

TRANSCRIPT

LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL LEGAL AND SOCIAL ISSUES COMMITTEE

Inquiry into Public School Funding

Melbourne – Thursday 12 March 2026

MEMBERS

Joe McCracken – Chair

Michael Galea – Deputy Chair

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Lee Tarlamis

WITNESS

Katrina Walker, Parent, South Melbourne Park Primary School.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Welcome back to the next session of the Legal and Social Issues Committee's Inquiry into Public School Funding in Victoria. I am Joe McCracken, Chair of the inquiry, and we are going to just introduce our members quickly.

Michael GALEA: G'day. Michael Galea, Member for South-Eastern Metropolitan and Deputy Chair.

Ryan BATCHELOR: Ryan Batchelor, Member for the Southern Metropolitan Region.

Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO: Good afternoon. Anasina Gray-Barberio, Northern Metro.

The CHAIR: We may also have a couple come in and out on Zoom as well, so you might be able to see them on the screen there.

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All evidence is being recorded. You will be provided with the proof version of the transcript, and you will have a chance to look through that, but ultimately it will be made public and put on the committee's website.

Just for the Hansard record, can you state your name and any organisation that you are appearing on behalf of, please?

Katrina WALKER: Sure. I am Katrina Walker, and I am appearing as a parent of a child at South Melbourne Park Primary School.

The CHAIR: Perfect.

Katrina WALKER: I am also school council president at the school, but my submission and my presence here today are just as a parent, not in an official capacity.

The CHAIR: No worries. Thanks for that. Welcome, Katrina. Thanks very much for coming in. I will hand it over to you now if you want to make a submission. We have got around 5 minutes or so. Then after that we will just go to some questions. Over to you. Thank you.

Katrina WALKER: Thanks, Chair. Thank you for the opportunity to speak today. I do have a speech. I hope I am going to make it in 5 minutes time. I might rush because I am nervous. As I said, I am here as a parent of a child attending South Melbourne Park Primary School, which is located within the Albert Park grand prix precinct. Like so many families, we believe in public education. We believe in a system that gives every child, no matter their background, the chance to learn and grow and build a meaningful future. I am here today because I am profoundly passionate about the impact of the Allan Labor government's decision to delay raising Victoria's school funding until 2031. What is happening to public school funding in Victoria is not a small policy delay or a technical oversight, it is a quiet deferral of opportunity, a cost shift that will impact an entire generation of children. As a parent, I find that deeply troubling.

Public education in Victoria remains underfunded year after year, and at the same time we see continued investment from government directed elsewhere. Just recently a \$400 million budget was announced for the grand prix pit lane building; due to contamination the budget blew out. When our school budget was impacted due to site contamination, important features such as air conditioning were removed to keep the project on track. I cannot see that happening to the pit lane project. It seems that sport is more important than education in this state. It is impossible not to feel strongly about this, because even a small fraction of that pit lane investment would transform learning outcomes, wellbeing and future opportunities for our children. They are

not just abstract numbers; they are real classrooms, they are real teachers and they are real children whose futures depend on the decisions made in this very building.

Full funding would change things in very practical, immediate ways. It would allow schools to maintain appropriate class sizes, it would ensure a full complement of teaching and wellbeing staff, it would provide essential learning resources without relying on donations and it would guarantee that every child learns in a safe, comfortable and modern environment. Yet public schools like ours are struggling to provide even the basic classroom necessities like sufficient teaching staff. The student resource package does not meet true staffing needs, rising costs for casual relief teachers, electricity, classroom supplies and maintenance. In our case, we have got many heritage buildings, which mean we at the school have to either operate in a deficit or we need to draw further on contributions from parents.

One of the most pressing consequences of underfunding is the growing burden placed on parents. Our school community is generous and supportive, but the current funding model assumes a level of family financial contribution that simply does not reflect reality. Government education based on the student family occupation and education index assumes parents can and will contribute at certain levels. In practice, they do not. Less than half our families make voluntary contributions, yet this shortfall is not recognised in funding allocations. There is no meaningful mechanism to check whether the assumed level of contribution matches what the schools actually receive, so schools like ours are effectively penalised. We are expected to bridge the gap between insufficient government funding and unrealistic assumptions about what the community can pay. At the same time, departmental constraints around parent payments send a confusing and discouraging message. The department website explicitly states that parents are not required to make payments or voluntary contributions to their school, so families who can contribute are told that they are not required to do so. Meanwhile the school remains underfunded. This leaves us trapped in a cycle of dependence on fundraising, grants and parent donations simply to meet basic operational needs.

The consequences of underfunding are not theoretical, they are visible every single day. South Melbourne Park Primary School was built without classroom walls, doors or air conditioning, features that most people would consider fundamental to a safe and functional learning environment. Parents have had to step in, contributing financially and through constant fundraising to provide what should have been there from the start. What makes this even harder to accept is that the solution was already known, and that is full and timely implementation of the agreed funding model. Every year of delay is another year that Victorian public school students are denied the support for their education. As parents, we are left wondering how such a fundamental commitment to children can be quietly postponed without urgency, without transparency and without any accountability. It is not sustainable and it is not fair to students, to families or to the dedicated educators who do wonderful work under extraordinary pressure. Fully funding public schools is one of the most important investments a government can make in its people, its economy and its future. Most importantly, it would restore fairness. Parent contributions could return to enhancing opportunities – be it through music, sport, enrichment or wellbeing – rather than paying for the basics of education. I think it is time to stop the cost shifting, stop quietly deferring reform and prioritise what truly matters. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you. And you timed it almost perfectly.

Katrina WALKER: Oh, I did all right.

The CHAIR: You did well. Well done. I will hand it over to Mr Galea first.

Michael GALEA: Thank you, Ms Walker, and thank you for your submission and opening remarks. As I understand, South Melbourne Park is a relatively new school, is that right? One of the hundred new builds? And it was opened in 2019?

Katrina WALKER: 2019, yes. Our first cohort has just entered year 7. So it is seven years old.

Michael GALEA: Excellent. Without this school there, what would the options be in the area for you?

Katrina WALKER: We have had a few schools built in our area. The existing schools were Albert Park Primary School and Port Melbourne Primary School, and around the same time as we were built, South Melbourne – the vertical school – was built. Since then, Docklands Primary has been built and the new one just opening on Williamstown Road, which is, I think, Fishermans Bend or –

Ryan BATCHELOR: Narrarrang.

Katrina WALKER: Narrarrang. Sorry. Yes.

Michael GALEA: So that is quite significant difference then.

Katrina WALKER: We have a lot of new schools.

Michael GALEA: That is really good to hear.

Katrina WALKER: Yes. Well, they all closed down during the Kennett era and then they all had to reopen again a generation later.

Michael GALEA: Yes, of course. So now they are having to repair the damage of 30 years ago by Jeff Kennett – gotcha.

Katrina WALKER: That is right. Yes.

Michael GALEA: I represent a very outer metro area, so I have got a lot of these new schools as well. Some are of the same generation where the pedagogical idea of –

Katrina WALKER: Open plan?

Michael GALEA: ‘Let’s have open plan.’ I am seeing the same rectifications happening now. You drew a link between these sorts of works that need to happen at these schools and the SRS funding. Do you think that the SRS, the schooling resource standard, should be incorporating capital upgrades, big or small?

Katrina WALKER: No, I do not think so. I think I would talk about the basic classroom necessities, and I suppose I see those big-ticket items – like, we have probably invested nearly \$250,000 in capital works, which is air conditioning and walls and doors. Walls and doors I get – the department does not believe they are necessary and they are still operating under that assumption, whereas –

Michael GALEA: The newer schools are changing that a bit, but yes.

Katrina WALKER: Right, okay. That is good. Air conditioning, as I said, got dropped because we were over budget because of contamination. If you apply for air conditioning now, you have pretty much got to be in Mildura or Swan Hill to get it – there is a zone involved with the approval of air conditioning. So no, but it just all adds up and it continues to add up. We could go without walls and doors and pay for pens and paper – we are sort of paying for that as well – and then add the maintenance on top, put in the air conditioning and add the electricity on top. Those ongoing costs are just multiplied by having to add those capital expenses in there.

Michael GALEA: And exacerbated, yes. As you know of course, working towards the SRS of 75 and 25, there is currently no – or minimal – federal contribution to capital. For example, Victoria is building half the new schools in the nation just in this state but not getting any extra funding from the federal government to do that. Would you be supportive of the federal government chipping in for capital works and new schools where they are needed as well?

Katrina WALKER: Absolutely. I mean, I think that sort of again goes back to what is equitable. If I even compare it to private schools, my understanding is that the federal government chips into that but does not do it for public. It is that lack of fairness or equality which really stands out to me. So yes, I would.

Michael GALEA: Thank you. Just from your submission and opening remarks as well, the word used was ‘shackled’ by the departmental guidance on the voluntary contributions. I would be really keen to get your input on this. Where should the line be drawn? Obviously in many vulnerable communities there is going to be a large proportion of parents who will not be able to and will feel the pressure to. Where do we draw the line there?

Katrina WALKER: It is a difficult one, and we do face that. We are talking about South Melbourne being a neighbourhood where you have multimillion-dollar mansions sitting next door to significant public housing, and our school profile is that exactly. I think 25 per cent are CSEF families at the school, so it is a tricky one. At

school we try to educate parents as to what the money goes towards by making the financial contribution, and we ask for quite a bit compared with other public schools. Being a new school, we did not even have a fork when we moved in, so everything had to be bought in and added after the fact. I guess our admin and our teaching staff are aware of families and how to handle and administer that. As a parent, I acknowledge that there are families who certainly would not be able to do it. Sometimes you will hear, 'We're going to public school for primary because we're saving up to send them to private school for secondary.' So you have got parents who have jumped from \$10,000 at preschool to \$1000 a year for primary to \$40,000 a year for private education, and they are not contributing. It is quite frustrating that you cannot –

Michael GALEA: That the ones who are in a position to –

Katrina WALKER: The ones who are in a position to do so really say, 'Well, we don't have to. Education in Victoria is free.'

Michael GALEA: It is not – it is still obviously very important that it should be free. But do you think it is perhaps seen through a different value lens from some people compared to other parts of schooling?

Katrina WALKER: Yes, maybe – that primary school should be free and they are happy to pay for it later. I think a lot of submissions were from primary schools as well. Interestingly, it feels maybe like primary schools perhaps feel a bit more pressure than secondary, who can charge for extracurricular programs that we cannot in the same way – they are part of the curriculum.

Michael GALEA: Do you have a rough idea of what percentage of parents at your school do pay the voluntary contribution?

Katrina WALKER: If every child was paid for, we receive about 50 per cent of that. But I think the reality is it is probably about 30 per cent of families that contribute; they just contribute a little more than what we ask for.

Michael GALEA: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you. I am interested as well. I think you just said before that when the school was first opened you did not have a fork. Do you mean to eat?

Katrina WALKER: I believe there was nothing – well, in the kitchen. There was a canteen which was put into the school which we have never actually used as a tuckshop; it gets used for breakfast club. But yes, there was nothing; it was pretty much the walls. We had to buy furniture. As you set up new classrooms, you have to buy the chairs and the tables and everything to set it up.

The CHAIR: Who paid for that?

Katrina WALKER: The school. There is a package that you get. I do not understand everything around that. But as a new school you get a kick-off package, which is intended to allow you to buy the things you need as the school grows. But yes, the kitchen was empty.

The CHAIR: Yes, of course. It just sounded odd, that is all – not having a fork.

Katrina WALKER: A fork – why do you need a fork? I suppose it is the smallest thing I could think of. Maybe I should have said 'a pencil'.

The CHAIR: No, it is fine. I am interested about the voluntary contributions. In your view, from a parent, how voluntary are the voluntary contributions? It does not sound as though they are consistently treated by families that attend your school.

Katrina WALKER: Well, they are voluntary. We will send out a notification. We will get a letter to say, 'We're asking \$990 per student, and this is what we're going to spend it on' – and it gets broken down into each of those sections – 'and this is how it's going to be used for your child.' And we make payment gateways available and let parents know how to pay and where to pay. You cannot put a date on it. It cannot come from the school; it has got to pretty much come from school council to say, 'Please pay. Please contribute.'

The CHAIR: But if I was a parent at your school and I said for whatever reason, ‘I don’t want to pay’, there would be no way –

Katrina WALKER: That is fine; that is your option – that is right. And that is my understanding of how it is meant to be – that no-one should feel under any pressure at all, even if they have the capacity. I have heard some schools might do telephone calls, like telemarketing-type calls on parents just to say, ‘Hey, we haven’t seen your payment’ or follow-up reminders or letters. I think the department says you can send one letter out and one notification per term – something like that.

The CHAIR: Because it gets a bit sort of like – I mean, you know how you get those annoying text messages and those sorts of things. I guess having to do that just so you can fund the things at the school that you want to fund would be pretty frustrating –

Katrina WALKER: Yes, it is frustrating.

The CHAIR: when there is \$2.4 billion that could go towards the things that you are fundraising for.

Katrina WALKER: Yes, that is right.

The CHAIR: What are the things that you are fundraising for? I noted you said in your opening that you were struggling to provide basic services, including perhaps even getting the appropriate level of teaching staff.

Katrina WALKER: Definitely. I think you have probably heard a lot this morning about getting good teachers, and there are great teachers out there.

The CHAIR: Do you have to raise money or funds to pay teachers?

Katrina WALKER: Well, we have to pay CRTs, and that cost is –

The CHAIR: About 500 bucks, or a little bit less, a day.

Katrina WALKER: It is ridiculous how much we pay in CRTs. It could be quarter of a million a year or more than that. In fact it is almost a good career choice for a – well, it is not; if you were a teacher, you probably would not agree with me. But I see teachers who leave full-time teaching and come back as a CRT because you get paid more, you have less responsibility and you still have the joy of teaching kids. But you do not actually have to do the reports and do the admin and so forth – and they get paid better, which is wrong, that we are not paying our teachers, because they are amazing. We have a fairly good retention rate. I have got an awesome principal who is absolutely dedicated to keeping her people, so we have got a fairly consistent team. Over the seven years it has been pretty good.

The CHAIR: Have there been any gaps in staffing that have been very difficult to fill?

Katrina WALKER: Yes, really hard. PE teachers we have struggled to –

The CHAIR: Really?

Katrina WALKER: Yes. We have had grade teachers moving into PE because we have not been able to get PE teachers for a while and, yes, lots and lots of CRTs.

The CHAIR: What are the barriers that you are finding from your perspective about employing teachers, maybe for PE or other areas that there are shortages of? I am not overly familiar, but is it housing affordability around the school? Are there those sort of barriers?

Katrina WALKER: I do not know. A parental observation would be parking is really tricky because there is none around the school, so if they do live close it probably works out better for them. I cannot say what the barriers would be.

The CHAIR: That is fine. For my last question before my time runs out I was going to ask what sorts of activities you actually undertake to raise those funds that you use to support the students there. Is it a cake drive? What sorts of things do you do?

Katrina WALKER: We are a new school, so we are creating stuff from scratch, really. We have a walkathon. We try to get money from outside of parents. We try to extend it to the community as much as we can. Elections are good because we can have a barbecue and we can have a cake stall. They actually are good for us. The classic Bunnings barbecue – we nominate to get into one of those. They are two and a half grand, though. You are not talking like you are getting a lot of money for a massive effort. The walkathon is a pretty good one; there are gold coin donation days occasionally. But again, it calls on the same group of parents to keep putting money into the school. We do a parent night, like a fundraiser night, with silent auctions and things like that. We do not have a fete or anything.

The CHAIR: It is almost like a business within a business in a way.

Katrina WALKER: Yes. We are probably raising about 40 grand a year in fundraising.

The CHAIR: Forty thousand dollars. Okay. Well, thanks for that. My time has just run out. We might have some more time later to ask some more questions, but Mr Batchelor, over to you.

Ryan BATCHELOR: Thanks, Chair. Katrina, thanks so much for coming in. South Melbourne Park is a great school. It is doing pretty well too. What do you think it is about the school that is delivering some pretty consistently good results for the students?

Katrina WALKER: We have had a principal who has been there now just over three years. She has implemented a number of changes within the school. Really, the learning – I do not know the terminology. It is direct teaching.

Ryan BATCHELOR: Explicit teaching.

Katrina WALKER: Explicit teaching, that is it. The focus on phonics – I think our current grade 4s started in prep on phonics. My daughter started in prep on hot words, and her spelling has been impacted by that. Phonics is amazing. It is a game changer.

Ryan BATCHELOR: Do you think the school has really noticed the change in pedagogical approach with respect to learning and to how to read?

Katrina WALKER: Definitely. Absolutely. In all of the assessments, both the official ones and in the teacher assessments around the school, we have definitely seen a massive impact in that.

Ryan BATCHELOR: Do you think that has filtered out into the broader community in terms of perceptions of the school, in terms of people talking about what is good about the school? Do you think the educational approach is discussed elsewhere?

Katrina WALKER: We try to make it part of the conversation. I think a lot of parents who have done school tours in previous years have been very much put off by the open plan environment. It is really disruptive and it is really loud. So when you are doing a tour and you have got kids just running between classrooms, because that is what little kids do, it is very distracting, and parents can see that. The walls have really only gone in in the last year for us, and that made a big difference in the last group of school tours. I think from the discussions in the community around the school, some of our public results have recently shown quite a marked improvement. So the community conversation around the school is changing in that sense.

Ryan BATCHELOR: Good. I am glad. I mean, I think one of the points I have been trying to get to with witnesses in the course of this inquiry is that the outcomes that we are getting are the things we need to be focusing on and what the schools are delivering. Funding is an important ingredient, but it is just an input into a process that is trying to deliver education to students. So trying to figure out how we use that most effectively, but also what are the range of policy interventions that we need across the system and in particular schools to make to improve student outcomes as being the sort of primary and most critical goal of the education system is really important.

Katrina WALKER: Yes.

Ryan BATCHELOR: Given the change process at your school, how much do you think it has been largely driven by school leadership and the principal, and how much of it do you think is attributable to other factors?

We spend a lot of time trying to figure out what makes a great school and how much of it is driven by the leadership and how much is driven by other factors. I am just interested in your reflections on it, given the school has gone through a change process.

Katrina WALKER: Yes. I mean, I sat in on the school review last year. We introduced phonics before it was mandated to be introduced. The principal has taken a very strategic approach to introducing these things. So she started with literacy. We had a full year focusing on reading, and every single class had that. Then it moved to writing, and then this year it is mathematics. So step by step she is moving through, and she is training the staff and she is sort of doing the ‘train the trainer’ type programs, working with her people.

Ryan BATCHELOR: How is that going? How are the staff responding to that?

Katrina WALKER: The staff survey results are phenomenal. She is a very supportive and encouraging principal, with kids at the heart. And she employs people who have kids at the heart. That is kind of the philosophy for the school. So I think that there are things driven through the department that support processes, but also just who she is and the way she operates in our school has made a massive, massive difference to the school. And she is hitting her stride now; she is in year 3. She really, really knows the school, knows the community and knows what she can do and how she can do it.

Ryan BATCHELOR: And do you think the teachers have responded well to that?

Katrina WALKER: Yes, definitely. As I said, the retention is really good. We will have teachers who go off on a gap year, and you sort of think, ‘Oh, are they gone?’ And then they come back because they are like, ‘This is a great place to work.’ And she does really support the teaching staff.

Ryan BATCHELOR: What else do you think we could do to assist those teachers who may want to take a bit of time? Everyone at some point gets a bit restless in their lives and wants to go off and do something else. To get them back, based on the experience you have had at the school, what do you think is the drawback to teaching?

Katrina WALKER: I mean, I think firstly they are not compensated well enough for what they do, so they need to be compensated properly. They are amazing. They do it because they love it. But that is going to burn them out. Our teachers come back because they love it, the environment they work in is good and it is a pretty good community in terms of supporting them. So pay them properly and provide the right development opportunities for them and I think they will return that in spades, that group of people, because that is what they are there for.

Ryan BATCHELOR: Great. My time is just about up. I will leave it there. Thanks, Chair.

The CHAIR: All right. Thank you. Ms Gray-Barberio, over to you.

Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO: Thank you very much, Chair. Thank you for being here today; we really appreciate your time, Ms Walker. Pay them properly: that is the theme that has been coming up quite frequently this whole morning and early afternoon from various witnesses. Do you think the system is broke when it comes to public education and schools?

Katrina WALKER: I do. I think I mentioned this equity, equality, and just feeling like the poor cousin when we should not be, and our children should have the right to have that full funding, I think, in public schools. What gets me is we will get contributions of maybe \$200,000, which is the equivalent of four or five students at a private school. We are getting that from 400 students at a small public school. I know you cannot compare the two of them in that way, but we are talking the impact perhaps for each school of a few hundred thousand dollars a year, which would just take the pressure off. The structure of classrooms, where we have got to look at running composite – and composite classes are great; I do not disagree with them. But when you are trying to say ‘What’s the best thing for the children? What’s the best structure?’ and then ‘What can we afford?’ that ‘What can we afford?’ being part of the argument is practical, and it is in real commercial terms. All businesses have to do it; I understand that. But when we are pulling things out – when we cannot run student excellence this year because we do not have enough money to do it or we cannot have that STEM program –

Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO: That is what is on the line, though, isn't it?

Katrina WALKER: That is right. All of those things.

Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO: Enrichment programs, opportunities to have experiential learning.

Katrina WALKER: Yes. Having clay in art.

Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO: Exactly. You spoke about your school fundraising activities. Was it last year that you raised \$40,000?

Katrina WALKER: That is our target. It is in the budget every year to raise \$40,000.

Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO: In the budget of the school or in the budget of the school council?

Katrina WALKER: I think it sits under school council – not sure. But it is definitely an item that we say, 'We need to raise that much money,' and that is taken into our revenue.

Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO: It that pitting parents against each other, between those who can afford it and those who cannot? You said earlier you have got a mix of parents who live, in your words –

Katrina WALKER: In multimillion-dollar mansions.

Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO: Yes, multimillion-dollar mansions. But then you have also got parents that live in public housing.

Katrina WALKER: Yes.

Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO: Is this creating any unintended rifts between parents and the wider community, between who is putting in and who is not?

Katrina WALKER: As I also mentioned, the school really does understand the community – our admin staff, for example. If I give you an example of an art show that we do where we have cake stalls and we have a sausage sizzle and games and things like that, the school will actually send vouchers out to families that we know would not be able to contribute otherwise so that we can be inclusive in that. We have got a separate wellbeing budget that we run for families that we know sometimes cannot be involved in activities that we want them to be involved with. We put in all of the profit from our secondary uniform sale. So when you donate uniforms when you are done with them –

Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO: Does that just go back into curriculum and other –

Katrina WALKER: No, the profit goes back to families who cannot afford uniforms. We actually have got a separate wellbeing group, a subcommittee set up under council, that looks after things like that. They even have things like making food available after assemblies on a Friday. Non-perishable items will be there for anyone to take, no question asked.

Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO: My goodness, you are doing a lot for your community.

Katrina WALKER: We understand that the community needs help.

Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO: But it is not your responsibility, though. It should be a shared responsibility.

Katrina WALKER: I guess.

Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO: Well, a shared responsibility when it comes to SRS funding. This funding is based on student needs, and what I am understanding – and correct me if I am wrong – is there are a lot of student needs within your student population and you and other parents of the council are having to fork out so much. Has your council reached out to the Minister for Education or their department at all regarding all these concerns?

Katrina WALKER: We have got a list of priorities, and probably the grand prix is our biggest one. That is an issue for the school.

Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO: Were you actually engaged at all by any government department regarding the grand prix pit lane and contamination issues?

Katrina WALKER: They let us know that the pit lane building was going to be built. It is a whole different discussion once we start getting into the grand prix and the impacts on the school. There are massive and very complex issues for South Melbourne Park being located on a grand prix circuit. I do not even want to start that conversation.

Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO: It sounds like a very complex issue in itself, so I will not go into that but just stick to the terms of reference of this inquiry. What are the consequences of this funding cut on your teachers? You said that there is good retention, but if this continues along the pathway of chronic underfunding, lack of investment and lack of value demonstrated towards teachers, what is going to happen?

Katrina WALKER: Yes, you can see the writing on the wall there. I mean, we are only seven years in and we have got good retention. That is one lever that can be pulled, which is making sure that the staff are properly paid for the job that they are doing and that there is full funding for schools to allow them to do the programs that they should be doing and supporting the kids that need supporting. I think one of the most –

Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO: The writing on the wall that you are speaking about, can you just sort of –

Katrina WALKER: It is losing staff, yes. Losing staff to other professions, losing staff to public –

Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO: And the impact on students in your school, what is going to happen to that?

Katrina WALKER: Well, I can see class sizes potentially getting bigger, more compromises having to be made around all of those aspects as well.

Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO: Thank you so much. That is very helpful; thank you.

The CHAIR: We have a little bit of extra time, so what we might do is each member has got about two minutes each and we will just fire a few extra questions. It will be a short, sharp sort of thing, but if you are happy with that, we will just do that.

Katrina WALKER: Yes, that is fine.

The CHAIR: All right. I will go to Mr Batchelor first.

Ryan BATCHELOR: Thanks, Chair. Katrina, in your contribution you talked a bit about CRTs. You may not know, but if you have an understanding about their use at the school, are they largely being driven by unplanned or unexplained absences, or are they more driven by planned out-of-classroom activities – do you know?

Katrina WALKER: I think they are normal workplace – you know, lots of teachers are mid-30s females, so we have maternity leave, we have marriage, we have people moving state, we have people who get sick, we have people who do their ACLs. I think it is normal workplace kind of – yes, I do not think it is more than that. There is definitely burnout. I mean, they work really hard and really long. I think someone this morning said they do 12 hours of extra work a week; certainly at our school they do much more than that. You can often get emails from teachers at 8 o'clock at night organising excursions and things.

Ryan BATCHELOR: It is just that the CRT thing has come up a number of times. I am just interested to see what we can learn about why it is happening, what the drivers are, and then what we can think about and recommend as ways of helping, because we had some evidence from some students that it really impacts on learning for students.

Katrina WALKER: I am sure. Yes, absolutely.

Ryan BATCHELOR: So what are we going to do to try and prevent that from continuing, and how can we better support? I am just curious if you have got any thoughts about how we better manage their use.

Katrina WALKER: Yes, like having a pool of CRTs that – we try to get the same ones so there is familiarity with the CRT. But yes, in terms of them knowing the curriculum, being able to pick it up and teach it straight away I think is quite tricky, if that is the issue, around continuity of teaching.

Ryan BATCHELOR: Yes, I think it is, for the students.

Katrina WALKER: Yes.

Ryan BATCHELOR: All right. Thanks, Chair.

The CHAIR: Mr Galea, over to you.

Michael GALEA: Thank you. Just in some conversations that were had earlier, talking about the income disparity and large range of demographics that parents in the school community have – do you consider that to be a good thing, that diversity of experiences and backgrounds?

Katrina WALKER: Absolutely. I think we have 45 different languages spoken through families at our school, so it is really diverse. And it is wonderful seeing – I mean, you have got Australia in a little group of 400 kids, which is fantastic for them. They are kids that are working across all ranges of the socio-economic spectrum and all ranges of different nationalities. So, yes, I love that my daughter gets to be part of that and gets to see that as being perfectly normal and how life should be.

Michael GALEA: A great example of public education being the great equaliser.

Katrina WALKER: Yes, I guess so.

Michael GALEA: The word ‘park’ is very appropriate in South Melbourne Park; I see you are right in that Albert Park Lake precinct. I am assuming the previous schools that were shut down in the Kennett era were not on the park site, they would have been in the suburb of South Melbourne itself.

Katrina WALKER: Yes, there was one on Dorcas Street. We are in an old drill hall, an old army drill hall. Beautiful old buildings; we cannot use the art room at the moment because there is rising damp and something else, and the floor has fallen in. So, as I said, heritage building maintenance is a big issue.

Michael GALEA: That is special that you have got the heritage – and added complexities, of course.

Katrina WALKER: It is lovely, but there are some complexities.

Michael GALEA: But the old school sites, then, they were sold off.

Katrina WALKER: Yes, they are all beautiful apartment buildings now in South Melbourne.

Michael GALEA: But after selling off space for schooling, you have had to find space in the park, is that sort of –

Katrina WALKER: Yes.

Michael GALEA: Yes, gotcha. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you. With these funding cuts of \$2.4 billion, what would be the use of that extra money at your school? Would you put that towards something – general recurrent funding that would stop you from having to go and work very hard to raise \$40,000? How would you allocate that money at your school so that it might, as you said before, ease the pressure that has been put on you by the government?

Katrina WALKER: As a parent, I think that is difficult to answer. The fundraising might go towards turfing a play area, which is –

The CHAIR: Well, that is what I mean. Is it general-use funding that you would want to see there?

Katrina WALKER: Yes, I guess so. I suppose that fundraising – we try to make it quite specific so parents understand what that is. But if it was just the proper funding for the school to run so that we are not having to steal from the excellence program to give it to electricity, so that we are not having to justify how much clay they use in an art class, so that they can actually make something out of clay and not have to not have a music lesson because of it. It is those checks and balances that every year just get weighed up: what is more important here and what can we perhaps delay now because we cannot afford to do it? Or if we take this fundraising money and we say to parents, ‘We’re going to specifically spend it on this, so you know exactly where your dollars are going.’

The CHAIR: Yes.

Katrina WALKER: Where I cannot say, ‘Oh, if we get \$10,000 in fundraising, we are going to pop it into the STEM program,’ because –

The CHAIR: What would be the one message you would like to send to the education minister, given these very challenging funding cuts?

Katrina WALKER: I cut it out of my speech, but my urging was that you recommend that they implement it now and that the department implement the funding as they have promised – that they implement it now, not in 2031.

The CHAIR: As promised but not delivered,

Katrina WALKER: Promised and not delivered.

The CHAIR: All right, thanks. I will hand over to you, Ms Gray-Barberio.

Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO: Thank you, Chair. From any of your fundraising activities, has any of that money ever gone to paying for CRTs?

Katrina WALKER: No.

Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO: Great. Thank you. We have heard contrasting evidence today, in contrast to public schools being an equaliser, purely because of the chronic underfunding and lack of investment into the whole ecosystem: schools, resourcing, opportunities, access et cetera. Underfunding public schools jeopardises what for your school?

Katrina WALKER: I guess future opportunity for the children. It is really hard to answer that specifically, because we want to make sure that they can get the very best that they can have, and if we can afford it, we can contribute more to help make that happen, which we should not have to do, but we will do that because we want our children to have a very good education. We believe they should get it through a public education. So specifically I cannot say what one thing the underfunding would fix. It would just mean that educators can educate and not have to manage and administer all the time and constantly have to question and check and remove things rather than give, which is what they want to do. It would give kids an opportunity to make the very best that they could and have the very best number of options available for their future.

Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO: Are government schools at their best right now?

Katrina WALKER: No. Definitely not.

Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO: Thank you. Thank you so much, Ms Walker.

The CHAIR: Well, we might leave it there, I think. Thank you so much for your time today, Katrina. I really appreciate your insights and the evidence that you have given. You will be given a proof version of the transcript. You will be able to have a look through it and make any minor changes if you need to. But from us, thanks very much for your time. Appreciate it.

Witness withdrew.