

TRANSCRIPT

LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY LEGAL AND SOCIAL ISSUES COMMITTEE

Inquiry into Early Childhood Engagement of CALD Communities

Dandenong—Monday, 2 December 2019

MEMBERS

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WITNESSES

Ms Hiranthi Perera, Program Manager, Community Hubs Australia; and

Mr Daniel Riley, Principal, Dandenong Primary School.

The CHAIR: Good afternoon. I welcome Hiranthi Perera from Community Hubs Australia. All evidence taken by this Committee is protected by parliamentary privilege. Therefore, what you say here today is protected against any action, but if you say anything outside or repeat the same things, including on social media, these comments may not be protected by this privilege. All evidence given today has been recorded by Hansard. You will be provided with a proof version of the transcript to check as soon as it is available. Any transcripts, PowerPoint presentations and handouts will be placed on the Committee's website as soon as possible. I now invite you to provide a brief opening statement to the Committee, followed by some questions from the Committee. Thank you very much.

Ms PERERA: Thank you. As you have already stated, I am Hiranthi Perera, the Program Manager for the National Community Hubs Program with Community Hubs Australia. Firstly, I would like to thank you for the opportunity to be able to present to you all today and also for accepting our earlier submission on behalf of our organisation. If Daniel was here, I would be introducing him; Daniel will be joining us shortly. He is the Principal of Dandenong Primary School, and together we hope to provide a good overview of how community hubs work in the early years space and share some of the benefits that we see for culturally diverse families, particularly for children, families and for schools more broadly.

I am sure you have already heard quite a bit about community hubs over the last few hearings across Victoria—and I know that some of you had the opportunity to actually visit some of our sites in Shepparton and Geelong—so I do apologise if I do repeat some things today. But of course, it is always important to hear things I think a few times to get the full picture of the importance of the work we do to support early years programs for culturally diverse communities. Throughout my statement today I will refer to culturally diverse communities, which includes migrants, refugees and asylum seekers, as these are the families that we see in our hubs, regardless of how long they have been here in Australia and regardless of how they arrived here. We also see temporary visa holders and people who were born here, so really hubs welcome everyone. The one thing which I will repeat twice today is the fact that the Victorian Government funding for the Victorian hubs ends at the end of 2019. We recommend that funding is continued and we think there are plenty of other regions that could benefit from having a community hub as well, and we will be very happy to share this information with you. That is something you will definitely hear twice today.

I like to always provide some context, when I meet new people, as to why I joined Community Hubs Australia. Over 40 years ago my family moved to Melbourne from Sri Lanka, to North Dandenong in fact, and at the time my parents had my older brother, who was aged four at the time. They knew one other family here and that was through an aunt, so really an acquaintance rather than a close friend. But thankfully they managed to connect with their family: they took them in and housed them, and they also had a son who was the same age as my brother, so the two boys bonded. But when it was time to go to school, having had no exposure to kinder or preschool and having had limited exposure to English language, it was a pretty traumatic experience for both Mum and my brother. The story goes that he would cling to her crying and pull at her hair, not wanting to let go, and this is a child entering prep. So with that public, disruptive emotion on display, then came the pointing, the laughing and to a degree some bullying from the other kids as well, because obviously they had been born here, they were settled and they were quite confident to walk into school having had exposure to early years programs.

So although this was not my personal experience, I know the impact that had on my family. We laugh about it now, because I was obviously born here—at the Dandenong Hospital in fact, just down the road—and so I waltzed into school with the greatest of confidence. I went to kinder at Dandenong Park, and so I had a really great grounding and a really good basis to walk into primary school from. So that is why I am here: it is to ensure that no child or family faces the same challenges that my family did, and that all children feel welcome and that they feel connected and that they have the opportunity to share their skills with others and learn a few along the way as well. This is the model of Community Hubs Australia: it is to connect, share and learn.

Before the Community Hubs Program started here in Victoria back in 2013 there was a pilot at nine sites in the City of Hume, and this trial started in 2011. It was known as the Supporting Parents Developing Children Project, and the pilot really demonstrated the effectiveness of a place-based model enriching communities who needed it most, and this was women with young children. So this best practice approach was then adopted by the Scanlon Foundation, who committed to funding the program's ongoing governance and management and

set themselves a target of opening 100 hubs nationally. I am really pleased to say that by 2020 we will have reached this goal, and Victoria now alone has 31 hubs that are currently operating, soon to be 41 with expansion to the cities of Casey and Wyndham early next year.

So when you ask our Chairman, Peter Scanlon, why he chose to support this program he will tell you that the Scanlon-Monash social research identified a significant gap in the support available for culturally diverse women caring for pre-school-age children. The research also indicated that community-level, place-based approaches were essential for achieving successful settlement outcomes for these communities. Every parent wants the best for their children, and every child should be given the opportunity to thrive.

Over the course of today you have probably heard a lot about the negative impacts of not having early years programs for culturally diverse communities, but Daniel and I are both here today to tell you about the benefits of why these early years programs are so important for the individual child, for their families and also for the wider community. Research tells us that children who are not appropriately prepared for school when they commence are less likely to do as well and overall more likely to face challenges later in life compared with their better prepared peers. The definition of 'school readiness' has expanded over these recent years and includes environments that a child is exposed to in their early years, such as the early childhood settings, the schools, neighbourhoods and communities. So school readiness is really a joint effort. It is about getting that child ready for school, ensuring that the school is equipped to take on that child and that the community have the capacity to provide the appropriate services.

We see that there are really two significant disadvantages in school readiness here in Australia, and for us we see that these are children that are more developmentally vulnerable if they are not proficient in English, and secondly, if they live in more economically disadvantaged communities in Australia. And these are the areas of Victoria where our community hubs are located. Currently operating in Hume, Brimbank, Dandenong, Shepparton and Geelong, we welcome all families into our hubs and engage them through playgroups and early years programs. We also run English classes, engagement activities and vocational training, but today we will focus on the playgroups and early years side of things.

For all hubs we really introduce playgroups as a soft entry point, and we find that through the children playing together it enables connection of the children but also the adults even if there is no common language. Through play, song and action not only do the children engage but so do the adults. We have got many programs that actually encourage both mother and child to learn English together, such as the Mother Goose, Sing&Grow and Smalltalk programs.

All of our hubs look and feel different. They offer different programs and connect with a variety of different services. An added benefit, though, is that we always do have a number of hubs that are located across one local government area. It really enables a smooth transition of referrals across these hub sites as well. Recently at a hub leader meeting in Hume we had all 15 hubs represented, and one hub mentioned that they were providing a specific playgroup with additional support and information for families with children with autism. Through the connection of the hub leaders and that local knowledge there it meant that other families from the other 14 sites could also refer their families there as well.

Commonly, as part of the early years program, specialist services are often invited to attend and provide information, assessment and referrals to local services which may not have otherwise been even known about for these culturally diverse families who are new to Australia. For some these assessments have literally been life-changing. Again at the hub leader meeting I just went to only a fortnight ago I think at Dandenong one of the hub leaders mentioned that there was a dental health check-up at one of the preschool programs. From this 90 per cent of children assessed experienced tooth decay, which for some was so severe that it was impacting their speech and their ability to connect and communicate, not to mention, I am sure, the pain that they were suffering, which I am sure lead to other complex behaviours. So annual dental health checks have now become a regular feature in our community hubs.

Our data tells us that here in Victoria 50 per cent of people with children under five do not take their children to anywhere else outside of the hub. This indicates that although we are incredibly fortunate to have a great range of services here in Victoria, the families that need them most are not accessing them. The additional barriers for culturally diverse families of trying to navigate services, limited English, transport issues and minimal finances

make things even more challenging. The cost of accessing these services for families is significant. Having the opportunity to seek free maternal health, dental health assessments, immunisations and ongoing support and counselling under the one roof and the safety of a place-based community hub is absolutely vital. For some cultures the stigma of being seen to seek support for children with developmental delays or complex learning needs often can be quite isolating. The common response is to put their head in the sand or ignore that the issue is even happening. However, in the safety of a known environment such as the hub, with the support of hub leaders and other services, families learn to recognise negative or inappropriate behaviours and are educated about what is expected over the child's development through early years before they enter school so that they can access the right supports and address the child's behaviour before it becomes a learned behaviour. We know that these negative learned behaviours often not only impact the child and the family but once they get into the classroom it can be quite disruptive in that learning environment as well.

What we hear from teachers and principals from host schools is that one of the outcomes of children attending early years programs in the hubs is that the school experiences a smoother transition from early years into prep: I quote, 'Everything just flows'. Some additional comments recently shared also include that the hub played a vital role in transitioning the children into school, they have got exposure to the school environment, to literacy and numeracy and other children that they might be in a classroom with.

I will now pass on to Daniel to share some of the more detailed information of what they see at Dandenong Primary, both in the hub and the school. Daniel is going to talk about their programs, which are not just good but actually award winning.

The CHAIR: At this stage, for the record, I will just welcome Daniel Riley, the Principal of Dandenong Primary School.

Mr RILEY: Thank you very much, and thank you for the opportunity to share some of the very positive impacts of, like Hiranthi said, our award-winning community hub that we have on the site at Dandenong Primary School, which is just a 5-minute walk up the road—a nice, brisk walk coming down here! Our hub serves Australia's number one most culturally diverse postcode. To give you an idea of how diverse we are, around 90 per cent of children come with language backgrounds other than English, with around 40 languages spoken across the school, and our teachers and support staff alone speak around 12 different languages between them, so very culturally diverse.

Our hub is a welcoming place where migrant families with young children come to connect, share and learn. Our hub has provided for things such as English language lessons for parents, visits from the Water Well Project to improve the health and wellbeing of our families and visits from Centrelink, the electoral authority, the energy ombudsman and other government agencies to help families navigate what can be a minefield of Australia's bureaucratic and democratic processes. It provides for referrals to much-needed support services for some of the most vulnerable members of our community. It has provided for the establishment of a Dandy Pals playgroup, which is for zero- to four-year-olds and their parents, and a free three-year-old Step into Kinder school readiness program. Both of those were part of the reason behind our being awarded the 2018 Victorian Early Years Award for supporting parents to build their capacity and confidence. The hub has also provided for parental capacity-building programs, sewing classes, a toy library, quilting, a food bank cooking program, whereby eight families come together to prepare and share a meal. One big thing is I guess the smooth transitioning of new families into the Australian and Victorian education system, the school and the wider community and the so-called 'Australian way of life'.

These are just some of the planned programs that I guess form the tip of a very large iceberg and a very important iceberg. Beneath the surface of these planned programs that we have in the hub are some very important incidental developments. We hear stories of trauma and then we can determine how we as a community are able to learn and to understand those experiences and then to respond with the support that is needed for those people who need it most. The early identification and intervention around issues such as speech and language delay for children, challenging behaviours, family violence and other factors that might impact the child's development, education and life outcomes. Other incidental things that happen through the hub are friendships and networks formed between families as well as between families and the school where parents and carers act as partners in their child's education. It provides for employment and education

opportunities for mothers in particular and broadens the horizons and aspirations of the families who participate.

I have got one example to share today of what the hub has done for one family in particular. We had a child who arrived to Australia and soon after arrival was diagnosed with insecure attachment. Basically this child was contaminated by fear. The hub provided support to the mother, building her parental capacity through a referral to the two-year home-based HIPPIY parenting program. The mother and child engaged in the school's playgroup and the Step into Kinder program. The mother went on to volunteer in the school and while doing this completed studies in children's services and now works as a HIPPIY tutor herself. The child is flourishing at school and the mother now sees the other participants of our community hub as her own family. As a result of our community hub, our families feel safe, they feel welcomed, they feel connected, valued, celebrated, and often times they experience the aspiration to give back to the community that has provided so much for them.

Ms PERERA: We hope that we have been able to provide some insight into the work of Community Hubs Australia and particularly share some of the positive impacts that we see every day for culturally diverse communities that engage with our early years programs. So for these benefits to really continue and grow, we recommend the Victorian Government recognise the critical role that Community Hubs Australia plays in early childhood engagement for culturally diverse children; that it continues to expand the national community hubs program here in Victoria with high levels of cultural diversity; and, as I stated earlier, continues to fund hubs beyond 2019. Although the bulk of funding for hubs does come from the Federal Government, all schools do contribute funding, so if they did not see the benefit, they would not fund it. No-one is forcing them to do it; it is an opt-in program. We do not have that Victorian Government contribution beyond 2019, so we do recommend that funding is continued, and we would love to chat about further regions we would love to expand the program to. Happy to take any questions.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much. Well, first of all, I have firsthand experience with community hubs in St Albans, and they run very successfully, particularly St Albans Primary School where it has become not only a place of networking but cooking classes for parents, a walking group was established, then encouraging non-parents as well so the local neighbourhood as well, sewing circles and dental hygiene and a number of other programs. I have seen firsthand the transition and the impact that it can have on a local community in St Albans and Sunshine. But my question is just in relation to navigation of services. I mean, community hubs do a great job of that but in general there seems to be a real gap when it comes to the enrolment stage from day one and from that point the difficulty of how the journey will, I suppose, progress. Whether you have received good service and someone to help you along that process or not will really dictate the level of service that one will receive. Just on that note, how can we streamline the services so it is a smooth-running service from day one?

Ms PERERA: I think this is something that we are seeing nationally across our networks. It is certainly not unique to Victoria. We certainly see it in Queensland in particular. I think the lack of particularly children being enrolled in kindergarten is pretty astonishing actually. But I think one of the things that often gets raised, and it might have been at another forum that I was recently at, is the whole area of settlement support and it only being five years. So I think part of it kind of lies there, particularly for these culturally diverse communities. The support that they receive in that first five years is not anywhere near enough or adequate. So that is I think one point to make on that. In terms of streamlining that process, I mean, depending on how people arrive here is what they are then exposed to and what they are granted. The third part of the challenge is from a school perspective.

Mr RILEY: I guess from a school perspective too it can depend upon who is actually leading the hub itself as well, like we have someone by the name of Alison Rogers, who I think is amazing in lots of ways and who comes with all sorts of skills. She used to be a bank manager in a former life. She has got all sorts of skills around engaging with different services, in pointing parents and children in those directions. It sort of is dependent on the person in the hub itself, but we have network meetings quite frequently. The principals are meeting as well as a group, and that helps I guess share the knowledge around, 'Well, what's your hub up to that we could maybe learn from and use in our school?' sort of thing.

Yes, it is a good question, because I think it is, from my point of view, maybe a little bit dependent on the personnel in the hub itself, but if you get the right people in there, then they are quite amazing at picking up things. We have a hub leader, but we also have other staff within the school, and it is hard to draw a line

between the hub and the school because one so much sort of blends into the other. Our wellbeing staff, for example, are sort of in the hub quite often and teachers are through the hub, so they are picking up different issues and suggesting different services for particular children. We have our own speech pathologists in the school as well, which is something that we choose to do or to employ, and that is, I guess, where picking up the speech and language issues nice and early becomes far easier as well.

Ms PERERA: Just to touch on your point from before, Natalie, I guess that is the beauty of a hub—that it is just not for families from that school. It is welcoming to anyone. From research that we have done here at Community Hubs Australia, a lot of the time the referral comes from the school, but if not, it is just from word-of-mouth, so people telling each other about the availability of it and the fact that pretty much all programs that are run there are free of charge. We do not check these categories or anything like that: whether you were born here or how long you have been here. Everyone is literally welcome, so we try to avoid many people falling through the cracks, I guess you could say.

Mr TAK: Thank you, Daniel and Hiranthi. We have heard about a minefield of bureaucratic process. So what are the most pressing issues for the Victorian early childhood system, in your view, in order to engage properly with the multicultural community?

Mr RILEY: It is a very good question. I think to narrow it or nail it down to one particular issue would be really challenging, but I think the language barriers and also the experience of education from families' home countries can influence to what extent they might engage at an early age with our school, but that is where things like the playgroup and the Step into Kinder are absolutely crucial because it is a really safe, welcoming and informal space, but then what grows out of that is where we are able to address different needs and things. To think of one particular barrier, I think language can be a challenge, and I guess—this is just generally—when you are looking for translated documents, say from a department agency or something, there might be five different languages whereas we have so many different languages in Dandenong that sometimes they are not even included so that can be a challenge as well. But I guess reaching out to the parents and being able to form those connections so that they want to be part of the school community is crucial, so that then the information flow can happen.

Ms PERERA: I guess similarly to what Daniel said—and I think I sort of touched on it before—the fact that our hubs are place-based and so for many of these families the school is some place that they are going to have to engage with, but for other families who may not necessarily be associated with the school, a school is always going to be a safe environment to walk into, so again it is that supportive and encouraging environment. The fact that we are bringing all of the services that these families need into the one place, I think, again, is really vital. And absolutely, language would have to be one of the biggest barriers. So wherever we can, as I touched on, we try to encourage all of our hubs to run a playgroup at the bare minimum, because we see that as a soft entry point for people where children can come with their families, or grandparents in some cases as well, and that just opens up a whole pathway for those families to learn English or to come and do a vocational learning program, but it all starts in that early years programming.

Mr RILEY: I think too that people need to feel like they belong, so we are always pushing the message: 'Everyone belongs at Dandenong Primary School'. We just recently did a video shoot for Beyond Blue because they wanted to have more diversity reflected in their marketing materials, and one of the parents in that shoot remarked about the fact that she was greeted in her home language at our school and how that was so powerful for her as far as feeling welcome. I think that is what can happen through things like the community hubs being place-based. We know our community really well, so I guess we hope we know some of the things that are going to engage them most so we can get them through the door and then get them as engaged as young as possible.

Ms COUZENS: Thank you so much for coming along today and giving your time. We really appreciate it. And of course congratulations to Dandenong Primary on their early years award. That is fantastic.

Mr RILEY: I had to get that in there.

Ms COUZENS: Yes. Well, it is recorded now. Just in terms of workforce—and I suppose this is directed at both of you—do you see the value of having people from multicultural communities working in the early years

area? I do not mean as volunteers or trainees but actually being encouraged right from the beginning to get the training and skills that they need to go into child care or kindergarten teaching or maternal and child health—whatever it is. I am asking if you see the benefit of that and if so are you doing anything about ensuring that that happens into the future, given we have free TAFE courses and those sorts of things and a skills shortage in the early years area.

Mr RILEY: Are you talking about the parents who come through and skilling them up to get into employment or just general employment in the school and community anyway?

Ms COUZENS: Probably I am talking about the people that are using your service for the playgroup or parents of children who can then connect with those communities and encourage them in, as time goes on.

Mr RILEY: I have got recruitment on the brain because we are gearing up for 2020 in the school. You know, there are set criteria for teachers who apply but if someone comes in with an extra language or some sort of experience as far as being new to Australia, that is something I sort of pick up on and think, ‘Well, that could be really valuable in our school’. I have got three teachers starting next year: one speaks Turkish, who arrived here when his parents had no English, so he sort of understands that experience of feeling isolated; one speaks Chinese, Mandarin and Cantonese; and another one speaks Filipino. They were outstanding teachers first, but the fact that they had those languages, I then thought, ‘Okay, that person is able to engage with this family’, ‘This person is able to understand the journey to Australia with no English’ et cetera et cetera.

I think in the hub itself we have had quite a few parents, I guess, engage in education support courses, which are great. We have employed one mother as a sort of babysitter to allow the English language classes to happen as well. We have got another mum who I think did some studies in child services and has now actually enrolled in primary education, which is amazing. We have the need for translators all the time, so we are often borrowing people with those skills on just incidental sorts of occasions and then sometimes quite deliberately as far as teeing up meetings, knowing that we are going to need a particular language spoken. That breaks down so many barriers, if you have got someone who speaks the language or understands the experience.

Ms COUZENS: So do you see the importance of pushing that in the community?

Mr RILEY: Absolutely, yes. And we have done things I guess through the hub like helping people with CVs. We have had, say, different employment agencies or people coming out talking about jobs in particular areas. So, yes, definitely. A lot of parents, or the ones who are new to the community, I think initially think short term and think, ‘Wow, I’d love a job as an education support person because then I can work in a school and then I can get school holidays’. But then there are other examples where once they get in and are more involved I guess their aspirations sort of grow or they think more widely around next steps beyond that—and that parent who is studying primary teaching is an example of that.

Ms COUZENS: I think we need to be doing things to make that happen, because we need more people with multicultural backgrounds actually working in these areas and it also helps people feel more comfortable in engaging as well.

Mr RILEY: Yes. I am quite deliberate: you want the faces that people are meeting at the school to reflect in some way that person. It is like stocking a library with culturally diverse books. You do not want just a whole bunch of white Anglo books, because kids are not going to want to pick them up and read them because it does not reflect their experience or identity.

Ms COUZENS: You talked about more hubs. Where do you envisage they would go?

Ms PERERA: Here in Victoria?

Ms COUZENS: Yes.

Ms PERERA: As I obviously mentioned, we are expanding to Casey and Wyndham next year, which is very exciting, but Greater Bendigo, Whittlesea, Melton, Moreland, Maroondah and Mildura would be our suggestions. If you were not already aware in terms of our selection of where the hubs would go, we sort of reflect on census data, the SEIFA index through the ABS, vulnerability levels on AEDC data and things like

that as our sources. Through collating all of that we found that those particular LGAs would be recommended as considerations for Victoria. We can certainly provide you with more detailed data and information about that if you would like.

Ms COUZENS: That would be really interesting. I suppose the only other question I have is around access and how people feel comfortable to access the hub, or I suppose any hub but in your case Dandenong. Do people just come across it through word of mouth, or is there a process that the school has about promoting the hub in the community?

Mr RILEY: Yes, a lot of it is word of mouth. When children enrol we will often point it out as part of the enrolment pack to say, 'Here we have this hub available with these activities or programs'. We have people refer friends. The main way is on enrolment really. We try and grab them and drag them in. It is interesting too, because it is a safe space, and the hub itself at our school is in quite a crummy old portable classroom. It is almost falling to bits. I have sort of said to the hub leader, 'Do you want to move into another part of the school?'. But because it is so well set up in there and people know where it is, and it is their kind of home in the school, they do not want to move it because people are familiar with it. They know where it is. They have made it their own. But the main way, I guess, is word of mouth and on enrolment.

Ms COUZENS: How would people who have got small children, to access the playgroup before kinder or school, find out about it?

Mr RILEY: The other thing is we generally market the school through the local newspapers or that sort of thing. We have got a Facebook and Instagram. We translate our newsletters into Dari, like verbally read them out so that we have sort of got a podcast in that language, and we are just always pushing the fact that we have got a community hub and we have this and we have a whole range of things. But, yes, the community hub is one, and I guess that is what we do—

Ms COUZENS: Does council play a role in that?

Mr RILEY: Not particularly, unless I guess if they are coming down with a particular program or something they might plug it through their own channels, but not really. It is just something we have done from the school.

Ms PERERA: In some of the other local government areas we work in a lot of the hub leaders do tend to sit on different committees and local state advisory groups or LGA level advisory groups, so they get quite connected through those, and inter-agency meetings. In all local government areas we work in, we work through a local support agency because Community Hubs Australia is five people so we need the on-the-ground local support. In addition to the five community hubs we have here in Dandenong, we work through the Smith Family, who are our local support agency. We always choose support agencies that are from different spheres that will bring local intel into their network as well. In other states we have settlement services; here we have got the Smith Family but also a local government, so Hume City Council is our support agency. So through those kinds of connections and partnerships as well is how we bring in all the other services and make connections.

Mr RILEY: We do have someone from the Greater Dandenong council who comes to some of the leadership meetings as well.

Mr TAK: Just before we finish, because today is the last hearing, we would just like to say Dandenong Primary School have done a tremendous job. You know, the current mayor actually came from your primary school.

Mr RILEY: Yes.

Mr TAK: And the Member for Bayswater actually graduated from your school.

Mr RILEY: Yes.

Mr TAK: Congratulations.

Mr RILEY: Thank you. And I can also say Gabrielle Williams is a great supporter of our school. She is amazing. So I think Gabrielle, Jackson and another former politician all went to Dandenong High School as well. Simon McKeon, who is the current Chancellor of Monash University and worked with Macquarie Bank et cetera, he is a former student. We have had a former Prime Minister come through the school. So we have high aspirations at Dandenong Primary School.

The CHAIR: Well done. That is very good. On that note, thank you very much for taking the time to present to us. On behalf of the Committee, again, congratulations. The next steps will be that the Committee will deliberate in the next coming months. We will prepare a report, which will then be tabled in the Legislative Assembly. There will be some strong recommendations, and part of those recommendations will incorporate some of the evidence that you have given here today. Again, on behalf of the Committee, thank you very much, and thank you for all the work that you do.

Mr RILEY: Thanks very much.

Committee adjourned.