

TRANSCRIPT

LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL LEGAL AND SOCIAL ISSUES COMMITTEE

Inquiry into the State Education System in Victoria

Melbourne – Wednesday 12 June 2024

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WITNESS

Jasmine Yuen, Victorian State Director, Australian Christian Lobby.

The DEPUTY CHAIR: Welcome back to the Legislative Council Legal and Social Issues Committee inquiry into the state education system. Welcome to Jasmine Yuen from the Australian Christian Lobby, who is our final witness today.

All evidence taken today is protected by parliamentary privilege as provided by the *Constitution Act* and as per the Legislative Council standing orders. Therefore the evidence you provide during the 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 a contempt of Parliament.

All evidence is being recorded, and 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's website.

My name is Ryan Batchelor. I am the Acting Chair of the committee today and a Member for Southern Metropolitan Region. Joining me are Michael Galea from South-Eastern Metropolitan, Melina Bath from Eastern Victoria, Joe McCracken from Western Victoria, Rachel Payne from South-Eastern Metropolitan, Richard Welch from North-Eastern Metropolitan and Aiv Puglielli from North-Eastern Metropolitan, and online is Moira Deeming from Western Metropolitan, hopefully.

For the record, if you could please state your name and the organisation you appear on behalf of.

Jasmine YUEN: Yes. I am Jasmine Yuen, representing the Australian Christian Lobby.

The DEPUTY CHAIR: Now we will turn it over to you if you would like to make a brief opening statement and then we will proceed to questions, taking it in turns.

Jasmine YUEN: Yes, I will do it very briefly. First of all, thank you so much to all of you for giving us, Australian Christian Lobby, an opportunity to represent our supporters in this inquiry. The Australian Christian lobby represents over 45,000 supporters in Victoria who are mostly parents from different Christian denominations and various cultural backgrounds. We share the same concerns about the decline in education standards and the ideological indoctrination in our government schools. We believe that one of the contributing factors to poor academic performance among Victorian state school students is the non-academic ideologically driven programs such as the Respectful Relationships and sexuality education. That not only distracts students, it prematurely sexualises them and also confuses them.

Some students who feel uncomfortable about all this ideology in programs actually feel discouraged. Let me tell you stories that I have heard firsthand. A 10-year-old student from metro west was uncomfortable sitting in the class that taught them transgenderism, so he asked the teacher to be seated in the corridor but the teacher refused. He said that his classmates actually felt uncomfortable as well, but no-one dared to say anything. A pair of siblings, along with a high school classmate, from the eastern suburbs were unhappy at being forced to write an essay on LGBTIQ topics and they felt uncomfortable as well being forced to take part in IDAHOBIT activities, so they told the teacher they did not want to participate, but again they were forced to comply against their will. Another teenager with autism was uncomfortable attending some of the sexuality education classes at school, so he chose to skip classes every Tuesday just to avoid that explicit age-inappropriate sex education. From all these stories that I have heard firsthand students become disengaged, distracted and lose interest in their studies and in school under the current ideologically driven curriculum in our school culture. How then can we expect our students to do well in their academic performance?

I will just keep it brief. One thing that has been shown from this is that not only parents are concerned about all the happenings at school but also many of the children, the students themselves, are concerned and feel uncomfortable about some of the programs taught at school. I will just stop there, and I am sure we will get through more through our discussion.

The DEPUTY CHAIR: Thanks so much. We will each take it in turns to ask you some questions. I might start. Do you believe that religious education should be compulsory in government schools?

Jasmine YUEN: Religious education?

The DEPUTY CHAIR: Yes.

Jasmine YUEN: I would say that it would be good if it is so, because religion has been over centuries or even longer than that. It actually could teach students to be good citizens, and it also builds up good character and actually helps them to build up good, respectful relationships a lot better than the current Respectful Relationships as well. But of course when we say ‘compulsory’, parents still would have a choice which religious education they could go to. That is exactly what we have at the moment: there is Christian religious education, there is the Islamic one and there is also the Jewish one. As far as I know in Victoria, there are three main organisations that are running such programs for Victorian schools.

The DEPUTY CHAIR: So you say that each of those programs should be available in every school?

Jasmine YUEN: Yes. I think parents and families should have a choice.

The DEPUTY CHAIR: Is there any particular Christian denomination that you believe should have responsibility for providing the Christian education? Should it be a Catholic education in government schools? Should it be an Anglican education in government schools? Should it be Presbyterian? Should it be Methodist? How should it work in other contexts? Who decides what the content of that curriculum is?

Jasmine YUEN: It is organisation-based. I would say at the moment what the Christian organisation has is Access Ministries; they are now called Korus Connect. They actually provide religious education for different state schools. So if state schools want to sign up, they can easily provide that. I am sure there are Catholic organisations that provide that sort of program as well, as do Jewish organisations and Islamic organisations.

The DEPUTY CHAIR: Your position is it should happen during class time. Is that correct?

Jasmine YUEN: Yes.

The DEPUTY CHAIR: What should it replace? If we put religious education into class time, we do not have time to do something else. What should religious education replace that is being taught in our schools now?

Jasmine YUEN: As I mentioned, there is a program called Respectful Relationships that is running in all state schools at the moment, and it is compulsory and mandatory. So that religious education could replace this Respectful Relationships. I think the outcome would be a lot better. I have other evidence that I can show. Religious education will bring out better character and respectful relationships than the current Respectful Relationships program.

The DEPUTY CHAIR: So you would allocate the time for Respectful Relationships to religious education. Do you have a view on how consistent that approach would be with the foundation principles of the Victorian education system – that it be free, compulsory and secular?

Jasmine YUEN: Well, even though we are now in a secular society, according to the census there are still a majority of people of faith in Victoria. It is over, I think, 51 per cent. What it means is that the society has gone secular but we still need some form of higher – well, what the faith community believe is there is a higher power to guide them. It is not inconsistent to have religious education in a secular society; in fact we need it, because when we say people are living in a secular society, basically they do whatever they think is best. How chaotic our society has become is because people are competing for their different views, for their different needs and perhaps for the different things that they want to achieve, and they lose that respect. That is why we see young people these days are getting more and more aggressive in their behaviour. So in bringing religion back to our classroom, it is actually good for our students to live in a secular society.

The DEPUTY CHAIR: Mr Welch.

Richard WELCH: Thank you. Thank you, Jasmine, for coming in. Where schools are teaching values-based education as opposed to academic-based, I guess, that is often where there can be a conflict between someone’s home life and their school life. That is an increasingly uncomfortable area for parents, teachers, administrators and kids because there is that inconsistency. What would you suggest are solutions? I do not

want to pre-empt you, but do you think there should be parental opt-outs, or how would you suggest addressing those when there are inconsistencies?

Jasmine YUEN: Back to the Chair's question, how does it work? I think definitely if there is an opt-out option or opt-in option, that would be great. To be honest, at the moment Victoria still has that as a right. But parents need to opt in, and they actually have a form to fill out. Looking at the Respectful Relationships program at the moment, I would hope that if it is not scrapped, it will give parents a choice to opt in or opt out. But if we are using that time to teach children about values, good character and good, respectful relationships, what they can do really depends on how the school or the principal is going to arrange that. A certain time slot could be used for that, where they bring in different religious organisations so parents could opt in, whether it is the Christian one, the Jewish one or the Islamic one. If this Respectful Relationships program – that is, the current one – is not scrapped, that could be an option as well. That gives families and parents options, which is very needed. That would reflect their values and their religious and cultural backgrounds as well. I think that is fair.

Richard WELCH: Earlier in the inquiry we had representations from parents who are, in the same vein, distraught about the ability of schools to hold back information from parents and in particular the mature minor process. Did you want to talk about that at all?

Jasmine YUEN: Yes, that is a huge concern among our supporters. The mature minor policy – I am sure you all know about that – is that children under 18 can make any decision, including medical referral decisions, without their parents' consent. I do have friends that, under that policy, have had children referred to gender clinics without them knowing. By the time they know about that, they have to go to court, and only then do they find out. The mature minor policy basically is keeping parents away from the lives of their children. I think that is dangerous. Children at that young age, teenagers under 18, cannot understand everything fully. Their parents' responsibility there is to guide them, but the mature minor policy is a barrier for them.

Richard WELCH: Thank you.

The DEPUTY CHAIR: Mr Galea.

Michael GALEA: Thank you, Chair. Thank you, Ms Yuen, for joining us today. We are currently experiencing an epidemic of violence against women in this country. We have seen a lot of adolescent young men being influenced by creeps online such as Andrew Tate spreading misogyny and hatred towards women. I am sure you would agree with me that that is appalling.

Jasmine YUEN: Yes.

Michael GALEA: We have also seen very, very disturbing reports in the last few days about a school in the west of the state, with fake AI child porn being created by a male student about some of his female classmates. But you are coming in here today saying that we should actually be removing Respectful Relationships and the teaching of consent in schools. Why are you opposed to teaching young children consent and respect?

Jasmine YUEN: Because I think that Respectful Relationships is not meeting its purpose. When this was first brought in, it was because of domestic violence. They wanted to teach students to be respectful so as to cut down domestic violence. But what we see in the past few years is, instead of helping children to become more respectful, they are in fact becoming more aggressive. I have evidence to show you here. I just point to one example from the Respectful Relationships program itself. Let me bring you to that. For example, a grade 1 and 2 students topic is called 'Labels are for jars, not for people'. What it is basically telling grade 1 and 2 students is that you cannot allow people to label you, whether it is a girl or a boy. The instruction there is that if people are labelling you in a way that you do not agree with, you just need to call it out. They say it is important to know that you can speak back and disagree, and then one of the –

Michael GALEA: Sorry, are you saying that people who are gender or sexually diverse are exempt from bullying or abuse in schools? Is that what you are saying?

Jasmine YUEN: Well, let me continue with that.

Michael GALEA: I am limited with time, so I am very happy for you to provide that on notice to me if you are happy to do that. If I can ask you, though: do you accept that there is a link between the lack of teaching of consent and sexual education and instances of higher prevalence of rape culture? Do you accept that there is a societal relationship?

Jasmine YUEN: Well, I think respect and consent – in a way, I trust that consent should be taught, but the thing is that the way that it is taught is using an activist approach. Therefore it is not meeting the purpose of building a respectful relationship. In fact it is the opposite.

Michael GALEA: I am sorry, I not sure if I can agree that it is activist to be teaching about sexual consent and boundaries and limits, because as I said, we are in an epidemic of sexual violence, particularly against women. I do not think it is activist to say, ‘Here are some clear boundaries.’ Is that fair?

Jasmine YUEN: But the way that they are teaching is the oppressed and the oppressor and in a way that is bringing up toxic masculinity. There are some males that are very toxic and some young men who are doing the wrong thing, but to blanket blame all the males as being toxic –

Michael GALEA: Look, I disagree with you. I do not think that is what the program is saying – that all men are inherently toxic. I think it is teaching appropriate behaviours. I am limited with time, so just let me finish. As we have heard from previous witnesses today, Victoria, along with the ACT, is leading the nation when it comes to numeracy and literacy. I am sure you would agree – you might say it is a bad thing, but I would say it is a good thing – that Victoria is also at the forefront of this sort of respectful relationship education in schools. You have given us some anecdotes, but doesn’t that undermine what you were saying – that it is actually leading to worse outcomes in English and maths – when the evidence actually shows it is the complete opposite?

Jasmine YUEN: Well, if you compare us to international standards, we are definitely behind. We thought with NAPLAN that we were the top amongst the whole nation, but that is not the case. Just the latest report from the *Herald Sun* last –

Michael GALEA: I am talking about data; I am not talking about newspaper articles. I am talking about data and research.

Jasmine YUEN: All these news articles come from reports, and so they are accurate data. What it is saying is that Victoria is not doing great and the reports that we get give us a false impression that we are doing great, because they are based on flawed reports that fail to report some of the students who are doing not that great and they just report outcomes of students coming from perhaps private schools.

Michael GALEA: But how does teaching consent interfere with that?

The DEPUTY CHAIR: Mr Galea, the time has expired. I might ask Ms Bath.

Michael GALEA: Thank you.

Melina BATH: Thank you. Thanks, Jasmine, for coming in today. Clearly you have some very important views for you and your stakeholders. How do you engage with state government? How do you engage with the education minister, other ministers or the education department? What is that interaction?

Jasmine YUEN: For?

Melina BATH: For the Australian Christian Lobby.

Jasmine YUEN: Last year I met with the chief of staff of the Minister for Education Ben Carroll, and we talked about education standards in decline and some of the issues with things that might be contributing factors, so we did have a bit of conversation.

Melina BATH: You had some interface. In our terms of reference, part (1) speaks to:

trends in student learning outcomes from Prep to Year 12 ...

and part (1)(b):

disparities correlated with geography and socio-economic disadvantage ...

We see that in this year's budget the Allan government has produced a \$400 school saving bonus. That is paid across to every parent of a student in a state school – it is paid to the school – and it also goes to certain families, through the school, if they qualify by being on a particular healthcare card. So there could be some very wealthy parents in the state school system who are getting funding for their child, and there could be some very low-paid families who do not have a healthcare card. What is the Australian Christian Lobby's position on that? What would you like to see happen?

Jasmine YUEN: Well, if there is means testing, that will be great. It will be able to solve that problem.

Melina BATH: Okay. So by means testing, you mean some state school system parents may miss out and some of that money may go to parents in, I will say, a low-income or low fee paying school?

Jasmine YUEN: It would depend on the income of the parents or the whole family. It is fair to say low-income families could be better supported, but on the higher incomes, they pretty much can support themselves better.

Melina BATH: Right, so a fair school bonus program?

Jasmine YUEN: Yes.

Melina BATH: Okay. Can you just describe to me, leaving the topic that you have been on, what some of the key things are that the government should do to support children who are socio-economically disadvantaged?

Jasmine YUEN: I remember after COVID the government was talking about tutoring.

Melina BATH: Tutoring?

Jasmine YUEN: Yes. I think that is a good thing. Having a tutoring program run at school – after school hours, but perhaps at school – might help the parents and the children themselves.

Melina BATH: And indeed we have heard deliberations today in regard to the positivity of small-group tutoring et cetera. You would see that both at – well, this inquiry is about state school, but at state and/or independent and private schools?

Jasmine YUEN: Yes. I think some of the private school students might struggle a little bit as well, but it really depends on the funding and the availability.

Melina BATH: Yes, state school focused. Thank you.

The DEPUTY CHAIR: Thank you. Mr Puglielli.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Thank you. Good afternoon. In your submission and in your remarks today you have suggested that programs like Respectful Relationships are ideologically driven content, while at the same time recommending that special religious education programs be included in class time – you have just noted at the cost of programs like Respectful Relationships, programs that talk about things like consent. Would you say that religious education is ideologically driven?

Jasmine YUEN: It depends on how you see it. Perhaps the left sees the right value –

Aiv PUGLIELLI: How do you see it, I might ask?

Jasmine YUEN: as an ideology, so it is vice versa. I would not say that is ideology, because religion has been there for a few thousand years. So if there is ideology, this means the whole world of humanity has been driven by ideology. But religion is different because it is some kind of faith, and faith is different from ideology.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Okay. So from your remarks earlier, Respectful Relationships – teaching children about consent through that program in schools – in your words is ideological indoctrination in schools, but teaching religion in public school class time is not?

Jasmine YUEN: Well, religious education actually teaches about respect, character building and good values, and that is not ideological.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Can you appreciate that to perhaps many in the community they might be hurt by the suggestion that religious education should be introduced in public schools at the cost of consent education through Respectful Relationships, given particularly the church's historic instances of child sexual abuse by religious leaders? Could you appreciate that perhaps many in the community would be quite hurt by the suggestion that RE should replace consent education through Respectful Relationships?

Jasmine YUEN: I would see it as a different matter. Certain wrongdoings by certain people do not mean that that faith community or that faith or religion alone is at fault. Everybody does certain things that are wrong and immoral, but it does not mean that we have to break down the whole faith community or that religion.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Sure, and I do not want to cast aspersions over entire groups who practise any particular religion. Nonetheless, given the significant instances over many years that have occurred, could you perhaps see why to many in the community it would be quite troubling to think that consent education could be taught through religious programs in school rather than a non-religious Respectful Relationships program?

Jasmine YUEN: I would say if religious education can help students to build better character, that would be better than the current program. That is always my position there.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Right. Does the Christian lobby have any issues with the science curriculum in our public schools?

Jasmine YUEN: Science curriculum?

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Yes. Any aspects of how science is taught to students.

Jasmine YUEN: Well, if it is true science, definitely we would be supportive of that, because one of the things that we see students falling behind in is science.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: What is true science, sorry?

Jasmine YUEN: True science is what is scientific and not twisted –

Aiv PUGLIELLI: As opposed to?

Jasmine YUEN: and is not taught in an ideological way.

The DEPUTY CHAIR: All right. Mr McCracken.

Joe McCracken: Thank you very much for your contribution so far, Jasmine. I want to pick up on a point that Ms Bath started on, and it is about the \$400 school saving bonus that is being distributed to some individuals in this state on a discriminatory level. Do you think that it is fair that people who might choose a non-government school option do not get to receive any support from the government under this program?

The DEPUTY CHAIR: Unless they have got it.

Joe McCracken: Unless they have got a Health Care Card.

Jasmine YUEN: Well, there could be an issue, but as I mentioned, if it is means tested according to the family income –

Joe McCracken: It is not means tested.

Jasmine YUEN: That is what I mean. It should be means tested.

Joe McCracken: Yes, it is not at the moment at all.

Jasmine Yuen: I know. I heard some comments that they cannot means test it because of the system, so I think that is unfair.

Joe McCracken: Yes. I have heard a lot of feedback too, and I bet a lot of your supporters would probably consider it to be completely unfair.

Jasmine Yuen: It is. To my position, it is unfair. In the beginning it should have been means tested, but unfortunately it has not been.

Joe McCracken: Yes, because I do not think disadvantage or cost of living sees religion or race or gender or any other aspect like that. The government have decided that it does, and clearly they made a policy decision that it reflects that.

You also spoke about the Respectful Relationships program. It has been quite controversial, and as you quite rightly say, it is ideologically driven. You put a contention out there that replacing it with religious education would be a better outcome. You have obviously had comments saying that that is not a good thing. Do you think that religious education teaches things like consent, respect and those other things that are currently a challenge in society at the moment?

Jasmine Yuen: They can program it in a way to do so. In fact I know that some of the programs are already doing that. The reason that we are so heavily focused on religious education is because the conversation started there in the beginning. What I see is that when it comes to teaching students about respectful relationships and consent, it does not have to be the current Respectful Relationships program. In fact it needs to be reviewed and really looked into because it is not meeting its purpose. When it comes to other options, religious education could be one option. Also, it depends on which religion organises it.

Joe McCracken: So you are not advocating for necessarily a Christian alternative; it could be Hindu if it was available?

Jasmine Yuen: That is what is available in the Victorian SRI at the moment, so therefore I said religious education is one option. It could be Christian, Islamic or Jewish. It depends on the parents' choice.

Joe McCracken: Are you saying that would meet the needs of multicultural communities and multicultural communities of faith?

Jasmine Yuen: Yes. If the choice is given to parents, they could choose which one to go for and that would reflect their religious background and their cultural background.

The Deputy Chair: Your time is up.

Joe McCracken: Thank you.

The Deputy Chair: Ms Payne.

Rachel Payne: Thank you, Deputy Chair. Thank you, Ms Yuen, for presenting to us today. I have just been listening to what you were talking about with religious institutions and also offering religious education. You talked about how it was about character building and respect. When we look at what Respectful Relationships promotes, it is respect and gender equality to help students learn how to build healthy relationships. Why is there this differentiation position from the Christian lobby that one has to supersede the other? Why can't they interact together?

Jasmine Yuen: Gender equality is one thing that concerns us because the gender equality that is mentioned in Respectful Relationships at the moment is actually gender fluidity, and that is not gender equality at all.

Rachel Payne: I am on the Respectful Relationships website, and it actually says that it does not teach radical gender theory; rather it is about primary prevention to reduce family violence, and wrapped up within that would be an understanding of respect around gender and equality of gender. Does the Christian Lobby believe that a woman is lesser than a man?

Jasmine YUEN: I think men and women are equal and therefore that is gender equality. But the problem is that in this Respectful Relationships they put in gender fluidity, which means what they teach starting from perhaps level 5 or 6. Because it is gender ideology driven, what they need to teach young students is that there is more than one gender – there are more than female and male. So when it comes to that, that is not true science; that is not biological, that is not scientific, and there is indoctrination. They are the things that we are concerned about.

Rachel PAYNE: Wouldn't you argue, though, that it is reflective of the students they are teaching? I mean, our world and our community and our society are vastly different. When you were talking about labels earlier, you made an assumption that the labels they are referring to are to do with your sexuality or your gender, not necessarily labels that may be applied to your race, your ethnicity or your religion even. So I think to sort of say that the labelling there is conducive just to gender may not be the point of what the education is trying to delve into around respect.

Jasmine YUEN: If you look into it, it is definitely gender fluidity driven. I think it is. The new Respectful Relationships that is coming up is actually teaching students as young as perhaps prep and grades 1 and 2 about gender pronouns. So my concern there is when things are not scientific and biological, they are actually confusing students. Back to the term that you mentioned, gender equality: when they have to teach children that there are more than two genders, that is not about gender equality, that is about indoctrination.

Rachel PAYNE: Okay. We will agree to disagree on that one, but thank you for your response.

The DEPUTY CHAIR: All right. Ms Yuen, thanks very much for your attendance today. This brings today's hearing and the inquiry's hearings on this topic to a close.

Committee adjourned.