

# TRANSCRIPT

## LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL LEGAL AND SOCIAL ISSUES COMMITTEE

### Inquiry into the State Education System in Victoria

Shepparton – Wednesday 17 April 2024

#### MEMBERS

Trung Luu – Chair

Ryan Batchelor – Deputy Chair

Michael Galea

Renee Heath

Joe McCracken

Rachel Payne

Aiv Puglielli

Lee Tarlamis

#### PARTICIPATING MEMBERS

Melina Bath

John Berger

Georgie Crozier

Moira Deeming

David Ettershank

Wendy Lovell

Sarah Mansfield

**WITNESS**

Katherine Neall.

**The CHAIR:** I declare open the Legislative Council Legal and Social Issues Committee public hearing for the inquiry into state education in Victoria. Please ensure your mobile phones have been switched to silent and that background noise is minimised.

Before we continue I would like to begin this hearing by respectfully acknowledging the Aboriginal people, the traditional custodians of the various lands we are gathered on today, and I pay my respects to their elders, ancestors and families. I particularly welcome any elders or community members who are here today to impart their knowledge of the issues to the committee. I would also like to thank the Parklake in Shepparton for hosting us today and welcome the public in the gallery.

Before I continue I would like to introduce the committee. I am Trung Luu, Chair of the committee, Member for Western Metropolitan. To my right is my Deputy Chair, Mr Ryan Batchelor, Member for Southern Metropolitan; Mr Michael Galea, Member for South-Eastern Metropolitan; Dr Renee Heath, Member for Eastern Victoria; Mr Joe McCracken, Member for Western Victoria; Ms Rachel Payne, Member for South-Eastern Metropolitan; Mr Aiv Puglielli, Member for North-Eastern Metropolitan Region; Ms Melina Bath, Member for Eastern Victoria; and Mrs Moira Deeming, Member for Western Metropolitan Region, on my far right.

Welcome today, Katherine Neall. Before we continue I would just like to read some information to you. Regarding the evidence you give today, all evidence taken is protected by parliamentary privilege, as provided by the *Constitution Act 1975*, and further subject to the provisions of the Legislative Council standing orders. Therefore the information that you provide during this hearing is protected by law. You are protected against any action for what you say during this hearing, but if you go elsewhere and repeat the same things, those comments may not be protected by this privilege. Any deliberately false evidence or misleading of the committee may be considered as a contempt of Parliament.

All evidence is being recorded. You will be provided with a proof version of the transcript following the hearing. Transcripts will ultimately be made public and posted on the committee website.

Welcome today. Could you please state your full name. I understand you are here as a parent.

**Katherine NEALL:** My name is Katherine Neall.

**The CHAIR:** Would you like to make an opening statement before we open it to questions?

**Katherine NEALL:** Yes, please. Thank you. Thank you for this opportunity to speak to you all today. By now you have read my submission and hopefully learned a little bit about what the teacher crisis looks like from the student and family perspective. A lot has been said and discussed in recent times about the heavy burden the teacher shortages are having on teacher workload, school management and daily operations – and rightly so. I myself have been teaching for almost two decades in country schools, taking on various leadership roles in student health and wellbeing at different times during my career. I have also not long finished working in a divisional role for the Department of Education as a professional practice leader in the now-defunct health and wellbeing branch in the north-west, holding portfolios that included coordinating a referral service for schools to seek support with complex and challenging student behaviours, supporting schools with health and wellbeing strategic planning and assisting principals with the delivery of behaviour support intervention meetings. These are meetings that occur prior to a principal making a decision on whether or not to expel a student.

I have worked in an alternate setting for disengaged students, many of whom were involved with the youth justice system. My husband is an ex-principal and is now in a managerial role in the Department of Education. Although I am giving you a personal account of the impact of the teacher shortages, in my submission I am speaking to you today as an informed parent with direct experience of the system. I would also like to clarify that my statements are my own. Furthermore, out of respect for my children's privacy, I request that my children's schools are not named during this proceeding if that is okay. I will just talk a little bit about the issue.

Members of the panel, our kids deserve so much more than this. As you are probably aware, the situation in areas such as the Goulburn Valley and Gippsland as well as other pockets around Victoria is dire. In last year's Public Accounts and Estimates Committee it was revealed that the average application rate across Victorian government secondary schools in 2002 was 2.8 applications per vacancy. In outer Gippsland this number was 0.7, and in Goulburn, where we are meeting today, 0.9. The Mallee, Wimmera South West, Brimbank, Melton, Ovens Murray, Loddon, inner Gippsland and Hume–Merri-bek were similarly struggling, with an average of two or less applications received per teaching staff vacancy.

So what does this actually look like on the ground? I have five children aged between 10 and 17 presently attending four different schools. In 2023 one of my daughters had to share her VCE sociology teacher with the VCE legal studies class. My other daughter's class had four CRTs for core subjects, and my son had no substantive English teacher for the entire year and as a result no report could be given.

Please understand I in no way blame my children's schools for these issues. There are other schools around northern Victoria who cannot run senior classes on particular days of the week, and over the last two years it was not uncommon for schools in this area, both government and private, to have to send year levels home due to insufficient staffing. Originating from the Wimmera, I know that my husband had to make difficult decisions as a principal in his hard-to-staff school about what VCE subjects and extracurricular activities he could offer, and he would often say that staffing was one of the most stress-inducing parts of his role.

When working in wellbeing for the VPS, I would often hear from schools saying that they were unable to implement recommended and much-needed health and wellbeing strategies and interventions for students because of a lack of staff. These are some of our most vulnerable young people, who require tier 3 wraparound interventions but sadly are more and more likely to fall through the gaps. The shortage may also partly explain the increase in suspensions and modified student timetables in statewide data.

I appreciate the department continues to look for strategies to address this issue, and this inquiry is much appreciated, but the fact remains that my kids and hundreds of other children across our state presently do not have permanent teachers – teachers who know and understand their learning needs, can build strong relationships with them and provide them with the predictability and formative assessment that we know helps a young person thrive. Propping up the system with casual relief teachers is not a sustainable solution, but many schools have no other choice. You need to have an adult in front of the kids.

Efforts to attract new staff are seeing some success, but there is a lot of money going into early-career teachers, who we know are finding teaching so difficult in their first few years that many of them are not lasting five years. As the working conditions for teachers continue to deteriorate, casual relief work can be attractive even without the benefits that come with contracts. We need to address the working conditions and retention of our experienced staff in schools and not just focus on attraction or incentivising casual relief work.

Addressing the inequity in funding in our system is essential to achieving this aim and improving the educational outcomes of all students.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, Katherine. I know you emphasised in relation to schools. Basically in the inquiry we understand none of the schools are at fault. Most of them are doing the best they can. This is what the inquiry is all about, so hopefully we will find some recommendations to assist the schools throughout the state.

Thank you very much for your submission. I will now open questions to the panel. Just because there are quite a few of us, can we limit questions to 4 minutes, please. We will start with our Deputy Chair.

**Ryan BATCHELOR:** Thank you, Chair. Katherine, thanks so much for coming and for sharing your story. It is obviously troubling as a parent the circumstances you are in, and I think in the experiences we have had in the course of this inquiry and more broadly we know that you are not alone in feeling particularly the heartache that comes with not being able to get a good assessment, a proper assessment, for your child. That is certainly not a unique story. One of the things that you talked about in respect of retaining experienced teachers is that working conditions continue to deteriorate. If we are thinking about what policy recommendations we can make to government to retain experienced teachers in the system or to potentially attract those who have left the system back, what do you think are some of the key working conditions that could be improved to assist with either the retention or the return of experienced teachers?

**Katherine NEALL:** Most of us love teaching. We love our profession, and the people that are walking away are walking away with heavy hearts. I walked away. I walked away for 18 months and went and worked for the public service, and I could have stayed on as an ongoing role. So I am one of the few people that actually returned. We are struggling with health and safety in our workplace. All schools are. When I ran the referral service, that was abundantly clear. I think that all of those things about workload, time – I personally believe, every teacher believes, we do not have enough time in our day to do all of the things that are required of us, so the burnout in that respect is really high. But if I could talk about the health and safety, because I know other people –

**Ryan BATCHELOR:** Yes, that is what I was going to come back to. What are the examples of that?

**Katherine NEALL:** When I ran the referral service, or coordinated it, with my colleagues last year – now, this was only one region; this was the north-west, not the north-east, which we are currently in – we saw a massive uptick in the number of referrals that were coming through for younger children. Almost half of our cases last year were for children aged under 10. We are talking about teachers that are in their classrooms, they might be heavily pregnant, and the child is dysregulated and kicking and throwing things around the rooms. Classroom evacuations were extremely common. We have seen a massive jump in expulsions due to violence in our schools and aggression and things like that.

I do want to state, though, that these are young people that I do not believe want to be behaving like this. We love our kids. We love all of our kids, but when you have 25 or 26 kids – and in some of the open-plan schools, which I know you heard about yesterday, we have had 90 preps in the one open-plan setting – it is very difficult for one teacher, and if you are lucky, an aide or a teacher assistant, to manage that situation. I love our inclusion policies. They are really good on paper, but inclusion without resourcing is risk, and our teachers and our schools and our principals and our leadership teams are currently holding on to a lot of risk. It was not odd for us to hear schools tell us that young people 14 or 15 years old that had been excluded – exited – from private psychiatric hospital because of their behaviours were then expected to come to school the next day.

**Ryan BATCHELOR:** How much of this do you think the education system can fix and how much do you think is a broader question?

**Katherine NEALL:** Smaller class sizes would help. I guess my personal wondering is about when we have recognised in a special school setting that we want to keep our class sizes to eight students with perhaps a teacher assistant and other adults in the room – some of our mainstream classes are 26. I have got nine children with disabilities in one of my classes at the moment. It is a lot to manage.

**Ryan BATCHELOR:** Sorry, I know my time is up, but what sorts of disabilities?

**Katherine NEALL:** ADHD and ASD are probably the higher end ones that we see now. The data showed us that as well. But it could be any disability. I have taught children that are mute, are with Down syndrome and cannot toilet themselves, particularly in regional and rural areas, where there might not be a special school for 100 kilometres. It is not the kids' fault, but that is our situation.

**Ryan BATCHELOR:** Thanks, Chair.

**The CHAIR:** Before I pass it on, are those kids under special care before they come to school? Are they under like the NDIS program and stuff?

**Katherine NEALL:** They can be. What you will find, in my experience in regional and remote areas, is that often the families of these young people, no matter how bad their disability is, find the NDIS system very difficult to access and manage. They might have very poor literacy skills. I am not talking about Shepparton, because Shepparton is a major regional centre, but in other regional and rural areas you might not even have advocates that can go and help that family to fill out those forms, and so schools are trying to do that with the families. We are not experts on the NDIS. Some of us have had to learn.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you. Ms Bath.

**Melina BATH:** Thank you very much. We were in Bairnsdale and the Latrobe Valley the other day with these hearings, and what you are saying is consistent as well with what we heard there. I thought you said, Katherine, ‘defunct health and wellbeing role in division.’ Can you explain that?

**Katherine NEALL:** Because the realignment got rid of that branch. There was a department reorganisation and realignment, and there were a number of redundancies. It is not that the work that that branch were doing –

**Melina BATH:** So it still exists? Or explain it.

**Katherine NEALL:** It has collapsed into a bigger branch with a new name.

**Melina BATH:** Okay. Are there still the resources there? Bigger branch, new name – are there still the people there to process health and wellbeing?

**Katherine NEALL:** They lost a lot of experience. Three of my colleagues took redundancy packages.

**Melina BATH:** Why, do you think?

**Katherine NEALL:** Why do I think –

**Melina BATH:** What I am trying to understand is: is the education department providing enough services for health and wellbeing at a departmental level to support regional schools and remote schools? That is the understanding I want to get.

**Katherine NEALL:** I think they try to. I think the issue is that the health and wellbeing in the department side of things, in the corporate side of things – they are struggling with staff shortages as well. So to try and get psychologists and allied health professionals to come and work, for example, in SSS – I do not know what the situation is here in Shepparton because I worked in the north-west, but it was not odd for major areas like Hume, Merri-bek and that not to be fully staffed in their allied health services. These are the people that can come and support the schools and come and support with assessments and things like that. So it is not a situation that is unique to schools. I think with the NDIS there are a lot of people now that have gone into private practice, so to come and work for –

**Melina BATH:** For the state system.

**Katherine NEALL:** Yes.

**Melina BATH:** Can I move now to reporting. I was a teacher in another life, and I know that reports are really important – that common assessment, that flowing through to parents and then to have that interaction between your classroom teacher and parents and the students. Explain more about the impact of the lack of assessment on your children, or child, specifically.

**Katherine NEALL:** I was quite concerned when my son could not get a report – I am concerned for all my kids, but he is a young person that was performing at grade 10 level in his reading and writing at year 7.

**Melina BATH:** So he is advanced.

**Katherine NEALL:** He is.

**Melina BATH:** I am not meaning to interrupt you, but my time is limited. What does it mean for kids who are not advanced and parents who need to have –

**Katherine NEALL:** It means the same thing. We need to give kids feedback. We need to give families feedback. We need to bring our families along with the learning journey.

**Melina BATH:** Sure – or the issues, if they arise, with the learning.

**Katherine NEALL:** Yes. For my son, I really had to advocate for him because I was not sure whether he wanted to go into an international university one day or an IB course, and those schools require those reports, so I had to act. But it is important for all students.

**Melina BATH:** So the reason why there was no report was not that it was not a school policy or education policy, it was because CRTs were taking those classes. Therefore, with the greatest respect to CRTs, they walk in, they get their lesson plans, which somebody else has written potentially – even the principal or someone else in a different department – they conduct them, and then at 3:35 they go home.

**Katherine NEALL:** Correct. They can be requested to do reports from the schools, but when the teacher shortage is as dire as it is here, what are you going to do? Are you going to employ that CRT to take five lessons out of five lessons for that day, or are you going to employ them for four lessons and give them a spare to do correction when you have got another class that has zero teachers? You are going to put them in front of kids first.

**Melina BATH:** Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, Ms Bath. I will just remind the committee that Ms Neall is here representing as a parent and not for the department, so we will refer to her experience as a parent, not her role in the department. Thank you. Mr McCracken, do you have any questions?

**Joe McCracken:** Thank you, Katherine, for your presentation so far. I will try and fire through some questions quickly because my time is limited. You spoke a bit before about CRTs. That is obviously a preference for a lot of people that might be semiretired in teaching or looking to transition into retirement. What is it about being a CRT do you think that might be leading people more down that path than to permanent or even part-time roles?

**Katherine NEALL:** I think the working conditions of a CRT are becoming more attractive. Well, two things really – firstly, early-career teachers are not always feeling very prepared straight out of university, so they are going to CRT first to really get that experience that they have lacked throughout their course.

**Joe McCracken:** Is that because they do not get a lot of experience in teacher training and that sort of thing?

**Katherine NEALL:** For some of them that is what it will be. Others will come out quite confident and be ready to get going. But I have heard from some friends and colleagues that I have had that are like, 'I'm not sure I'm ready for the classroom. It seems very daunting straight out of university. I'm going to do CRT first.' They have run different incentives because of the shortage. For example, I think in the last couple of years up here a CRT was on around \$450 a day plus another \$300 for accommodation. It is almost like a leading teacher wage without the preparation, the responsibility, the assessment and the admin that we have to do. It is still hard work, CRT. I have done CRT. It is still challenging work, for sure.

**Joe McCracken:** You get a full load each day, pretty much.

**Katherine NEALL:** Yes, but why are people choosing that in such high rates over having sick leave and holiday pay? Why are teachers walking away from all of that if the conditions are so good?

**Joe McCracken:** Yes, that is fair. I guess one of the points that we hear quite a lot from the government is that building new schools is all good, but if you have got no-one to staff them, they are not very useful. Would that be your perspective?

**Katherine NEALL:** I guess it is the types of schools you build. I love the P-12 model. I worked in a P-12 for 17 years. My children attended a P-12 until we moved up here. It helps with transitions and keeping them small and things like that. You know, a lot of our new inclusion schools are open plan. Why is that? Open-plan environments can be very challenging.

**Joe McCracken:** You said before that schools are not resourced. In what way – is it staff? Is it money?

**Katherine NEALL:** It is all of the above. I mean, my main concern in the submission that I submitted is about people resourcing. But there are a number of students we have in any school that are not funded. DIP is aiming to address that, and the mental health funding that is coming in is trying to address that. But you still need to have people to spend the money on. If you are in a rural or regional area, it might be great that you have just got all this money to go and get a private psych in two days a week – not if there are no private psychs in your area.

**Joe McCracken:** It is a hard challenge to overcome. I do not think it is really fully understood from a city perspective either how difficult it can be to attract and retain staff. What incentives or otherwise have you seen in place for attempts to attract and retain staff?

**Katherine Neall:** The financial incentives have been around for a while. That is public knowledge. They are advertised through recruitment online, and they are pretty generous. We have teacher housing in some parts of this state. We had it in my old town in western Victoria. I think that would really help in Shepparton, because we have a housing crisis here that was exacerbated by the floods.

**Joe McCracken:** Our last inquiry was on the housing crisis, so we are all aware of that. I think my time is up. Thanks so much.

**Katherine Neall:** No worries.

**The Chair:** Thank you. Mrs Deeming, have you got any questions?

**Moira Deeming:** Thank you. Yes. Thank you so much for your fabulous report. You have got this unique position of being a teacher and a parent and also having worked in the department. I was wondering if you could expand a little bit on what you think that you know that the parents of these children do not really know and what they can do to help their children?

**Katherine Neall:** Sorry, in what way?

**Moira Deeming:** Parents are going to have their kids coming home with reports that do not really say much. Often parents are in this position where they do not know what is going on at school. They do not know the policies that are impacting them and are impacting everyone across the state, so how do you think that is impacting them?

**Katherine Neall:** This is a very disadvantaged community here. There are pockets of great disadvantage in the Goulburn Valley. A lot of parents will not realise that their child has not had a proper assessment, or they will not understand what that means. My argument is that that should not matter, that we have a duty of care and a responsibility to ensure that we are delivering a quality education regardless. It does help. When you have to bring these families in, you need to be able to have a strengths-based approach and be able to point to a child's assessment and say, 'They may have been performing at grade 5 level when they were at year 9, but they're in year 10 now and they've made such improvements. They've got up to this level – they're up at grade 6.' Assessment gives us that ability to use that strengths-based approach and to see the growth and to see the change and to celebrate those successes. It is really important, because if you are just a kid at home and you are not getting a report and nothing has changed and your dot points have not changed on your report – children's confidence is so important and is very fragile, particularly in the teen years – why bother? How is this not contributing to our behavioural issues that we are seeing in our schools when these kids are disengaged because we cannot even do what we are meant to do?

**Moira Deeming:** It is fair enough that they would feel that we have disengaged from them if they are not even getting any proper regular feedback and no-one is paying attention to them, and they will be able to tell just in the classroom let alone from that. It is really great insight. Thank you so much.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Mrs Deeming. Mr Puglielli.

**Aiv Puglielli:** Hi. Thank you for coming in and sharing your contribution with us today. You touched on earlier, speaking to us, the experiences of teachers, particularly those who have been there in the longer term within schools, who are leaving the profession – you know, the overwork that they are experiencing. We heard even in yesterday's proceedings about that overwork, words like 'burnout' getting used. Could you expand a bit more on your experiences of that within the sector?

**Katherine Neall:** It is so multifaceted. I can speak from my experience. My experience was related to the amount of trauma that I was hearing from these kids on a day-to-day basis, and over time I probably ended up with compassion fatigue. Our profession is very emotionally driven. We are dealing with young people every day – and in secondary schools many times a day, like I have got 100 different students – that are coming in and bringing their own issues and their own problems, and in communities like this, where we have a high level

of disadvantage, we represent a lot of priority groups. When I talk about priority groups, I am talking about our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. I am talking about refugees. That is very high here in the Goulburn Valley. I am talking about LGBTQI students. It is the works, and that is all happening in our classrooms every day. My story was I did not walk away because I fell out of love with teaching; I walked away because I lost a student to self-harm.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** Given these pressures that you are talking about, do you think there are appropriate mental health supports currently in place for teachers who are having these experiences?

**Katherine NEALL:** We have the EAP. No. I think that unfortunately the situation is so difficult for our leaders just trying to do what they need to do every day. You could say, 'Well, the principals need to have a better understanding of mental health issues for their staff,' but that is just putting more on principals. Principal health and wellbeing outcomes are just as bad.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** What do you think the solution is? Do you have a suggestion? We are going to be making recommendations at the end of this process.

**Katherine NEALL:** I think that you have to do the things that protect you from compassion fatigue like you would in any other type of industry – whether you have space in your time in a day that is not taken up with meetings and other things to debrief with colleagues. They do some really good jobs at the schools here in terms of social activities and stuff like that, but when every minute of your day is taken up, it is your family that is getting it at home. It is not the workplace looking after you; it is your family picking you up off the floor.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** Thank you. With the remainder of my time: in terms of new teachers coming into the workforce – I perhaps misheard the figure you gave earlier in terms of applications per job that is advertised – what do you think the barriers are that are stopping people from applying for these positions?

**Katherine NEALL:** Housing would be one in Shepparton. I think that the schools sometimes successfully recruit only to sort of get temporary housing for the teachers and then that falls through. It is a really big problem. Barriers to applying? I think that regional and rural areas always tend to be hard to staff, just from their location to the city. I think that that existed prior to COVID, probably.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you. Michael.

**Michael GALEA:** Thank you, Chair. Thanks for joining us this morning, Ms Neall. You have spoken a lot about the issues of teacher retention and having sufficient teachers. You are someone who has, as you have said in your remarks, gone out of teaching and then gone back into it, so you seem to me like the perfect person to ask: how do we actually get more people to return to teaching who have left the profession?

**Katherine NEALL:** We need to address the cause of why they are leaving. Why don't we do exit interviews? When I left the VPS and my colleagues were made redundant – it was just online; it was through eduPay or whatever – they went through and they said, 'This is why I'm leaving.' It was just an online thing. Monash and Melbourne uni and that are trying to research this, but we have the system in place. If you are changing schools or if you are leaving schools, why are we not doing exit interviews? Once we have this data, there are lots of things that we could do for retention if those teachers were rewarded in some way. The thing with the CRT is that the substantive staff that are there are supporting the early teachers, and they are also preparing the class work. They are not just preparing their class work; they are preparing all of this work, so the burden is heavy. Could they have more generous long service leave? There are things like that. Teachers will tell you. There will be a hundred different ideas for what you could do to at least recognise and validate what they are doing. The department could run a campaign. They could speak up for us. They could run an It's Never OK campaign, like they did with the ambulance years back, saying, 'We're here to help. We won't accept this sort of behaviour in our schools' – that sort of thing.

**Michael GALEA:** As others have said, we are looking for findings and recommendations. I think you just landed on a really good one there, especially exit interviews to get that data. You also touched on CRTs just there. What do we need to do to motivate more CRTs, if it is appropriate for them to become permanent, to become permanent?

**Katherine NEALL:** I think there are lots of CRTs that would go permanent if the conditions were better and it was not such a heavy workload in schools. I think that it is kind of a catch-22 because as the shortage gets worse the class sizes get bigger, but we actually have to get the class sizes smaller. We need to give people proper planning time. When I went to the VPS – I am sure that you guys have all experienced this – they were like, ‘We have a 1-hour presentation to give next week; is a week long enough to get the PowerPoint together?’ I was like, ‘You realise I do that five times a day?’ I do not have a week. We do not have the time. We do not just walk in there and teach. We have to prepare, and we have to overprepare. We are competing with these now. We have to try and create really engaging lessons to bring these kids back from COVID, to bring them back into the classroom. We are not TikTok stars and influencers, but that is what we are competing with. So we need that preparation time.

**Michael GALEA:** I do not know if you teach in public or private schools, but with mobile phones being banned in classrooms, as someone who has been a teacher for a long time have you seen an impact from that ban coming in?

**Katherine NEALL:** If we could invent an electromagnetic pulse that you just switched on for the school day and then turned back off –

**Michael GALEA:** We can add that to the recommendations. I am not sure if it will –

**Katherine NEALL:** It has been an issue.

**Michael GALEA:** Has the issue improved since the ban came in? Has it been better since then?

**Katherine NEALL:** It depends on the school’s policy. Schools that have really rigorous policies around the ban and are able to enforce it are doing pretty well.

**Michael GALEA:** Thank you. Just on other distractions, if I may quickly ask, we had an inquiry two days ago here in Shepparton into vaping as well, and we heard from some local schools, including some school captains at one of the local schools here, who gave us some really good feedback on that. As a teacher and as a parent, are there any perspectives that you have on vaping?

**Katherine NEALL:** Yes. I have an enduring respiratory problem from when I taught in my alternate setting. We transported the kids, and they would often vape on the bus. The problem with the vapes is that they are so concealable. You do not need to go behind a building to have a smoke. Girls would hide them in their tops, put their shirt up and vape and stuff like that. It is a big problem.

**Michael GALEA:** And widely available in this community, I understand, as well.

**Katherine NEALL:** Yes. I have got a cough that will not go away now just from second-hand.

**Michael GALEA:** Very interesting. Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, Michael. Ms Payne.

**Rachel PAYNE:** Thank you. Katherine, thank you so much for coming and speaking with us today. Your insight is really valuable, and I know it must be difficult to share some of your experiences as well. But I want to talk about your kids, and what we have heard from some of the other parents is that, with what happened during COVID, a lot of kids got used to virtual learning and there was a little bit more flexibility there. I would love to know your thoughts. I note that at least one of your children is also accessing virtual learning. How has that impacted your children’s lives, and do you feel like there could be more options there for kids to have a bit more flexibility?

**Katherine NEALL:** I have my own personal cross-section of children because I have got five of them. They are all 18 months apart. With one of my children, for my husband and me it was a hard decision, but she did not rebound. She was in that year level that missed the transition during COVID, highly anxious, and we got to the point where she now has a dual enrolment with a mainstream school. We are slowly trying to transition her back in a safe way, and she is doing really well. Virtual learning was a lifesaver for us. It really just helped her calm her nerves. Now we are doing the stretch, but she was very impacted by that. She was a happy, joyful, bouncy, sociable young person beforehand. Now it is hard to get her out of her room.

**Rachel PAYNE:** You did mention the open classrooms. I would love to discuss more around that, probably reflecting on your kids' experience if they have learned in open classrooms and also reflecting on your lengthy teaching experience. Have you experienced it? I would love to understand what the kids' experience is more so in that open learning space.

**Katherine NEALL:** They can be utilised well. My brother was a principal in the private system, where they had open planning. You either love it or you do not. I personally am not a big fan of the open classroom because we have so many issues that we are dealing with with kids in our classrooms. Just adding the extra distractions, particularly when we have got this huge uptick in anxious kids and ADHD coming through – let us just close the door. It just seems to be a low-hanging fruit that we could just go – you know.

**Rachel PAYNE:** Especially following the pandemic. I think we need to reflect on doing things differently.

**Katherine NEALL:** Yes. I personally do not like them. Some people love them, but I do not.

**Rachel PAYNE:** Some of the kids that we heard from yesterday were saying that they just felt really distracted in those environments as well.

**Katherine NEALL:** Yes. I mean, I would be distracted as a teacher, teaching with 90 kids in your space. What we heard from a lot of schools was that when they have to do a classroom evacuation, it is not just taking 17 or 20 kids out so you can regulate that one child, it is exiting 90 preps or large numbers of students. How is it healthy for these kids to have to be evacuated all the time due to safety? How is that not contributing to the anxiety our kids are experiencing?

**Rachel PAYNE:** Yes, exactly. What impact is that having on the collective of the children? Yes, okay. Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you. Ms Heath.

**Renee HEATH:** Thank you for your submission and coming in and presenting today. In your submission you mentioned that one of your children did not have a permanent English teacher for six months. What impact has that had on him or his peers?

**Katherine NEALL:** Well, he is having to catch up now. He was going to start this year off again with no English teacher, and I actually had to make some noise to get that changed. So we swapped his English and maths classes. It means that he is not with his mate, so it has had that impact. He was reluctant, and I just said, 'Mate, you've got to.' I think I mentioned at the start he wants to either go into politics or law or economics. He needs his English; he needs to do that. He is very confident, and he will catch up, because he is academic. A lot of kids will not.

**Renee HEATH:** That was my next question. Are there remedial classes or remedial work for these kids that have missed so much?

**Katherine NEALL:** Yes, there are. It depends on the school. There are different initiatives within the department. There is MYLNS and there was a tutoring initiative and things like that. But again, staffing –

**Renee HEATH:** Yes, absolutely.

**Katherine NEALL:** You need people to not be taking classes to run those remedial –

**Renee HEATH:** Which, if there is a teacher shortage –

**Katherine NEALL:** Yes.

**Renee HEATH:** You also mentioned that I think your daughter had her psychology class and her legal studies class combined. So what did that look like?

**Katherine NEALL:** I think what happened was that she would have her teacher for – say, they have five VCE classes a week – two or three of them and then a CRT for two of them while the teacher went next door and dealt with the legal studies class but was able to sort of pop back. In other schools it is really common to

collapse classes. That is hard too. I mean, in rural schools that happens more than we would like it to. I used to work in a school of only 150 kids. That is double the planning. It does not matter that those class sizes are smaller. If you are trying to teach year 11 psychology at the same time as year 12 psychology, they are two completely different study designs.

**Renee HEATH:** Doubling your load.

**Katherine NEALL:** Primary teachers do it all the time. They have grade 2–3 classes and stuff like that, but when we are talking about the VCE, it is very challenging.

**Renee HEATH:** You also mentioned – I wrote down a heap of things as you were chatting – that there were times when whole year levels would be sent home.

**Katherine NEALL:** Yes, I feel like that was happening a couple of years ago in the Goulburn Valley. I might have lost track of time a little bit.

**Renee HEATH:** No, that is fine.

**Katherine NEALL:** But yes, it was private schools as well. They did staggered things, so it was like ‘We’ll take 7s and 8s and 9s today and the VCEs can come in tomorrow.’ There is one school I know of more north than here where the senior school kids do not come on a Wednesday.

**Renee HEATH:** Wow. And that is a regular thing, just so they can be managed?

**Katherine NEALL:** Yes. It might be their VM kids or something like that.

**Renee HEATH:** Have they seen an improvement from that strategy? It is far from ideal.

**Katherine NEALL:** I do not know.

**Renee HEATH:** You do not know. Okay. The other thing: as you were talking it seems like a lot of responsibility comes back on the schools for mental health. Do you think that if there are not enough services in the town, such as social work and health services, these things and responsibilities come back on teachers?

**Katherine NEALL:** Yes, of course. Schools in regional and rural areas particularly but also in Melbourne are often the wellbeing hub, like the access point, for families. I have sat in SOCIT meetings with police. I have been at midnight at a police station with a child that could not go home because she was unsafe and no-one else was there for her. I have had DFFH turn up and had to walk primary school students to the car. This is what we are asked to do.

**Renee HEATH:** Wow.

**Katherine NEALL:** Yes.

**Renee HEATH:** I think that alarm was my time, but thank you so much. I have got a few other questions which maybe we can send to you on notice.

**The CHAIR:** We might come back, because we have got a bit of time. Your submission is fantastic because you have got a broad range of experience in relation to being a parent with five kids and your experience as a teacher.

**Katherine NEALL:** Yes. Please do not put me on trial for having five kids!

**The CHAIR:** No, that is all right. I have got five too, so it is okay. You touched on various areas in relation to teacher retention and CRTs and the kids themselves in open plans. I just want to ask for your experience. We understand and we have heard a lot about time, health and safety and the workload. Just from your experience as a teacher, what would you like to see as a teacher to reduce the workload? What part of the workload that a teacher is doing now can be reduced?

**Katherine NEALL:** There are a lot of administrative tasks that we have to do, and there is a lot of stuff that is part of our normal day-to-day job. There are things that I wonder about. We have a Vic curriculum. Why

don't we have rubrics that are designed by the department that we can follow? To create a rubric takes a lot of time. A lot of teachers are now looking to AI to help differentiate. We are looking at that with assistive technologies, because it is not odd to have, in one of my English classes, for example, the level ranging from prep – and I am talking about a year 9 class – to kids at grade 2–3 level, 3–4 level, 5–6 level. I have probably got two that are at standard. I have got a plan for all of that. If I really want to respect those kids and help them learn and help them grow, that is what is required of me. I think there are things like that that can be done. To be honest, we are building the plane in the air and we do not have the staff. Can we shorten the school day for secondary – have planning time at the end of each day?

**The CHAIR:** Just to go back to your example of primary school, 1 to 6: if there were pre-planned set plans for teachers for each class, would that assist – done by the department?

**Katherine NEALL:** We can do our lesson planning, but the rubrics for different curriculum outcomes that you design, they would be a huge time saver.

**The CHAIR:** So generic across the state – have a generic one.

**Katherine NEALL:** Yes. Then you would at least have a template and you could adjust it and stuff like that. Developmental rubrics are really important as well because developmental rubrics allow us to assess – we are not primary school teachers all of us – down to grade 3, down to grade 2. Providing us with those helps with the assessment.

**The CHAIR:** I understand you mentioned reports – now, that would take part of your time as a teacher – and the lesson plan, which is part of the administration. As a parent, you said you are not getting the reports. Would you have time set aside for that and some time set for planning?

**Katherine NEALL:** Most schools will give you some report-writing time. They will have a meeting-free week, or at one of my past schools there was a report-writing day. It was a student-free day where we wrote reports. I put reports in the bucket of essential teacher business. That is stuff that we should be doing. We know the kids; we have to write the reports – we have to.

**The CHAIR:** What about the emergency teachers and CRTs? Do they do reports for the kids as well? You said you were not getting any.

**Katherine NEALL:** Not necessarily, no. Unless you are paying a CRT to do assessment, to have planning time and to write reports, they are not doing those things.

**The CHAIR:** At the moment parents are missing out on that if those classes have CRT.

**Katherine NEALL:** Yes. That was my situation.

**The CHAIR:** You also touched on open planning. You were not in favour of that, I understand. What are your suggestions and solutions in relation to schools that are designed with open planning? How can we –

**Katherine NEALL:** I think we need to look at letting our leaders, as in our principal class, get back to instructional leadership. Their time is taken up so much that we cannot access our line managers all the time. If I need help with my instruction, if I am an early-career teacher and I need support, I am often getting that from leading teachers, which is great, who are middle management. But as teachers we want to see our leaders. We want to walk with them. Most of our principals got to the point that they are at because they were great teachers. There is so much we cannot learn from them because they are taken up with administration. I think that would help as well. I think that there needs to be a dedicated workforce beyond our senior education improvement leaders, the SEILs, to support our prins when they are dealing with really complex cases.

Something that I heard constantly from principals when I ran that referral service was that, firstly, they were really worried about the young people and their school community. But next in line I am worried about the media, because it is not odd for parents to come and say, 'I'm going to the *Herald Sun*' – and the stress that that places on principals. There is a complex matters team, but they only deal with written communication. I think we need to look at how we can take some of that administrative burden, whether it is the finances or whatever, from the principal so that they can get back to instructional leadership. And that would help us. So my question is: what do we want our kids to be doing? What then do our teachers need to be doing to allow for that? What

does middle management need to be doing in order to support that? And so on and so forth up the chain. If we think about it in that framework, which is very much a school improvement framework, then I think the answers will come.

One other point is that I think that we have to create better links and connections between our policymakers and our on-the-ground workforce. There is a massive gap, and it is creating a very unhealthy us-and-them situation between our policy design and what is happening there and what we are experiencing with implementation on the ground.

**The CHAIR:** To just go off to another cohort's situation, you have mentioned teachers and how it suits them. You also mentioned behaviour. I am just wondering, from a parent's point of view – we also want a teacher's point of view – about discipline. We do not enable principals at this stage. Also, what is your point of view in relation to ownership and the responsibility of parents regarding their kids' behaviour in school?

**Katherine NEALL:** Most schools will put out in their documentation and their strategic planning and publish on their website: 'These are our expectations of students, these are our expectations of staff and these are our expectations of families.' What you heard yesterday in terms of the female AP that ran the alternative setting – she is right on the money. Establishing those great connections with kids and their families is the answer for being able to effectively put those boundaries in place with those challenging classes and with those challenging kids. Because if the kids like you and you are connected and they feel safe, they go home and they say, 'Oh, Mrs Neall's all right,' so when they do throw a chair or do something silly, I am going to say, 'Mate, I'm going to have to call Mum,' and they know that they cannot go, 'Oh, that teacher's just horrible and doesn't like me.' It just helps. They can say, 'No, Jimmy, you told me that Mrs Neall's a nice person.' The connections are super, super important.

That speaker that you had yesterday is a phenomenal practitioner, but she is able to do things in an alternative setting that are very challenging in a mainstream setting, because we do not have the time to develop those connections. Less face-to-face teaching time allows us to have those phone calls with parents and allows us to hunt them down, so to speak, and develop them.

**The CHAIR:** With your kids, you mentioned you have five kids at four different schools.

**Katherine NEALL:** That is this year. I mean, I wrote my submission in August last year.

**The CHAIR:** I am just looking at the ways of discipline at private schools, Catholic schools and public schools. Whereas sometimes a private school has got a 'three strikes and you're out' –

**Katherine NEALL:** I do not think it is a discipline issue.

**The CHAIR:** Not a discipline issue at the moment?

**Katherine NEALL:** I think that the disciplinary methods that you use at private and public schools can be a little bit more stringent, but it is because for the students you have in those schools something has gone right enough that their families can pay fees. It is an equity thing. The equity situation in our system is getting so bad that our public schools are almost becoming like ghetto schools. They are becoming almost Americanised. We are bound by very strict ministerial orders in the public system in terms of expulsions and suspensions and things like that. Why aren't the private schools? Well, maybe they are. I do not know; I have not worked in a private school. They can exclude the child if the behaviour gets to a point. In our system it is up to the school principal. If they would like to expel, there needs to be somewhere to expel them to, and the responsibility is left with the principal – no-one else can make it – who has to find another placement for that child. I think it is not as simple as saying, 'Oh, there's stricter discipline.' Our cohorts are different. And what we know is that very punitive disciplinary approaches are not as successful as strength-based approaches anyway – natural consequences, things like that, and positive support for students.

**The CHAIR:** So at the moment in the public system what are the issues? Why is it not working? Why are we finding more behaviours? Is it linked with the parents? Is that the reason?

**Katherine NEALL:** I just think we have to look at poverty. I think it is poverty. I think it is trauma. It happens in private schools as well, but I would hesitate to guess probably not in as high numbers as in your

public system. You do not have to pay fees. Education is free for anybody. The children are often coming to school because it is their safe place, and they are coming with extreme, sometimes very, very high complexity things going on in their homes.

**The CHAIR:** So additional support would assist in that area – or social additional support for schools in that area?

**Katherine NEALL:** Yes. I think it is equity and funding, I really do. I think that our public schools need to be funded appropriately.

**The CHAIR:** Since we have not got the next witness –

**Katherine NEALL:** Can I just make one point on something that you said, though? One tangible thing that would be a recommendation is having better connections between our system and DFFH.

**The CHAIR:** Okay.

**Ryan BATCHELOR:** We are hearing from the commissioner for children and young people next, who has done a big inquiry into the links between out-of-home care and the education system, so I think that is something we can take up shortly.

**Katherine NEALL:** I would argue I should not be at a police station at midnight with a young person.

**The CHAIR:** There is no next witness for a while. Are there any extra questions the panel would like to ask?

**Joe McCRACKEN:** No, we are behind time anyway.

**The CHAIR:** No-one has any more questions?

**Katherine NEALL:** Can I just give one more recommendation?

**Melina BATH:** We are here.

**The CHAIR:** It is an open field.

**Katherine NEALL:** I think that we really need to think creatively about our current educational models. When I worked in the department, I would often say things and people would say, ‘Yes, that is systemic. It is too big of a problem.’ Our young people are currently telling us that our educational models are not fit for purpose. We are using the same educational models that we did in the 50s, when we were trying to create factory workers. I do not know what the answer to that is, but I think that we need school models that fit 21st-century learners and we need to look at the time our children spend in school. In Australia our kids have more time at school than nearly any other developed nation. They spend more time at school, and our outcomes are awful. So I do not think it is a time thing. You have got countries like Finland that have their kids for significantly less time. Teachers are still at work; like, they are doing all the planning and stuff like that. And our kids are burned out from COVID as well. I know there is a supervision issue and things like that. I think looking at the P–12 model, looking at whether our year 7 students need that extra year in primary school, like South Australia had for years – they held on to those 13-year-olds and then sent them to secondary school. I do not know what the answer is. I am just freeballing here. But I am talking about honest-to-God creative thinking. We know what our young people are telling us. We can see it in their behaviour.

**Joe McCRACKEN:** Some schools do flip classrooms as well, which can be of benefit.

**Katherine NEALL:** Templestowe College has tried things. There are places out there that have tried really creative and innovative – and their enrolments have shot up.

**Joe McCRACKEN:** That is not across the board.

**Katherine NEALL:** The teacher that you saw yesterday – like, kids are coming every day.

**Melina BATH:** Yes, success.

**The CHAIR:** If there are no other questions –

**Melina BATH:** I do.

**The CHAIR:** Yes, please. Ms Bath.

**Melina BATH:** Chair, are you saying just for the moment our next witness is late or not here?

**The CHAIR:** Yes. Not here.

**Melina BATH:** Okay. Thank you. Thanks very much, Katherine. I think you have been very clear, and we can see that you have experiences that we value in understanding. You raised in your opening comments that inclusion without resourcing is risk. This is about disability inclusion. Well, I think there was a topic, but explain that further.

**Katherine NEALL:** I am a supporter of inclusion – my background is in psychology; I cannot not be – but if you do not resource that effectively, it is risk.

**Melina BATH:** What is happening? What is not being resourced?

**Katherine NEALL:** We are seeing violence in schools.

**Melina BATH:** And what would it look like, good resourcing?

**Katherine NEALL:** So many things. We need the capacity building of our staff. Not everybody is like me and has postgraduate qualifications in psychology, but I know that that helps me in my classroom. I go into some very complex classrooms and I have 20 years of experience, a minor in sociology and postgraduate qualifications in psychology, and I am working so hard pulling hundreds of different tools out of my tool belt to support those children and to have a half-decent class. Your graduate teacher has a hammer, like –

**Melina BATH:** Is floundering.

**Katherine NEALL:** They do not have 20 years of experience and tools. In some of our hard classrooms that is what is required at the moment. So I think it is about capacity building of staff. Someone I think spoke yesterday about being trauma-informed but not really being told what to do. The restraint and seclusion policy that we have: we get told what not to do – that you should not use this type of restraint but you can use it in certain circumstances if a child is going to be of harm to themselves or others, but we are not going to tell you how to do that safely. Like, that is a big issue.

**Melina BATH:** Is that because the education department might come down on them – like, ‘We’re not going to tell you’? What would be that –

**Katherine NEALL:** I do not know why that is, because when we have protective intervention training, that is more about how to protect yourself, not how to restrain a child safely. That is going to protect your job. Teachers basically have to decide: ‘Am I going to go break up that fight, or am I going to protect my career and myself?’ And it is not appropriate for all staff. People have their own issues – mental, physical, health issues. We need the capacity building. I think the principal said it yesterday: it is almost like you have to stop schools, let us catch our breath, let us catch up in some way, get the training that we need, have our leaders be instructional leaders. But we are on fire; our house is on fire at the moment.

**Ryan BATCHELOR:** We cannot stop schools, right? So what do you think we can –

**Katherine NEALL:** You could shorten the school day.

**Ryan BATCHELOR:** Do you think parents would accept that?

**Katherine NEALL:** No, they would hate it. That would be wildly unpopular, and people – rightly so – have, like I do, supervision issues, because our childcare system is not great either.

**Ryan BATCHELOR:** And after-school care does not really exist for kids post primary school.

**Katherine NEALL:** I do not know. In COVID we were allowed to have longer holidays, and maybe one week needs to be for that sort of thing.

**Melina BATH:** For upskilling and capacity building teachers?

**Katherine NEALL:** Yes.

**Melina BATH:** Then from your experience, Katherine, in relation to those new teachers coming out from university with their shiny degree that may not have built some of that capacity in the lectures that they have had, do you see them staying? What sort of percentage in your experience can continue?

**Katherine NEALL:** I could not put a number on that. I currently work with some early-career provisional teachers and Teach for Australia, and they are struggling.

**Ryan BATCHELOR:** If we were to think about better supports for early-career teachers, what do you think that would look like at a practical level?

**Katherine NEALL:** We have some supports. We do not give them full teaching loads when they are early career. The issue with the shortage is in that some pockets where the shortages are the greatest, they are not getting the degree of mentoring, for example, that I was privileged to receive when I started.

**Ryan BATCHELOR:** Who did you get your mentoring from?

**Katherine NEALL:** Just a more experienced teacher at the school.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you. Ms Payne?

**Rachel PAYNE:** Nothing from me, thanks, Chair.

**The CHAIR:** No other questions? Thank you, Katherine, for coming in. Your submission is very broad. It is fantastic. We will get a lot from that, and we will definitely refer to it for our recommendations going forward. Again, thank you very much for your time.

**Katherine NEALL:** Thank you for having me.

**Witness withdrew.**