# T R A N S C R I P T

# LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY ECONOMY AND INFRASTRUCTURE COMMITTEE

## Inquiry into Student Pathways to In-demand Industries

Melbourne—Friday 28 November 2025

**MEMBERS**

Alison Marchant—Chair
Kim O'Keeffe—Deputy Chair
Roma Britnell
Anthony Cianflone
John Mullahy
Nicole Werner
Dylan Wight

**WITNESSES**

Colin Axup, President, and

Belinda Hudak, Principal, Mildura Senior College,

Matthew Koutroubas, Principal, Rochester Secondary College, and

Robert Boucher, Principal, Swifts Creek P–12 School, Victorian Association of State Secondary Principals.

**The CHAIR**: Welcome to this panel hearing for the Legislative Assembly Economy and Infrastructure Committee's Inquiry into Student Pathways to In-demand Industries. All mobile telephones should now be turned to silent.

All evidence given today is being recorded by Hansard and broadcast live on the Parliament's website.

While all evidence taken by the Committee is protected by parliamentary privilege, comments repeated outside of this hearing, including on social media, may not be protected by this privilege.

Witnesses will be provided with a proof version of the transcript to check.

We are going to jump straight into some informal conversation and some Q and A. Thank you for being here. We may not have an opportunity to get to every question, but if there are some important points you do not have an opportunity to speak to, you are more than welcome to provide additional information in writing.

I will just introduce the Committee, and then if you can introduce yourself too and maybe your title or the role that you undertake. My name is Alison. I am the Member for Bellarine and Chair of the Committee.

**John MULLAHY**: John Mullahy, Member for Glen Waverley.

**Anthony CIANFLONE**: Anthony Cianflone, Member for Pascoe Vale.

**The CHAIR**: Maybe if we start at this end.

**Robert BOUCHER**: Robert Boucher, Principal of Swifts Creek P–12 school. I have got 90 kids from prep to 12. I have been in the role for 20 years, and Ben Carroll trusts me with 6000 kilometres of the great state of Victoria.

**The CHAIR**: Lovely. Thank you.

**Belinda HUDAK**: I am Belinda Hudak, Principal of Mildura Senior College in Mildura. We are a year 11 and 12 campus that has a thousand students at years 11 and 12. We are obviously in quite a regional area but quite far away.

**The CHAIR**: Thank you.

**Colin AXUP**: Colin Axup. I am the President of the Victorian Association of State Secondary Principals. I am a former principal. I have been principal of two schools, one a rural school at Stawell and another one closer to home, Suzanne Cory High School out in Werribee. The association represents both principals and assistant principals and government secondary schools. I have been in this role for nearly five years, so I have a much bigger overarching view, whereas my three colleagues are all, quite intentionally, from rural and regional Victoria. But also I can give maybe the more metro perspective.

**The CHAIR**: That is great. We do need to hear the regional voices, so thank you.

**Matthew KOUTROUBAS**: I am Matthew Koutroubas. I am Principal at Rochester Secondary College. We are a rural school that is quite central and close to some regional centres, but not as close as we would like, with 350 students and a community that is just recovering from a massive natural disaster.

**The CHAIR**: Thank you for your time too. I am an ex—primary school teacher, so I wear that hat sometimes when I look at this, but I have also got teenagers going through our high school education system. I suppose my first question would be around that career advice that we are giving young people now and what that looks like. A lot of the young people who we have spoken to have said it was very patchwork, it was very hit-and-miss; some could get good advice, some got none, really. So we are trying to work out what this pipeline looks like, educating young people and preparing them for their future. What career advice are they getting to help them on their way?

**Colin AXUP**: I might kick off with a kind of global perspective. I think the start point from a school perspective is—and it is interesting—we are very big on student voice and agency. For years, a long, long time—since I was since I was a teacher as well—we would say to students in terms of careers, 'Follow your

passion. What is it that you like studying and doing? That's what you should pursue.' That was a bit of a mantra that we would follow. I think we still do, and students are given a lot more say, but also taking into context that families have a huge impact on student choice, and we have to remember that element. As to careers, education and careers choice is a patchwork—yes, it is. No doubt many of the witnesses to your Inquiry talk about—and we just heard the last one talking about it—staffing shortages and access to staff. Not all schools necessarily have as many careers practitioners as they would like, or qualified careers practitioners. And it is very patchwork, if you like—it is a great term. If you look around the state, some schools, regardless of where they are—and it is not a metro—rural—regional thing; it is almost like you are lucky or you are not in terms of that perspective. But my three colleagues will probably have much more personal examples. Maybe Belinda?

**Belinda HUDAK**: Yes, we at Mildura Senior College resource our careers team quite heavily; we have a tertiary careers adviser, we have a school-to-work adviser who specialises in those pathways, and we also have an industry engagement coordinator. So our aim is to really, I guess, expose young people to the breadth of industries and opportunities that there are, because, as Colin said, we are about trying to support student aspiration; we see our role as creating the opportunity to scaffold what that looks like, so helping young people to know that, yes, tertiary pathways and ATAR scores are one way to get their foot in the door, but there are also lots of vocational pathways and stepping stones to different pathways. I think that is a challenge for young people, that you are often trying to provide a really broad range of advice so that you can help them not just keep their options open but know the things that they may not be aware of and know. I do think that it can be challenging for young people to get the specific advice that they are after, because we have got a thousand young people who all could be looking to go in a different direction.

**The CHAIR**: Yes.

**Belinda HUDAK**: So we are trying to cater to the different opportunities that they can connect to and also upskill them so that they can find their own pathways, because we know that young people will have many different careers in their lifetime, and helping them to know how to scaffold those pathways or look for other avenues and opportunities, because they may go to university straight out of school but then they may be looking for something else later on. Our area has a huge interest in vocational pathways; we have a large VET cohort that is highly valued in our area, and students have a really broad opportunity to access those pathways, but I guess that is not always the opportunity across the schools in the state.

**Robert BOUCHER**: So in smaller communities it looks different, but that is the sensational thing about being a principal in a rural community which is small: you do have the opportunity to develop your workforce talent and the dispositions because of the support that we have had from the government. One of the privileges of being in the principalship for an extended period of time in the one location is you can see programs like Head Start and the difference that they have made. So I have a number of kids doing school-based apprenticeships, which is really sensational. Why? Because those students have connected to the work from Head Start. It is enabling those kids to express an aspiration. If you do not have that consistency, you do not have the trust; if you do not have the trust, students and families will not share their aspirations. So one of the things I have noticed, post COVID, is the challenge around workforce: if you can have consistent people, it helps the aspirations be realised in a P–12 setting. We know that the aspirational work has to start in year 3. We know if we can expose our kids to industry visits, whether it is to the bakery or CFA shed, then kids will start thinking about what they might want to be.

The challenge in our little community, as we have seen—a series of natural disasters and some changes in economic opportunities with the closure of the timber industry—is how we raise hope and aspiration for our kids so they can go, 'Wow, I can be.' And so that really interesting proposition for a rural school: how do we find the money to enable kids to come to Melbourne to visit other centres? How do we connect in so that kids do start thinking about the things they actually do not know about? It is really exciting. That is one of the great privileges of working in the role: how do we help elevate for our families? We can talk about the power of some of the frameworks that have been developed, but that fundamental belief of our teachers that we want our kids to learn, we want them to be well. How does that marry with the aspirations of: do you want to be a shearer, do you want to be a mechanic, do you want to go on to uni? That is that is one of the brilliant things about the rural community: you have a number of role models, but sometimes you do not have kids going on to those different pathways, and it involves cost, and it involves bringing them to the big smoke, and some of our kids have lost their confidence around that. So how do we build rebuild that? It is the continuity of the workforce.

**The CHAIR**: Just on the school-based apprenticeships and Head Start, there was some evidence to say that can be quite an admin-heavy process and that we probably could do that better.

**Robert BOUCHER**: I may be a little biased. It has been fantastic for our kids. We had a little girl that in year 10 struggled to get to school. We worked with her intensively with our psych. That young lady signed up to a school-based apprenticeship in child care this year. That young lady led a whole-school assembly around a motor neurone disease fundraising activity. Her life has been forever changed because of the SBAT. That would never have happened if the Head Start program was not there. We were doing school-based apprenticeships before Head Start came along, but it was reliant on our careers teacher. Her connection to our teachers had ceased. So having that external person coming in— 'Carly, you're a star. Can you help me, please?' —has given not just that young lady but other kids a great deal of choice and options. Belinda is really lucky she has got a massive workforce; I do not, so I am reliant on a number of the brilliant initiatives that the government has brought in.

**The CHAIR**: Thank you. It is great to hear that.

**Matthew KOUTROUBAS**: I want to add to that too. We have got a number of SBAT kids at school, and without the Head Start worker and the work involved, our career staff just would not have the resources and the time, with all the other competing priorities, to allow that to happen. We have also made sure that we form lots of links with our community in taking our year 8s out to do visits of our local community businesses, as a start, and then trying to increase our VET offerings. But it is hard to offer all those VET offerings with small numbers, because they do cost money to have them. We are very reliant to be able to provide access to VET. Anything that involves coming to Melbourne is on transport and has transport costs. Without transport costs to support the VET, we have got 60 kids travelling to Echuca that would not be able to get there to access that.

We also run a work experience camp to Melbourne at year 11, so we have 40 to 50 kids coming down here for a week, but that is extremely expensive to continue and run. But we see it as something that is really important and viable to give our students that experience. Also, the local partnerships that we and I am sure other schools have—we have got a very strong relationship with La Trobe Uni. All of our year 12s are involved in that program and have access to a staff member from La Trobe to drive some different passions. Even students that are not looking at university get lots of benefit out of that, because there are also some—I will call them—life skills, where they learn how to study and to cope when they need to get into the real world.

**Belinda HUDAK**: If I could speak to the administration challenges that you mentioned regarding SBATs, the nature of SBATs is a little bit complex in the fact that you have the school involved, the employer involved, the apprenticeship network involved and the TAFE or the training provider involved. So it is just in the nature of having all of that. As Rob said, we have seen a significant uplift in SBATs for us since the introduction of Head Start, because the managing of all of the training contracts plus how that impacts their VCE or vocational major program is quite complex in its nature. It is not unachievable, but it needs that extra layer of support. Without the support of Head Start for schools to be that conduit, it becomes too hard for the schools to manage. As I mentioned, we invest quite heavily, but that resource comes from other areas. It is a choice that we make. But we could not have the volume of SBATs that we have without it because we just do not have the resource to manage that. It is also quite specialised. We are cross-border areas as well, so there are also different training compliance requirements from one side of the river to the other. Knowing and understanding those nuances is something that we kind of need support with. Headstart has been invaluable in that space. We would have increased from 12 to 50 SBATs under the three years that we have had Headstart.

**Matthew KOUTROUBAS**: We are well above the average as well. To add to that, without that support, getting 50 spots of work experience would not happen because that would then have to go into trying to do all that paperwork and things like that. And to add to that compliance and things—it does go to the same lot of admin stuff—we had a kid that needed a police report and another check, an ID check, and it took, you know, 15 hours of paperwork to do four days work experience at a leisure centre. So the red tape, yes, is extreme.

**Colin AXUP**: I think it is really important too that we keep an eye on what is good administration.

**The CHAIR**: Yes.

**Colin AXUP**: When they talk about the SBAT and Headstart, I think that is good admin, especially when it is outsourced for schools and somebody else is doing it. But there is good admin and then there is the

frustrating admin where you sit back and you go, 'There's a whole lot of work for very little return.' Principals are very quick at determining where you get maximum return for the work. We are often the people to ask, 'Is this good or bad administration?' in that respect.

**Belinda HUDAK**: We should not have different rules from one side of the river to the other.

**The CHAIR**: No, no.

**Colin AXUP**: Welcome to the Federation. Look, if New South Wales just got their act together and followed us, we would be a lot better off.

**The CHAIR**: Robert.

**Robert BOUCHER**: One of the really significant implications in our little school—you are very aware when you get your students on the right pathway of choice and the impact it has on their cohort. You know, in the olden days when VCAL was first introduced we had tiny numbers, but we said we must have both pathways for our students. It allowed our VCE students to be successful, and some of them have achieved outrageous ATARs, well and truly defying their postcode, going on and doing brilliantly and contributing to the economy in a way which is remarkable. That has occurred because there was a pathway of choice and they were sitting in a small classroom with other motivated students. If we were not able to offer all options for our students, they would never have experienced the academic success they did. So the SBATs actually strengthen our VCE students' aspiration around going to uni. It is really apparent in a little place, that cause and effect. If you can get people on the right seats on the bus, the bus trip is really good, but if they have got to sit up the front and they do not want to, it is no good. So there are a number of changes that I have seen during my time where you go, 'That is brilliant, but I'm not sure if the person who is in charge of that silo actually understands the brilliance of their strategy in terms of what it means for students and families.' Families are so excited about kids having a 'Yes, this is my pathway of choice'—whether it is an SBAT or 'I'm going to get a good ATAR; I'm going to go to that uni.' It is just so, so important because, you know, the hand-in-glove thing is absolutely the sophistication of where we have got to.

**The CHAIR**: That is great.

**Matthew KOUTROUBAS**: We found with the SBAT that it has filled that gap where we have not been able to offer all the VET choices. A student has been able to pursue that individual choice that they would not have had without the support of the Headstart worker to get them a placement. They would have been disengaged in a VET class just to tick, now, a box, which is not what we want.

**The CHAIR**: No, we are not setting them up to succeed in that way.

**Matthew KOUTROUBAS**: No. Or they leave early.

**The CHAIR**: Yes. Anthony, I am going to head to you next.

**Anthony CIANFLONE**: Thank you, Chair, and thank you all for appearing—very much appreciated. I wanted to ask specifically around career practitioners. I guess you have touched on it a little bit in varying degrees, but what are the main challenges that schools face in actually identifying, recruiting and retaining good-quality career practitioners? And what are the main challenges that career practitioners face in providing that much-needed quality career education to school students from particularly schools from different geographical and demographical backgrounds as well?

**Colin AXUP**: Well, how long have I got to answer that question?

**Anthony CIANFLONE**: Ask the Chair.

**Colin AXUP**: Look, I think the start point with career practitioners is that finding a qualified career practitioner is the hard bit. But let us go back a step. Once upon a time, careers practitioners were usually a senior teacher who had an interest in providing careers advice, but it was also an era when things were really simple: there were probably half a dozen courses at university and the apprenticeship. You had high schools and tech schools, so a careers practitioner really at a high school just had to think about, 'Well, what do you do after school if you're not at a tech school, going into an apprenticeship?' If you look at the present, there are

600 different university courses available, and we have not even started on all the industry options of traineeships, apprenticeships and so on and so forth. How do you find a small group of people that covers all of that information? So there is an element of a careers practitioner not going to (1) know everything and in a way need to know everything; it is about if they have the tools and the expertise to be able to go looking for the right advice. From memory, there are only a couple of actual courses on being a careers practitioner; RMIT runs one, which is about six months. So the training aspect of getting careers practitioners generally, from a school perspective—we will be up-front—most schools now have non-teaching staff as career practitioners, and that is a financial decision as much as anything else. An education support staff person, from a salary perspective, is cheaper than a teacher. Then the question becomes: actually, can we pay them enough? This is probably a repeated comment that you hear in this Committee, but can we pay them enough to keep them?

I know at my previous school, it was a select-entry high school, so those students were all going to university—that was the easy bit, except there are 600 different options—and we could not get a careers practitioner and advertised multiple times. So, basically, we will find someone, train them, pay for their training and then look after them as best as we possibly can so they stay with us and hope the universities do not pinch them as student advisers, because they will pay them more money, that type of thing. So workforce is a challenge, and for a large number of students you probably want a large number of practitioners, but then you have got to be able to fit that into your budget as well. So it always becomes, as a principal, that you have got to balance all of that: I need teachers for these subjects, but I also want careers practitioners and all the other elements of it. So it is difficult.

**Anthony CIANFLONE**: So I guess the question is as well, in your mind—and this goes to all of you on the panel, and Mildura sounds like you are doing an absolutely fantastic job in this space—what is the ideal model that the Victorian government could be considering and implementing when it comes to careers practitioners and the wraparound scaffolding supports that also embed teachers themselves to complement the efforts of a leading careers practitioner in a school environment? What is, in your opinion, a model we should be really looking at?

**Belinda HUDAK**: Well, the resource to ensure that we have a careers practitioner in school who is dedicated to do that work—there are still schools that are allocating a certain portion of a teacher's EFT to do this work. My 7–10 partners in Mildura are having their students access VET, they are connecting with industry, they are doing Morrisby, and they are trying to provide industry engagement, sometimes with the resource of a 0.6 EFT for someone to kind of do that work—so ensuring that we have people allocated to do the work. We have found, going to your question around upskilling or having skilled practitioners, the Department of Education has had an opportunity for people in the space to upskill in the certificate IV in careers education. We have had nearly all of our staff in our career space train in that, which has gone a long way to ensuring that they are knowledgeable, not just in how to manage and have conversations with students and their families but also from where to access and seek information. But it is complex work, and I guess what we are asking those career practitioners to do is not only know those 600 courses, the pathways to skills and industry, but also to broker local opportunities for industry to connect with schools and then provide work experience connections, help families and children access work experience that, for us, is 600 kilometres from Melbourne; it is not a cheap undertaking if a young person would like to go to the city to be able to undertake work experience in an area that they cannot do in Mildura, and that goes for my counterparts.

**Matthew KOUTROUBAS**: Yes, I am thankful for the government for providing those scholarships for those courses. I have currently just got a staff member who has been assisting in them, because we have got a retirement, who has completed that this year, and we are very grateful for that. That person is also a teacher, and we have a leading teacher in that, so it costs me money, but we cannot recruit anyone else with that. If I was to go private, we would be fighting with the universities or with New South Wales, who pay substantially more. So I would like to see the department fully fund a leading teacher full-time solely just for careers, because they are doing about 0.6 in that. They have some ES support. But yes, it is about trying to find the right person. This person has those links, because they have a massive job to do and without that the students will not be able to access it.

**Colin AXUP**: I think when we talk about a model, we need to keep in mind that there are some 300 secondary schools in the state, and they are all in very different contexts. So there are 300 different models, if you like. Part of your question too was around your demographics and the nature of your students, and that is why the context matters enormously. The model is, as my colleagues have said, funding to train people, and

that is always—ask a principal what they want and they will tell you: more resources. So regardless of your question, we will always say, 'Give us more resources.' But doesn't everybody say that? The reality is that being able to train people is a good thing, but each school will have a different need based on their context and the students that they have.

**The CHAIR**: And a local economy.

**Colin AXUP**: And a local economy, absolutely, and that will vary. Rob talked about the changes from having a timber industry to not having a timber industry. So asking for a model is not that easy sometimes, but certainly funding for training is always welcome.

**The CHAIR**: Robert.

**Robert BOUCHER**: The excitement is around not the money column but maybe the trust. The principal recruitment process I believe is pretty rigorous. We select people, and we trust them to do the very best for their students. So having a state government that has massive trust in what the burden of that role carries with it, there is trust there to deploy the resource to support the students. Part of that is the measures we have that we use to celebrate the success of schools. We all collect exit destination data, but often we talk about an ATAR, and the media grabs hold of that and celebrates that. We had one year where five of our students who did VCE got their first preference. The other kid got her second preference. You talk to people from universities about that, and they go, 'That is outrageous,' yet that was not celebrated beyond our school because it is not a dataset that is picked up on. For our state to continue to prosper, we have got to celebrate the destinations of our students, and there has got to be trust that there are the resources and the capabilities within the school.

We know that we are in interesting times in terms of the workforce. Yes, we are coming out of a really tricky period; that is really positive. So being able to be mindful of the workforce compositions for each of our schools, given the three very different schools that are here, to say, 'Robert, you must have a full-time careers teacher'—I would be a little bit sad about that, because what do I have to cut for that to happen? It is not realistic to say that and suddenly find a whole lot of extra money. Trust in decision-making around your workforce I think is really helpful, and yes, celebrating the measures around what that really means is another part of the conversation.

**The CHAIR**: I think what we have heard is that young people are really thirsty for knowledge and understanding of what their careers, or changing careers in their lifetime, will look like, but their parents are the most influential people in their lives at the moment. Can schools be elevated in that? I suppose it is giving the whole family advice on the pathways that are available, and maybe young people say that they do not feel they have always had the whole breadth of awareness of what is out there.

**Colin AXUP**: I think it comes back to that whole breadth of awareness. It is interesting, though: these students, I would argue, have access to more information than any other generation before them. Forty-something years ago, when you were looking at going through school, for that access to information you were reliant on people, and you were much more reliant on teachers. I think it is really important to say that they have access to that information, so in a way, part of the school's job is to help facilitate and guide them in accessing that information. We also have to realise that parents do have an inordinate amount of influence, obviously, on their decisions. Schools are not there to replace parents, and it is not about one being better than the other. A lot of schools will bring parents into the discussion. In fact most do in this day and age. But that also becomes slightly more complicated because you have got to find the time to get the parents. Thank heavens for Zoom, Webex, Teams and all of those things; you can do it online. There are still a whole lot of influences on that young person. We have a role to play as schools, but we are not the only part of the influence.

**Belinda HUDAK**: I think that is a key point to this work: it can never just be the responsibility of one system or one entity. We know we have got LLEN networks and have got a regional pathways workforce, and the department helps us create those conduits. We have seen really great industry round tables that the department has facilitated through that workforce for us to bring industry into that conversation as well. I think that we have to be really mindful that it is not just schools, not just kids and not just parents; it is this whole complex system working together. I think, as you are probably hearing, that is the challenge.

**The CHAIR**: That is our challenge.

**Belinda HUDAK**: How do all of those players come together so that it does not just fall—we cannot be everything to everybody, as much as we always try to be that.

**The CHAIR**: Yes, you are given that task sometimes, and it is tricky.

**Belinda HUDAK**: Yes. As Colin said, the place-based approach is really important. For me, we are on the border almost of two other states, so our students do not just go to study in Victoria. Fifty per cent of our students who go to tertiary education will go to South Australia, just about. Well, it is not quite 50 per cent, but it is almost equal to Victoria. We have some that go to Queensland and some that will go to Western Australia. They will go to regional universities as well as metro universities. There are just so many different variabilities. That then leads also to the complexities for regional students around having our careers support and school support for students and families to be able to relocate to study and the complexities that come with helping take parents on that journey, which are around relocating their lives, being able to afford accommodation and what their accommodation options are. Looking at how we can support that process is an additional layer again.

**The CHAIR**: I am so sorry we have run out of time, and you did not even get a question.

**John MULLAHY**: I did not get a question. Can I make a comment, though?

**The CHAIR**: You may.

**John MULLAHY**: We have been getting evidence over the Inquiry about negative connotations on vocational education, but this has been a breath of fresh air from Belinda and your community about the positive nature of it and how the vocational major is being looked at positively, so it was good to hear from all of you. We need to import that from the country into the city here.

**Colin AXUP**: We do not do too badly in the city.

**John MULLAHY**: We can do better in my area.

**Colin AXUP**: There are some schools that have bigger VCE VM programs than others, but that is also largely driven by the community in which you operate—thinking of your community. It comes down to context: we have to accept the fact that there is that difference and that one size does not fit all. There is no perfect solution. Robert talked about giving a principal the resources and trusting them to understand their community. They work with their community, and they will find the right pathways for the majority of those students. It may not be a whole lot of VET, it may be more university, but it could be the complete opposite as well—celebrate it all.

**Belinda HUDAK**: Schools celebrate those successes every day, so it is about how we can help the community celebrate those successes and see those as equal achievements, because they really are. Kids are amazing.

**The CHAIR**: Thank you so much for your time. I think we could have kept talking all afternoon.

**Belinda HUDAK**: Thank you.

**The CHAIR**: We really appreciate you answering some questions. It gives us a really good insight. Thank you for being here from regional Victoria too to represent that area. Thank you very much for your time; we really appreciate it.

**Colin AXUP**: Thank you.

**Committee adjourned.**