I live in Gippsland and there are a lot of disadvantaged towns in Gippsland and its regions. It is a great place to live – I love living there. But what skill matrix do you need? Have you got a framework or a kit box so you could say to another town, 'Here it is. This is the support'? Because, honestly, we need to understand how it can work in other regions.

**Sally MATHESON:** Yes. We have had many other towns come to visit us, including the Latrobe Valley. They have come up to see us and to learn from us about our model. Tasmania have as well. Really when they come up we talk about our governance structure, we talk about our staffing structure and we talk about the programs that we can offer, and really the essential part is starting early. But you cannot just say, 'Right, we're going to focus on the 11- to 19-year-olds and ignore the early stuff.'

**Melina BATH:** The early intervention is key.

**Sally MATHESON:** It has got to be the whole – it has got to be the whole lot of the program. In terms of your skill matrix, you need someone that has a good community development focus, so who knows how to bring people together to discuss the issues. And then of course education focus – you need people who have educational experience.

**Melina BATH:** And that could be rolled out. Just one further question, if I may: in your submission you talk about the department of education in South Australia – student wellbeing. Why is it done in South Australia and not in Victoria?

**Sally MATHESON:** Victoria has the student Attitudes to School survey. We wanted to go deeper than what that survey was offering. The wellbeing and engagement census looks at wellbeing not just at school but within the home environment – what children are involved in outside of school and what their relationships are like with other adults outside of the school environment.

**Melina BATH:** Thank you. I do have more questions, but I am understanding that we are running behind schedule. I am very sorry that you have come at the end of the day and not the start, but thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Moira?

**Moira DEEMING:** Thank you. Yes, I absolutely loved your presentation and I really enjoyed reading your submission. I was so excited, because every single thing that you are doing has obviously been proved in all sorts of other countries, but you have brought it all together. Everything that I read, I was like, 'I know about that.' In Sweden they did that with the extracurricular activities that totally decimated drug use and delinquency – parents as early educators. I have seen all these studies everywhere. You just brought it all together, and it is so impressive. It is just so practical. I think you are amazing, and I really hope that we can get not just more funding for you but for this kind of a model everywhere, because it works. You should not need any other incentive to back this program and to roll it out. It just works, so congratulations.

**Melina BATH:** Chair, could I just interrupt. You have provided the submission. Could you provide any documentation that, say, you gave to Latrobe Valley. I know the group down there. Your kit, that would be.

**Sally MATHESON:** Yes, we have got some.

**Melina BATH:** Yes. It could be used to roll out in other locations. That would be really helpful.

**Sally MATHESON:** Sure.

**Louise PEARCE:** I think it is important to realise it has been a gradual build, the number of programs that are running now. We started with PEEP – that was our first program.

**Sally MATHESON:** That we ran, yes, but Hands on Learning was the first program that we actually funded and got off the ground. We then run playgroups and then decided, ‘Right, the missing piece is the parent education.’ Playgroups bring parents and children together for engaged learning together, but really we need that support for parents to be better educators for their children, and that is where PEEP came in. So we started PEEP back in 2012.

**The CHAIR:** I will just quickly try a few questions before wrapping it up. Your service is basically for those disadvantaged now, and a referral or just sort of general crisis?

**Sally MATHESON:** Open to all.

**Louise PEARCE:** All people.

**The CHAIR:** Open to all? What is the cost – I know it is in here, up in this area – to run one program? I mean, to run it for the school.

**Sally MATHESON:** The budget for the Education Benalla program for a year is \$1.5 million.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you. I will provide more questions to you on notice, but just in relation to the interventions you spoke about: are those referred to you?

**Sally MATHESON:** The interventions in schools?

**The CHAIR:** Yes.

**Sally MATHESON:** They are children who are identified by their prep teacher or by their year 1 or 2 teacher, and then they are referred into our program.

**The CHAIR:** What is the number for that?

**Sally MATHESON:** We have got 61 preps at Benalla P–12 this year. We will be working with 20 of those preps this term. They are 20 preps who have been identified by the teachers and who are not switched on for learning. We will work with them intensively for eight weeks, four times a week, to help switch them on and get them up to speed with their peers.

**The CHAIR:** Twenty-one kids throughout this area.

**Sally MATHESON:** Twenty within the state system out of 61, so about a third.

**The CHAIR:** When you say ‘not quite at the level’, what level is that? I have a fair idea. I have got five kids. They all came through prep. So I just want to see – you said ‘not to the level’; at prep level what are you expecting?

**Sally MATHESON:** Kids who are coming into prep that do not have any letter or sound knowledge; kids that are coming in with poor number recognition or that do not know how a book works – say, to find the front cover of the book or to show you that you read a book from the left-hand side to the right-hand side – those types of skills. They are not the lowest of the low kids, who may have a diagnosed disability. They are not those kids. That may be say five out of the 61. These are the 20 who are the next level up from there.



**The CHAIR:** Besides prep, is there anything above that, mid-school?

**Sally MATHESON:** For year 1s and 2s we run the Reading Buddies program. We do not run anything in years 3 and 4, but in 5 and 6 we run a careers program with the year 5–6 students.

**The CHAIR:** Careers, but not literacy or numeracy?

**Sally MATHESON:** Not literacy, no.

**The CHAIR:** Okay. Thank you.

**Sally MATHESON:** We would like to, but we do not have the resources.

**The CHAIR:** I understand in relation to the years 1 and 2, but with preps, is this something that preschool could lean into in the education system? I am wondering in relation to education in the private schools and high schools, and now we are looking into preschool as well.

**Louise PEARCE:** The research shows that if kids start to fall behind in those first couple of years, it is very hard to bring them back, so you have got to get their confidence and their capability up early.

**The CHAIR:** I know my kids went through prep, and none of them were actively doing it in year 1 – I think Ryan mentioned the assessment in relation to phonics. I think that all the private schools have done that for years. I think the government has started getting involved in that now, and that is needed. I thank you for the great work you have been doing. Are there any other comments?

**Louise PEARCE:** I think probably the comment is that organisations like us exist around Victoria and around the country, and we know how important the work is that happens in schools. But you would have heard from teachers over the last few days that they are sinking under the expectations, so organisations like ours can mobilise and activate the community to help in their own regions. I have worked in government departments and I understand the way money is divided up for different areas, but we are trying to say, ‘Let’s look at the problem as a whole,’ and I think that is a challenge and something you could consider in your review: how can you support models like this to make a difference in communities where there is the goodwill to do that? Because I think there are a lot of people that want to help but they do not know how. They say, ‘There is a problem.’ It is no good saying it is a schools problem. We have got to own our own problems and participate, so I think it is an opportunity.

**The CHAIR:** That is fantastic – to actually have solutions and programs that work, which provide evidence for us to put recommendations forward. Again, thank you on behalf of the committee. Thank you so much for coming in here and giving your time, your insight, your experience and the results, and I look forward to getting those from you as well.

**Louise PEARCE:** We have got our 10-year program and our annual report and some light reading for you.

**Melina BATH:** If there is anything else that you want to add to us, then feel free to provide it.

**Jodie FLEMING:** And you will send those questions to us?

**The CHAIR:** Yes.

**Jodie FLEMING:** Great. Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** On behalf of the committee, I want to say thank you for coming in today, Louise, Jodie and Sally. I also want to say thank you to the department staff for the hosting and for putting in all the hard work today in relation to the recording and arranging the hearing. I would also like to thank Lakeside for hosting us today. I hope what we get from today’s submissions and yesterday’s submissions in Bendigo will give us some good insight in relation to what is required out in the north-west. What we heard from Gippsland and Bairnsdale and will hear, moving forward, in the CBD as well will give us some good, solid evidence for recommendations to put forward to better and improve our education system. Thank you very much.

**Committee adjourned.**