

TRANSCRIPT

LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY LEGAL AND SOCIAL ISSUES COMMITTEE

Inquiry into Early Childhood Engagement of CALD Communities

Ballarat East—Thursday, 21 November 2019

MEMBERS

Ms Natalie Suleyman—Chair

Mr James Newbury—Deputy Chair

Ms Christine Couzens

Ms Emma Kealy

Ms Michaela Settle

Mr David Southwick

Mr Meng Heang Tak

WITNESSES

Ms Joanne Geurts, Chief Executive Officer, and

Ms Michaela Saha, Early Education Adviser, Eureka Community Kindergarten Association.

The CHAIR: Good morning. Sorry to keep you waiting. I would like to begin by acknowledging the traditional owners and the custodians of the land on which we meet today, the Wathaurong people of the Kulin nation. I also pay my respects to their elders, both past and present. I declare open the public hearings for the Legal and Social Issues Committee's Inquiry into Early Childhood Engagement for Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Communities. All mobile phones should be turned to silent at this point. I ask you to just state your name for the record.

Ms GEURTS: Joanne Geurts.

Ms SAHA: Michaela Saha.

The CHAIR: Lovely; welcome. All evidence by this Committee is protected by the parliamentary privilege, therefore you are protected against any action for what you say here today, but if you go outside and repeat the same things, including on social media and other platforms, those comments may not be protected by this privilege. All evidence given today is being recorded by Hansard, and you will be provided with a proof version of the transcript for you to check as soon as it is available. Verified transcripts plus any PowerPoint presentations and handouts will be placed on the Committee's website as soon as possible. Welcome. I ask you to present for 5 to 10 minutes.

Ms GEURTS: Thank you, and thank you for the opportunity today. Just to let you know, with the extreme weather my phone is on vibrate just in case. We do have services in bushfire-prone areas. We are the Eureka Community Kindergarten Association. We currently manage 27 early childhood services—one is a long day care service and the others are sessional kindergartens. Traditionally we have had very low numbers of CALD families accessing our services, and that is just probably due to the fact that in our population—which is starting to grow and more CALD families are coming in—there just has not been a lot in this area.

Until recently we have had only one staff member who has had English as a second language. None of our staff presently have a first language other than English. We, over the last probably 15 years, have seen a lot more Sudanese families come into the area, and we have consulted with the staff in all of our services before coming here today to talk about their experiences. Initially there were some real challenges with particularly the language barriers. There certainly were services, such as family services and others—Centacare and those—trying to support those families. As time has gone on we have found that their own community have, as they have learned English, been really supportive of new families coming into the area.

So some of our other challenges are around international students. We have a lot of international students coming to Federation University and the hospitals and other organisations here, particularly in Ballarat. Those students often come with families and with children, and they would like to have their children come into a kindergarten program because they are of kindergarten age. There are some real challenges with that in that they are not eligible for the subsidies and therefore the cost is very prohibitive. One of the other big issues is around immunisation, in that most of them cannot prove their immunisation status for us to be able to confirm an enrolment. So that is quite challenging. There are some other issues that Michaela might just touch on around families who are here and want their children immersed in English and do not want us to be talking about their culture as much.

Ms SAHA: When we want to incorporate their culture or their first languages within the program they are quite hesitant, because they want them to be immersed in English. Because they are going off to school, they want to be proficient in English and those sorts of things. That can offer another challenge for staff as well. Also just the enrolment process can be really challenging for a non-English-speaking person. Because they can be quite isolated, it is difficult to have emergency contacts, have a doctor that they go to and all those sorts of things that are all required to confirm enrolment. So there are all those sorts of challenges.

Ms GEURTS: We are just redoing our website, and we are putting up quite a number of languages. So people will be able to choose a language, and our whole website, including the enrolment process, will then be able to be seen in their own language. That will go live before the end of the year. That is one of the things that we see as an important service that we provide.

The other thing our educators have indicated is that they do have trouble particularly when they identify developmental or learning delays in children. We had a fairly recent case where the parenting just was not good and the child was diagnosed with Down syndrome, but the parents were very hard to engage around what services or what supports the child needed. They did a lot of nodding and saying yes, but obviously they did not understand. I think they also felt that the behaviours were quite okay and quite normal, whereas again there could be differences in the expectations of what our teachers and educators are expecting of children, but in some cultures those families do not see those behaviours or even learning difficulties maybe as a problem. So that is quite challenging.

One of the other things that are great that we do make use of is FKA, which is the multicultural support service that runs out of Melbourne. It has been operating for over 100 years. They have a range of resources and interpreting services, and the department of education also has interpretive services that we have used in the past. For the transition to school, the learning and development statement that every child goes to school with, there are now great resources available from the department to give parents information in their own language about, ‘Well, what is this form that we are preparing that is going to go to the school?’. That, again, has been a really great initiative to assist us.

Our teachers talk about how they invite the families, and that is one of the big things around community. The national quality standard area 6 around community involvement of families is really strong, and our educators are really good at trying to get their involvement. They make it important that we share the different cultural aspects of those children and their families and the countries that they were born in and things like that. We do a bit of assessment of—and the department of course also assesses—how we are, I suppose, travelling in that area. It is quite pleasing to see that most of our services are really engaging well with that area of the national quality standards. I think that has covered pretty much everything I had on my list here.

Ms SETTLE: What we are very interested in is how people are getting to services. Anecdotally some CALD communities are less likely to automatically engage with kinder and prep. How are people coming to you? Are they being referred through maternal health?

Ms GEURTS: Yes. There are a number of referral points, and if they are coming into the community as students we have relationships with the universities and they are aware of early childhood services. We have early years networks here in Ballarat where we meet regularly to talk about families. Parent Place with the City of Ballarat is a really key place as well for the distribution of information. It sits in the main street of Ballarat, so maternal and child health are referring people to go to Parent Place but Parent Place are referring them through to our services. I think we are lucky because we are small communities, particularly in the little country towns that we service like Creswick, Clunes, Daylesford. New families that are coming in are generally picked up quite quickly, that they are new in town and people just in the neighbourhood generally we often find as well will see if they have got little children and find out whether they are going to—

Ms SAHA: Even the cultural communities there are saying to their friends, ‘The kinder, my child goes there’, so it is around that referral pathway as well. They feel that they trust so they go to those services.

Ms SETTLE: We were in Geelong yesterday and obviously there is a higher migrant refugee cohort there, and it is interesting—it had not occurred to me—that it is around Fed Uni’s international students. But one of the things we heard yesterday was the role that playgroups and kinders have, almost for the parents as well in terms of engaging them and then referring them into English language courses. Does that happen here in Ballarat, and do you feel confident about the services to refer people on to?

Ms GEURTS: Yes, absolutely. We feel very confident about what services are available and, as I say, work together very closely as groups of organisations to identify where there are gaps and issues. We have lots of supported playgroups as well as Playgroup Victoria playgroups, which are community run and are—

Ms SAHA: Parent Place is a great place.

Ms GEURTS: Parent Place, yes, is a really good resource, which is of course owned and run by the City of Ballarat.

Ms SAHA: It has maternal and health and all those sorts of referrals. Playgroups—they have supported playgroups there as well.

Ms GEURTS: Yes. So we feel that if you are moving to Ballarat you have probably got a really good chance of finding out about what services are available or that you can walk into somewhere on the main street to seek information. They have interpreter services available as well and information in other languages. We think that in Ballarat we do not find many people missing out, and it is very rare that we have someone cold-call and say, 'We want to know about kindergarten'. Usually it has come through that they have been referred or someone is ringing on their behalf to find out. The City of Ballarat have a central enrolment system, so there are lots of inquiries that will go through to them. We meet regularly with Centacare, CAFS and other organisations that would again be able to refer people through that may be getting other types of assistance.

Ms COUZENS: Thank you very much for your presentation this morning. We really appreciate your input. Are there refugee families that are using your kindergarten service?

Ms GEURTS: It was just on last night's local news actually that there are only 27 refugee families in Ballarat itself, so we are not aware of any that have children in our services.

Ms COUZENS: Okay. Have you got an idea or a sense of where they would go, those children?

Ms GEURTS: I believe that if there are children of that age, they would get referred through to us because the City of Ballarat are very involved in the supporting of refugees coming to the town. I feel confident they would be referred.

Ms SAHA: And they would be probably using long day care as well and all that to help with them getting back to work and all of those sorts of things needing longer days of care.

Ms GEURTS: That is true, because we do not provide long day care in the City of Ballarat itself. We only have one service in the Pyrenees, in Beaufort, and there are no refugee families out there. But that is a very valid point that there are probably childcare services where they may be already involved.

Ms COUZENS: So if some of those 27 families have children that attend your kindergarten, what do you see are the challenges for the kindergarten, particularly in terms of trauma and those sorts of things, which obviously you would not have in place because you have not had to deal with it? Do you see that as a significant challenge in your community, or do you think there are services there that can support you through that?

Ms GEURTS: We have significant challenges in this community with children with trauma—

Ms SAHA: And vulnerability.

Ms GEURTS: and vulnerability, and not just coming from a refugee background or families with English as a second language. So we already have a lot of services and a lot of support and a lot of training for our staff around trauma and how to deal with that. Staff might find it more difficult to recognise trauma in children from refugee families, but again we have been training now since we have had a program called Access to Early Learning, which is about vulnerable children accessing kindergarten programs, and that has been about eight or nine years. We have had a significant amount of training in recognising trauma, so I think we would be well equipped, and given that we do not have a huge influx of families, I think again we would probably have the capacity to be able to support those families. I imagine there are other areas where there are large numbers of refugee families where it would probably be very tricky. But I think again here in Ballarat at this current time we are probably very lucky and in a good position to be able to support more refugee families and children that may be having trauma as a big issue.

Ms SAHA: I think the challenge—sorry, just add to that—is with the families. So we are caring for the children, but it is the families—who is supporting them and making sure their wellbeing is being looked after as well and are they connected with the correct services and engaging with those to support them? Because at the end of the day the children are going home to parents that are also traumatised, so we have got to manage that.

Ms GEURTS: Just to give you a very small example, Michaela and I were talking about some of the examples that we have seen over the years. We had a Sudanese mum come to us because she had a complaint. She had very, very little English; we had a lot of trouble trying to actually identify and understand what the issue was for her. It was that her child needed a comfort toy, and what we did not know was that the kindergarten had a policy that children do not bring in their own toy because it can cause conflict and other children might want to grab it and touch it and all of that. So Mum was told, ‘Take the toy’. It was taken off the child and she was told to take it home. She then came in to us as management and was trying to tell us. She was very upset about that—very upset—and we finally got to the bottom of it and went to that teacher and just said, ‘We’ve got to manage this. This child may need to have this toy until such time—

Ms SAHA: It is around security and all those sorts of things.

Ms GEURTS: So they probably sound minor, but—

Ms SAHA: It can be quite significant.

Ms COUZENS: Definitely.

Ms GEURTS: It is not understanding, and what we have been used to is probably mainstream and generally of a European background, and when you are told you do not bring any toys to kinder, as parents we know we do not do that. It is very different.

Ms COUZENS: In terms of the workforce, have you got multicultural workers in your workforce now?

Ms GEURTS: No. Until recently we had one teacher whose second language was English and her first language was Bengali, I think. She was Indian. But she has left us and gone to South Australia. We may have some that are of Dutch heritage, who may have some limited Dutch or German, but it is not their first language. So we do not have a diverse workforce.

Ms COUZENS: Would you see that as being a useful thing to do within your kinder services, to have more multicultural childcare workers and staff generally?

Ms SAHA: Yes.

Ms GEURTS: Definitely. If there were people doing the courses and coming along with the qualifications, we would be very interested in looking at whether we could source some employment for them in our services. Being sessional kindergartens you are probably aware that we just break even—or in some kinders in rural areas we are not breaking even at all; we are running at losses—but it is very hard to find extra money to do extra things. We do have a couple of kindergartens that have taken advantage of the early learning language program and are using their resources to introduce other languages. And the Victorian Government of course, as you are aware, introduced other learning programs this year, which I do not believe any of our services have taken up or been successful in getting part of those languages. Again, there are probably other areas of greater need than ours anyhow. I think it is something we will see change over time, but at the moment it is very—

Ms COUZENS: In terms of communication with families—and you gave two examples earlier about learning difficulties and the toy issue—do you access the interpreter service to deal with those issues? And if you do, do you find that a positive experience or is it really difficult to use that service?

Ms GEURTS: The teachers that I have spoken to that have used the interpretive services have indicated that it was a positive experience, so they have not indicated that there was a challenge with that. Most of the teachers that provide me with feedback—and I got a lot of written feedback from our teachers to make sure I was giving information straight from the coalface—have said that in many of those circumstances there are

other families here that have been able to assist that have better English language and have been able to support them.

Ms SAHA: Sometimes translating newsletters into a family's first language can be a little bit challenging because the message can be a little bit different sometimes. So we need to be really careful about how we manage that, because it might not necessarily be our intention and it comes out a little bit differently. So we just need to try and manage those things and work with the family.

Ms GEURTS: Some of the feedback we are getting is that they are using things like Google Translate and others, and again we are not sure that they are going to get the right message.

Ms SAHA: Yes, that is around that confused—yes, sometimes it is not what it—

Ms COUZENS: That is what we have heard from other inquiries—that although the interpreter service in some cases can be difficult, the use of family members or even older children cannot always be the best way to do it because of confidentiality and issues that that family may not want their friend or another member of the family to know about. So there are difficulties around that that we have heard from other areas. But it sounds like you have had a reasonable experience.

Ms GEURTS: We have, but again it is just so limited. I mean, it might have been one family in a service two years ago, or it could have been two families last year. The numbers we are talking about may be, in a calendar year, eight families across our whole organisation of over 1000 children. It is very small. So again, we would see that those issues would probably grow as the population of immigrants changes here in Ballarat.

Ms COUZENS: So are you looking at strategies going into the future where that growth is likely to occur and thinking about, 'Well, how do we start to meet the challenges that are going to confront us'?

Ms GEURTS: Yes, we are, and one was our website, where now they will be able to use the drop-down box to a number of different languages. Our website has a large range of information for families, not just about kindergarten but about other services that are available to them in the community as well. So we are thinking about that. And I think we feel quite comforted that we have FKA, who do provide a good service that we trust or we have confidence in that service to be able to provide us assistance. The Department of Education and Training are building their resources as well to support us, so we are certainly thinking about it.

We find a lot of the Indian population that are coming in now that are settling here have really good English. Mum and dad often have really good English and we are not having a lot of issues. We just had one example of an Indian family where their child had been living in India with a grandparent and has just come over to Australia now because they are about to start their kindergarten and then schooling. They had no English. That is an example where mum and dad have got pretty good English and the child has come over with absolutely no English. But once again they have made it clear they want the child taught English by people with English as a first language, because they want the child to have an accent that is an Australian accent. So it is interesting as well. We have had two cases of that with Indian families wanting their children to have Australian accents and they only speak to them in their own language, not in English. That we found interesting.

Mr TAK: I just have a few points to share, but as a former interpreter myself I kind of understand it is sometimes a little bit tricky. As a parent of my two boys I want them to be able to speak the language with their grandparents, but then it is a bit confusing when they start prep and kindergarten. It is really interesting.

I understand that for some of the migrant or refugee communities, for example, the Sudanese, I think for a few from that region English is actually their first language. It is not the second. It is the official language, similar to the Indian community. Now, I understand that it is not one-size-fits-all, but how does your organisation work out a program that helps the CALD communities feel that they belong to the community?

Ms SAHA: I think staff work really closely with families, so actually at the services to make them feel welcome. They will connect children together to play together to really build their capacity to get them out in the community. And for their children I think that really helps, when we all have children and families naturally come together. So I think our staff do really well in making them feel very welcome and that they can come to them if they have a question. So they feel like they can belong or they can come and ask—to build that trust.

But it does take time. For some it will be immediate; for some it will be maybe in fourth term until they are actually feeling comfortable, and then they are moving onto the school community.

Ms GEURTS: We are lucky because the parent or the person responsible for the child has to actually bring them into our centre. Unlike a school where you can drop them off at the door and you do not have to engage with a teacher or an adult, in our services they actually have to come in and be dropped off to the staff. So the staff have an opportunity to greet them and to ask them questions or make sure that as much as possible they think that they are being made welcome and comfortable.

Mr TAK: One more question, just to follow on from a question from my colleague there, would you think that it would be helpful in some way if you have a sort of a CALD worker, or it does not really matter?

Ms SAHA: I think with the amount of children at the moment I am not quite sure how financially viable that would be to have, but what we do have in our structure is we have early education advisers—which is what I would do. So the staff would contact me, and then we would work together to work out how we support this family. So if they are having difficulty supporting the family, we would either have that additional resource. I could come and do some observation and I could be included in speaking with the family and trying to get what they might need. So they do have that aspect or that layer to come and get support and for us to help them access services for the family and connect them with the right people or the right agencies.

Ms GEURTS: But I think if there were dedicated workers within, say, the department of education that we could access at times when we needed that, I think it would be really, really welcomed.

Mr TAK: It would be really good.

Ms GEURTS: As we are saying, we probably have not got the capacity ourselves to employ people in those types of positions, but if there were positions available and we could call on that, I think it would be very useful.

Mr TAK: And I heard from a previous hearing it also takes time and dedication to get a CALD person to qualify, so perhaps that may be a good thing.

The CHAIR: Just to add onto that, I have asked this question previously just in relation to having a one-stop hub when it comes to early childhood, preschool, playgroup information, nurses—the whole integrated into one hub where parents and carers can actually just attend and have face-to-face contacts and where there is assistance and information on a whole range of services, because we have heard that navigating the system is extremely challenging, completing the forms and then services change, costs change, the 500 hours at one point is free and after that it comes by fee and most parents are unaware of these changes. So what would be your view in having a one-stop hub, where the service's information is placed in one integrated service model.

Ms GEURTS: And service delivery in the same model is what you are talking about? So the services, like the child care and the kindergarten and MCH, are all delivered at the same service, or are you just talking about for information only?

The CHAIR: I would say information, and that becomes the referral agency to these service providers.

Ms GEURTS: I think that would be great, and it is something that we have almost got in the model here in Ballarat, in that the City of Ballarat have developed a little shopfront, and it is called Parent Place. The City of Ballarat fund it and pay for it. We have an MCH nurse that sits in there a couple of days a week. We have interpreting services. We have Aboriginal services that sit in there—

Ms SAHA: Supported playgroups.

Ms GEURTS: supported playgroups and certainly us as kindergarten providers and long day care providers, we all have information in there. So they have dedicated staff members who work there. As well it is for new residents; the new residents packs direct people to this Parent Place—that is the name of it. So I think here we have something like that, and we really do see the value of it. We have had it for three or four years now, Michaela, I think.

Ms SAHA: Yes.

The CHAIR: And that is where I go to my next question, because you have spoken about international students not being able to access or that there is a fee in relation to the services. Just on refugees and asylum seekers, what would be your view in relation to that cohort also accessing the service?

Ms GEURTS: They will come with some of the same issues in terms of that, as you know, the law here is very stringent around that you have to be able to prove your birth, you have got to be able to prove your immunisation status and things like that; you have got to have emergency contacts. Some families come here without another person that they could put as an emergency contact, whereas our legislation will not allow you to start kinder unless you can provide at least one emergency contact. You have got to be able to provide people who can collect the child from the centre and things like that.

The CHAIR: So would you say that the early start kindergarten policy should be extended to asylum seekers and refugee children?

Ms GEURTS: Absolutely, yes. I think that would be very beneficial.

The CHAIR: Thank you. I think that concludes our questions. Thank you so much for presenting on behalf of your organisation, the Eureka Community Kindergarten Association. Thank you for all the work that you do and taking the time out to present to us.

The next steps will be that we have got two more public hearings, and then the Committee will deliberate on all the submissions and the evidence that we have gathered. We will then provide a report to Government next year, which will be presented to Parliament with some strong recommendations, and your evidence today will be part of that consideration as well. If you would like to keep up-to-date with the progress of the Inquiry, you can stay tuned to the Committee's website. I am sure—

Ms SETTLE: Or you can call me.

The CHAIR: Or call your local member and keep up-to-date. It will be a very extensive report with some strong recommendations. So, again, thank you for taking the time out to be here today.

Ms GEURTS: No, thank you for the invitation.

Ms SAHA: Yes, thank you.

Witnesses withdrew.