

TRANSCRIPT

LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY LEGAL AND SOCIAL ISSUES COMMITTEE

Inquiry into Early Childhood Engagement of CALD Communities

Sunshine—Monday, 25 November 2019

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WITNESS

Mr Danny Schwarz, Chief Executive Officer, Playgroup Victoria.

The CHAIR: Good afternoon. I welcome you to the Legal and Social Issues Committee's Inquiry into Early Childhood Engagement of Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Communities. Thank you for being here, Danny Schwarz, Chief Executive Officer of Playgroup Victoria. All evidence taken by this Committee is protected by parliamentary privilege; therefore you are protected against any action for what you say here today, but if you repeat some of the words outside, including on social media, you might not be protected by privilege. All evidence given today is being recorded by Hansard. You will be provided with a proof version of your transcript for you to check as soon as it is available. Any verified transcripts, PowerPoint presentations or handouts will be placed on the Committee's website as soon as possible. I now invite you to proceed with a 5- to 10-minute opening statement to the Committee, followed by questions from the Committee.

Mr SCHWARZ: Very good. Thank you so much, and thank you for inviting me here; I really appreciate it. I would like to start off just by acknowledging the traditional owners of the land and to acknowledge the elders, past, present and emerging, and to acknowledge and say thank you for taking care of the land for a long time that we have been able to live in this amazing country.

I have provided you with a handout, which I am going to take you through. Behind the handout is also another document which is a cost-benefit analysis that has recently been undertaken by Playgroup Australia. I am not going to refer to that. That is there for your information and primarily to give you a researched overview of the cost benefit of playgroups, which we found actually astounding, to be honest, when it came out that there is a significant cost benefit in terms of what playgroups have to offer. So what I want to do is to take you through what it is that we think is important and what the opportunities are in relation to playgroup and our CALD communities to probably support some of the evidence that you have already received, particularly from VICSEG and from the centre for excellence, who have already presented here, and to provide some further opportunities to consider in relation to what it is that might happen.

I wanted to start off by just having a quick overview of what is playgroup, because there is sometimes a bit of confusion about playgroup in terms of it is with parents or without parents. You may have seen the recent documentary on the ABC, *Old People's Home for 4 Year Olds*. Did you see that? There was a documentary on the ABC which took a kindergarten into an aged-care facility to look at what is the benefit of intergenerational play, and there is a lot of research about intergenerational play. We—being the playgroup fraternity around Australia—were the early years partners. We have actually had to have some conversations with community about the difference between what they saw on TV, which was a kindergarten bussed in, and a playgroup, where parents are with their children and also increasingly grandparents are with their grandchildren in a playgroup.

On the first page I have just outlined that there are basically four different types of playgroups. In terms of playgroups, the fantastic thing about what it is that is offered in playgroup is that it meets the needs of what people require, so it is proportional to what people's needs are. I think that is really important. We think the Government is actually doing a fantastic job in the early years. It has really great infrastructure in the maternal and child health nurse scheme, and then recently supporting three-year-old kinder et cetera, but there is, we feel, a gap in between zero and three in terms of that overarching, continual engagement and opportunity to participate. The Government is, as I said, spending a good deal of money on supported playgroups, so really focusing on those that need, which is fantastic across the state. Certainly the money that Playgroup Victoria receive is to support the facilitators of those supported playgroups, and we think they are very good.

But in terms of most of the community, most of the community actually go to community playgroups. We say a playgroup is a group of three parents with their children. That is it. It does not matter where they are. They do not have to be organised. They could just be walking down the street. Or there are some really organised playgroups. We have a number of playgroups registered with us that are like little local football clubs: they have got 300 members, they have got access to a local council building for the whole week, including the weekends. It is a really structured set-up. There is a broad context. But what we would like to see is more opportunity to provide the support that is required at the level it is required along the continuum rather than just focusing on what we talk about in the sector, the pointy end, so where it is that the community is requiring help.

In terms of where it is that playgroup already fits into Government policy, as I said, you have a great early years reform plan, and we certainly have worked with Ms Mikakos over the last term really well. She is an incredible

supporter of the early years and playgroup particularly. I have highlighted, in terms of the early years reform plan, in the green, it says 'Early Childhood Reform Plan. Ready for kinder, ready for school, ready for life'. I have talked to Minister Mikakos and now recently Minister Donnellan—actually we think it should say, 'Through playgroup, ready for kinder, ready for school, ready for life'. It is not about saying to the Government, 'You need to spend money'. It is just, in terms of policy, recognising that there are a number of things that happen along the journey in relation to children's development. We know there is a lot of research that talks about the importance of the first 1000 days in terms of children's development. The reason I gave you the Lego is because, as much as that is nice to play with—it feels nice—when it is that the children are playing with Lego the neurons that are forming in children's brains are fundamental to their ongoing development. So while larger community people would think that just playing with Lego is having some fun, yes, it is, and if play is not fun, it does not work. But what we do know is that when play is fun, those neurons that form in the brain—and 80 per cent of them form by the time a child is three; the foundation is really laid down quite well by that time—if we can do that and do it well, the trajectory for children over and above that is fantastic.

In terms of, 'How does this all relate to the Inquiry?', I want to talk particularly about how it is, particularly for children from CALD communities and how it meets and connects with their local community. What services and activities families from diverse community can do to give their children the best start in life? Are CALD families able to actually access all of these things, and what is it that we might be able to do to improve on some of those things?

So in answer to the first question—how do young children from culturally diverse families connect with local communities?—a whole range of ways, but one of the ways is playgroup. And one of the challenges in CALD communities is that it is not something that is part of what people understand and know. Often there are communities that have a very structured approach to the way it is that children develop, so in terms of what it is that they set up around them, it is very structured. But we know in terms of the research that the bonding that happens when a parent is with their child, that the socialisation and emotional development, the literacy and numeracy that happens in relation to what it is that children do in playgroup is now evident. While we do not have a causal link, there is an associated link between that play in playgroup and children's development, and I will talk about a little bit further on. We need to do some work in relation to helping communities from diverse backgrounds understand how it is and work out how we can fit it into their belief system. That is not to say that the playgroup system is the only system or the way we do it is the only way we can do it, but how can we help communities understand that this is a good thing and could fit in to what they are already doing? It is not about trying to change things and reinvent the wheel.

In terms of being able to access services, playgroup—and you have probably heard this a few times already during your Inquiry—is a great point of soft entry to connection to other services. Now, in a supported playgroup space you have a paid, qualified facilitator who understands what it is that might help someone who is going through a particular point in time—something that is happening in their family, for example. But what we know, and there is some evidence now about what happens in community playgroups, is that the discussion that happens between parents helps parents understand what it is that they might have access to. While it is that within the parent group they might not know where to go exactly, just the fact that they have had that discussion enables more discussion, so when children are between zero and three and the age and stage visits are happening with the maternal and child health nurse, they might have a discussion in playgroup about something—it could be about a child's development, what they are actually doing—and that might lead to a discussion that when that parent goes to their age and stages visit with the maternal and child health nurse, 'We were talking about this. Is this something I need to worry about?'. So it is a great opportunity, as I was saying, to make use of the already embedded infrastructure that we have in the community.

Can and do culturally diverse families access these things? What we do know is that attendance, in terms of playgroup, for CALD families is lower. We know around 53 per cent of families attend playgroup, but in terms of families from CALD backgrounds, it is as low as 29 per cent who attend playgroup. And we get the data from the Australian Early Development Census, which has been looking at a children's development since 2009; that is what we get that information from.

So what is it that we can do to potentially improve that outcome? How we get people to participate? And that is all it is really: we just want to get people walking in the door. And so what we think is that if we can provide

support proportional to what it is that people need, that will help people be able to access what they need. And so—I am sure you have heard this again from other witnesses—we really believe strongly in a place-based approach. Because this is not about having a cookie-cutter ‘This one will fit everywhere’. Rurally, regionally, there are a whole range of things that go on that are barriers and challenges for people participating. Even in the city there are challenges as well. From Playgroup Victoria’s perspective, we do not want to be running playgroups; we are not a service provider. What we want to be able to do is to provide that leverage, so work with wherever it is that the effort in early childhood is going on, so mostly in local government. So we want to work directly with local government, place-based, to support them to support the playgroups or support their communities to be able to access playgroups. The way that we do that is we have community development workers based around the state working and leveraging those already existing services. The reality is, though, we have five. In terms of Victoria, there are 79 local government areas. I am certainly not suggesting we need 79, but you can imagine the ability for five people to work with 79 councils is pretty limited. It is not new to the discussion we have had with government, but it is something to consider.

I have talked about the different types of playgroups. There is a slide there that talks about the community-facilitated and supported playgroups. We actually have just finished a project over the last two years that the State Government funded, a pilot project that looked at connecting and supporting maternal and child health nurses to support first-time parent groups into baby playgroups. We have specifically used the word ‘baby playgroups’ because we have come to understand that often people think, when they think about playgroup, ‘My child isn’t old enough if they can’t walk’. Now, what we know about the evidence in terms of going to playgroup is that as soon as a child is breathing, that is a good time to go to playgroup. We know that the brain is forming as soon as a child is born, so we encourage people to go to playgroups straightaway. We have named those playgroups ‘baby playgroups’, and what we have found in the very short time that we ran this pilot was that we had within a three-month period 30 first-time parent groups register with us as baby playgroups. What will be interesting of course is to see over time are they continuing to meet and go to their playgroups. There is a slide there which just describes for you the different levels of playgroup, as I have talked about, based on providing support proportional to their needs.

On slide number 8, the universal impact of playgroup, we are talking here about looking at the Australian Early Development Census. So what this is doing is every three years prep teachers are asking 100 questions of every prep child in the country to work out where they are developmentally. They are looking at five developmental domains: how are children going with literacy and numeracy, social and emotional development et cetera? So what it is looking at is: what are the factors which contribute to a child being vulnerable in one or more of those domains? What are the things that are inhibiting a child actually developing at the level we would expect in all of those domains? What we can see already in terms of playgroup is that CALD families have a slightly higher vulnerability than families where English is the only language in one or more of those domains if they do not go to playgroup. So it is a pretty amazing association in terms of just by going to playgroup you reduce the level of vulnerability by 1.6 to 1.7 times in one or more of those developmental domains—just by going to playgroup. So just from that alone I would like to see that every family considers playgroup like they do consider a car seat or a cot or a kinder or child care. That is what we are aiming for at Playgroup Victoria in terms of our engagement with families. We want families to be thinking about playgroup like they do the other standard things that families think about when they have children.

In terms of the way that things are set up now, after the last state election there was a machinery of government change. The funding that Playgroup Victoria received and the funding that the Government provided for the supported playgroups around the state came from the department of education. Now, we think that in terms of playgroup it is part of the educational time line in a child’s life. We think that is where it should sit. But there was a machinery of government change which moved the supported playgroup delivery into DHHS. We think in terms of that supported playgroup at the pointy end support it actually makes sense. It makes sense to put support into the department that is focusing on those that need more. Absolutely perfect. However, that means everybody else is missing out, because the focus is just on those that need; yes? So in terms of recommendations—and I am just thinking about the time here more than anything else—on the last page there are a couple of recommendations to move forward.

The Government has, up until June of this year, funded a program called the Great Start grants. It was a \$50 000 a year grant that was given to Playgroup Victoria, and we provided to 50 new playgroups around

Victoria based on a range of criteria \$1000—about \$600 worth of material and about \$400 worth of support from our community development workers to get playgroups going. But that funding finished in June. Now, this is a really good example of where while I have met Minister Donnellan on a number of occasions, he is the Minister for Child Protection and Minister for Disability, Ageing and Carers. You can imagine where it is that playgroup delivery is probably struggling to find some time to breathe. Minister Donnellan has come out to visit Playgroup, and he is fantastic, but I think in terms of where it fits in the structure, the Government has the Education State and in terms of the machinery of government change a continued focus on early childhood education with a parliamentary secretary in Sonia Kilkenny. What we would like to see and we think would work well in terms of providing that more broad support is that the remit of community playgroups sits with the parliamentary secretary, because in terms of education and in terms of the early childhood reform plan that is where it all makes sense for the population in general. In terms of continuing, the funding finished on 30 June for the Great Start grants. We know that at the beginning of next year we are going to have playgroups contacting us, ‘When are the Great Start grants opening up?’. While we have talked to the department and also talked to the Minister about that, we are obviously really keen to see that those Great Start grants continue—\$50 000 a year.

I talked briefly about the project that we did with the maternal and child health nurses in eight pilot sites. We have developed some fantastic material, which is supporting the Maternal and Child Health app. I am not sure if you know about that, but the Government has created an amazing app which, when parents register, provides notifications to tell them to think about things on the journey of their children’s development. It has had incredible take-up. It is been really fantastic. We think it is great. This project was about supporting that, providing material the nurses can use, with four messages really focused on playgroup. Again, we are really keen to see over time if those messages have had an impact on families attending playgroup.

So in terms of recommendations we would like to see a continued focus on that. The funding has finished, so at the moment all of that material is just sitting there. I hope that it does not get wasted. We would like to see it continue in some way, and here is a real opportunity, particularly in relation to the focus of this Inquiry, to look at further developing the material so that it is culturally specific for a range of communities. I have talked to you about the concept of universal proportionalism, so having community playgroups situated in early childhood with the secretary for early childhood education.

That is our presentation. As I said, I have provided the cost-benefit analysis, which gives you really good evidence about the benefit from an economic perspective about what happens in relation to playgroup. I think in terms of proportional spending, spending a little bit now we can see is going to save a lot of money down the track. Thank you.

Ms SETTLE: First of all, I would like to thank you for coming along. But, also, I am from Ballarat and I believe we have one of your five—her name escapes me at the moment.

Mr SCHWARZ: Yes, you do. Maureen.

Ms SETTLE: Maureen, and she is wonderful, based at Sebastopol Primary School, and doing some interesting stuff, like a men’s playgroup in a hard-hit socio-economic area. That is really important. So thank you for that service to Ballarat.

Mr SCHWARZ: Yes, that is a great example. We are based at the school, and since coming to the school they have had the dads playgroup, which won the NAPCAN award last year, as you know. There are now nine playgroups in that school, including a Spanish playgroup, as a result of the workers just being there. What is important is: they do not run the place.

Ms SETTLE: I know, I have seen it in action, yes.

Mr SCHWARZ: Which is really important—we do not want to run playgroups.

Ms SETTLE: One thing I found interesting. My elder son turned 18 recently, so we are talking a long time ago, but I had arrived back from England with a baby and knew no-one in Ararat, a small country town, and the maternal health nurse did encourage us to do playgroups, and every cohort did. I am just sort of curious: is that

because it was a small country town? We just did all have playgroups. Each cohort went through and had playgroups, so what has changed that those do not just automatically gel?

Mr SCHWARZ: I think there are about 1300 maternal child and health nurses in Victoria, so you can imagine that they all do things a little bit differently. In the country, in terms of the number of groups that they are connected to, it is much less than a council such as Brimbank, for example, which probably might have 30 maternal child health nurses that are each running a first-time parent group every six weeks. It is really hard to keep up. It is not to say that what we are asking them to do is to start playgroups, because we are not. They have got enough work to do. But being able to provide them something that they do not have to think about too much—it is just there, it is part of their work, and the discussion comes up in relation to playgroup—is what that project was all about.

Ms SETTLE: That is a little bit what she did with us. It was just a matter of saying, ‘All share your numbers’. Though we did meet the first time in the local pub, which I was slightly shocked at, but that is country life. Certainly in my experience it was very good to have those playgroups, and our kids still 18 years later all hang out. But obviously, with this CALD community, we have heard before about pop-up playgroups and actually more going out—it is that outreach playgroup. Does Playgroup Australia have a view on outreach playgroups?

Mr SCHWARZ: Yes. We are part of Playgroup Australia, the federation; we are Playgroup Victoria.

Ms SETTLE: Sorry.

Mr SCHWARZ: No, that is okay. So, yes, we do do pop-up playgroups. We have a couple of vans and we go out and run pop-up playgroups, and we think that is a great way of helping people see what it is that they can do. In Ballarat, for example, we have two workers who are based there. They are not full-time. Louise is the other one in Ballarat. What she does is she actually has connected up with the toy library in Ballarat, and once a month she is taking toys in the van from the toy library—I just had a mental blank now about the regional town—to a regional town. It is about 45 minutes from Ballarat. Their families would not otherwise get access to those toys.

Ms SETTLE: It is probably Ararat where my kids were.

Mr SCHWARZ: It may have been. There is a great example in terms of the infrastructure that is already there—that playgroup and the toy library, all volunteer.

Ms SETTLE: But with a particular view around the CALD community, do you think that that outreach model is important, because there might be less inclination? I was going through the whole mental—sorry, maternal nurse, though it was a little mental at the time—maternal health system. Do you think for CALD communities the outreach model might be more effective?

Mr SCHWARZ: Look, it depends on how it is that those communities are brought together. From Playgroup Victoria’s perspective, what we would be doing is working with services at a local level to support them. So if they had a relationship with the community, as part of what they are doing we would be suggesting, for example, that we could be doing this with them. So where the council is not able to do the pop-up we would come and do that with them. That is where the community development workers are really helpful, because Maureen, for example, in Ballarat, the person that you were talking about, is able to come and show the community the sorts of things that they can do and, importantly, show them and connect with them about what it is that they can do that is culturally appropriate.

One other example from a cultural perspective is a program we run called ‘ALL come out to play!’ that was funded by the State Government initially through the Department of Premier and Cabinet. It focused on protective behaviours and respectful relationships, following up in relation to the royal commission. It is a musical workshop where the message is given to the children and parents at the same time, and it is unique in that regard. We just received some funding last year to work with a Vietnamese women’s association, who we are currently working with, to take that program and make it culturally specific for them. It is not just about translating the material; we have developed a training package for workers and now we are getting a storybook, because we want to build capacity and we want to make sure that the message can continue to be delivered

once the workshop is finished. This project is about making that model culturally specific, as well as translating it into Vietnamese. So there are some great opportunities there.

Ms SETTLE: Are any of the five development workers from a bicultural background themselves? I know Maureen is not.

Mr SCHWARZ: No, Maureen is not. That is a very good question. I have two based in Selandra, which is out past Clyde down in Cardinia, and she is Albanian and the others are not—very interesting.

The CHAIR: Just one question from me. We have heard through the evidence and submissions that navigating the system is extremely difficult and challenging. A proposal, a suggestion, has been to centralise and integrate it to a super hub, where it is a one-stop hub for early childhood, maternal and childhood health, information on playgroups and three-year-old and four-year-old kinder and so on. Having it centralised rather than having parents needing to go out and find this information and navigate it themselves in a very complex system: what is your view in relation to that? Is it difficult? Is that a fair statement to say?

Mr SCHWARZ: Certainly for families that are struggling on a range of levels, yes, it is. So where it is that families are requiring more intensive support for whatever it is that is going on at the time it is very complex. We certainly see in the work that we are doing with the supported playgroups—so the playgroups that the Government funds for that cohort—that the facilitators, the paid professionals, struggle with understanding the system themselves. We know, and it is probably not news to you, that if the professionals are struggling then the families have no hope.

The concept of a hub is good. The challenge with hubs—and there are some great ones around—is that once they get quite big they become complicated just within themselves, in terms of who it is that actually manages and runs the hub and who makes the decisions in terms of how things are integrated. We think that concept for those that need that more intensive support works well, and there are some great examples around the place. In fact one of my team runs a facilitated playgroup for children with disability that is federally funded called MyTime down at Doveton. You have probably heard of the hub down in Doveton; they are running one of those playgroups down there. We can see the model is great, but there are some struggles with the fact that there are a whole range of services that are coming in that are not quite coordinated. So it is not to say that cannot happen, but it definitely makes a big difference to the families because they do not have to go around to find things.

For families that do not need that support, that sort of setup is not something that they would necessarily go to. They are quite happy to go down to the local park. They know where the council is and where the maternal child health nurse is just through their own social networks, so for most of the community the hubs are not necessarily something that people are going to be going to for help. We know in terms of the way that families engage with us it is primarily on their phone. We know 90 per cent of people who engage with us—and when I say engage, I am talking about looking for information, registering their playgroup, all of that sort of thing—are on the phone and through the social media platforms. We know that is the most effective way of getting the message out and understanding who—because we can actually know who is clicking on all of this; it is just unbelievable—is clicking on all of these links. We know that is most effective way forward for the broader community.

The CHAIR: Lovely. Thank you very much of behalf of the Committee for presenting today. The next steps will be the Committee will deliberate on all the submissions and evidence and next year there will be a report tabled in the Assembly with some strong recommendations, and of course your submission will also be considered as part of that. So that will occur next year, but if you would like to keep up-to-date with the Committee's progress you can stay updated online. But again, we do thank you for taking the time to present on behalf of Playgroup Victoria.

Mr SCHWARZ: Thank you. I appreciate it.

Ms SETTLE: And thanks for the Lego! I have not stepped on any in ages.

Committee adjourned.