

T R A N S C R I P T

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

Ryan Batchelor

Anasina Gray-Barberio

Renee Heath

Ann-Marie Hermans

Rachel Payne

Lee Tarlamis

WITNESSES

Lee Carnie, Chief Executive Officer, Youthlaw;

Lauren Frost, Advocacy Manager, Policy and Communications (*via videoconference*), Youth Affairs Council Victoria; and

Leigh Bartlett, Executive Officer (*via videoconference*), Barwon Adolescent Task Force.

The CHAIR: Thank you, and welcome back to the next session of the Legal and Social Issues Committee. I am Joe McCracken, Chair. We are going to go through and introduce the rest of our committee.

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 or may not have other members come in on Zoom as online as well, but we will see how they go depending on their availability.

All evidence taken is protected by parliamentary privilege as provided by the *Constitution Act 1975* and further subject to the provisions of the Legislative Council standing orders. Therefore, the information that you provide during the hearing today is protected by law. You are protected against any action for what you say during the hearing, but if you go elsewhere and say the same things, those comments may not be protected by that privilege. Any deliberately false evidence or misleading of the committee may be considered a contempt of Parliament.

All evidence is being recorded. You will be provided with a proof version of the transcript following the hearing. Those transcripts, once you have had a look through them and ticked them off, will be made public and put on the committee's website.

Just for the Hansard record, can you please state your name and the organisation that you are appearing on behalf of. I will go to Lee in the room first and then I will go to the guys online next.

Lee CARNIE: My name is Lee Carnie. I use they/them pronouns and I am the CEO at Youthlaw.

The CHAIR: Thanks, Lee. And online, please.

Lauren FROST: I will kick us off. My name is Lauren Frost and I am the Advocacy Manager at Youth Affairs Council Victoria.

The CHAIR: Thank you.

Leigh BARTLETT: My name is Leigh Bartlett. I am the CEO of Barwon Adolescent Task Force.

The CHAIR: Perfect. Thanks so much. I will go to Lee in the room. I will give you 5 minutes or so, and then I will go to the guys online. Over to you.

Lee CARNIE: Thank you, and thank you for the opportunity to speak today about the impact of delaying Victoria's increase in public school funding to 75 per cent of the school resource standard, particularly for children and young people experiencing disadvantage. Youthlaw is Victoria's statewide specialist community legal service for young people under 25. I am also the co-chair of the Smart Justice for Young People coalition. Youthlaw provides holistic legal and social work support to young people in and leaving out-of-home care; children facing intervention orders; children at risk of school exclusion; and young people experiencing homelessness, family violence and poverty across a range of legal areas. Through this work we see clearly how underfunding public schools is a critical catalyst for at-risk and marginalised children and young people being pipelined away from algebra classes and school musicals to being arrested by police and locked up in cold, cramped prison cells.

The data reflects what we see every day. In 2019, 68 per cent of children in youth prisons had been suspended or expelled from school. At the same time the retention rate for Victorian public high school students has fallen by almost 10 per cent in recent years. It is now below 80 per cent, compared to close to 91 per cent of private school students who complete their educations. Victorian public schools, as you have heard from other people who have given evidence today, are unfortunately the lowest funded in Australia. In the 2023–24 financial year it cost the Victorian government \$7,775.44 on average per day to detain a child in a youth prison, compared to just \$20.87 each day to educate a child in a public school.

We want to highlight three impacts of delayed public school funding. First, underfunding limits schools' ability to provide the supports that keep children who need the most support engaged, particularly children who have experienced childhood trauma, abuse or neglect, family violence or mental health challenges. Second, it puts proven early intervention programs at risk, including school lawyer programs run in partnership with local, place-based community legal centres that support students, families and teachers to navigate legal problems and provide education to students on legal issues such as online safety, bullying and criminal law. Third, it affects schools' ability to retain experienced teachers and properly support students with complex needs, raising risks of exclusion, disengagement and eventual contact with the criminal legal system.

We know that keeping children connected to school is one of the most effective early interventions we have to reduce rates of youth offending. Adequately funding public schools is not just an education or workplace issue; it is a decision that impacts whether we as a society are supporting children to recover safely from violence and to learn from their mistakes and for every child to be given an equal opportunity to grow, learn and thrive regardless of what school they attend, their postcode or how much money their parents make. Thank you, and I welcome your questions.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much. I will now go to – were you both speaking? Is it Lauren and Leigh or is it just one?

Lauren FROST: Yes, we will both speak. I will start with a short statement and then pass over to Leigh.

The CHAIR: Sure, no worries. Over to you.

Lauren FROST: Great. Thank you so much. As I said, my name is Lauren Frost. I use she/her pronouns and I am the advocacy manager at the Youth Affairs Council Victoria or YACVic. I would like to start by thanking the committee for inviting us to speak at this hearing today. As the peak body for young people and the youth sector in Victoria, a key part of YACVic's work is ensuring that all young people have the opportunity to lead well-supported and fulfilling lives, and equitable access to quality education is a core part of that. We are deeply concerned about the decision to delay Victoria's increase to public school funding to 75 per cent of the schools resourcing standard, and our submission and evidence today will focus on the significant impacts that this will have on current and future students and on Victoria's teaching and education support workforce.

As the peak body for Victoria's youth sector, we are constantly hearing from our members about the current lack of funding and resources in the public school system to meet basic educational goals but also on the flow-on impacts that this has on student supports and wellbeing. A classic example of this is that we are increasingly hearing that schools are using funding from the schools mental health menu, which is designed to promote student mental health and wellbeing, to enable schools to intervene early to support students, and to provide targeted and individualised support for students who need it. Instead this money is being used to employ casual relief teachers to help meet basic staffing requirements, and I know that CRT has been a big topic of discussion today. This means that there will be, then, less funding available for those really crucial early intervention and wellbeing supports, including the really crucial support that youth workers and the youth sector provide to help keep young people engaged with education and on the right track.

We know that children and young people facing educational barriers without access to appropriate resources and support are more likely to experience unemployment, to enter the criminal legal system and to experience poor physical and mental health outcomes. Education is such a critical protective factor to lift young people out of poverty, and positive experiences with schooling are such strong predictive factors of success later in life for young people, including in higher education and employment. Creating a more equitable schooling system can only be achieved through fully resourcing public schools. Without this, schools, teachers and education support

staff will continue to struggle to provide the tailored support young people need and deserve to remain engaged and to excel in educational environments.

Now, we wanted to ensure that the committee was not just hearing from me as a representative of the peak body today but also from our members who work in the youth sector and who are on the ground experiencing these impacts every day. So I would like to hand over to my colleague Leigh to introduce herself and to give her statement.

Leigh BARTLETT: Thanks, Lauren, and thanks, Lee. I am going to come from a slightly different angle because I know you would have heard a lot of data and a lot of reasons for this understanding. I am going to start back in 1988, when I became a teacher. I actually started my bachelor's degree in 1988 at a time where there were pages of jobs in the paper, and we were all very excited about this career path, because up until then everybody we knew had made a career out of teaching. By the time we graduated in 1992, that right was pretty much taken away from us, with cuts across the state, some of us choosing to move to very far-flung regional areas, which was a fantastic opportunity to work off the books for contracts because they had a big need for teachers but we could not be employed directly via the Rialto process, which had existed up until that year.

Since then I have experienced the cumulative impact of underinvestment in education, and that goes across managing 20 years of school-focused youth services, which has ceased to exist this year, but all up 35 years of working in and around education. That is under three Liberal and five Labor leaders, so it is a cumulative impact. Over that time we have developed and we have run hundreds of interventions, small interventions, in schools. We have developed programs to complement or fill gaps in schools. For example, when the netbook trial came out, we had to develop Digital Tattoo to assist schools with supporting students in that space. When school-family partnerships really started to struggle, especially in the post-lockdown period, we developed some work co-designed with schools about what their real needs were. Throughout the lockdown period we developed online resources to support the communities around schools, which have had 32,000 hits on the pages, so they have had a huge need. In that time our funding to work in education has continued to diminish to a point where we are very lucky, through Chris Couzens this year, to have some funding, but once these two years have finished, that will potentially see the end of an organisation which has supported schools in the Barwon region for over 50-odd years.

As CEO of the peak body I have had the privilege of working on communities across health, education, inclusion, justice and education. In 2024 I was really privileged and was able to deliver the Voice of Young People paper at the 10th international crime prevention conference. I have been there, and I know my stuff around this space. In nearly every part of our work there are two common themes: educational disadvantage and the lack of support for families, zero to 12. Both these issues stem from the cumulative impact of underinvestment in specialist supports across government schools, and the first place across government those flags go up is in education. The majority of our young people start in education, so not being able to get that early impact keeps players like Youthlaw in play once they have started to disconnect from school.

Over those years we start to think about – you know, we always work to the one in seven economic marker – how for every dollar we invest in prevention we can potentially save seven. That, if anything, has gone up. Year 5 students say to us in a group situation – they can already articulate the advantages students in the private and Catholic systems get over them and their friends – in comments when I am running a workshop in a school ‘Oh, it’s all right for the kids from the Catholic school; they’ll do fine in high school.’ They are already able to articulate this. We have got a problem and we need to listen to that language. Parents and carers of students on modified programs that we have just run in co-design called Listening Posts have all got children on modified programs. These are parents who are not able to participate in the workforce. These are parents who have their own mental health challenges because they are disconnected from social things because their sole purpose is caring for their children because their children do not have a right to education for a full day at school. They are all on modified programs. The funding we put into disability inclusion just simply does not allow students to stay for the entire school day in most instances in our experience.

If we start to think about teaching as a career, when people become teachers, the thing when I am running professional developments that I hear is ‘I became a teacher because I want to educate. I didn’t want to become a social worker.’ And these are comments we hear over and over again. If we are consistently strengthening our youth justice laws, then we need to invest more in early education, because we know categorically the

relationship between early investment in education and keeping people out. Lee is the expert in the room on that.

Due to EBAs in recent years, the lack of school–family partnerships and how they are starting to diminish because schools are struggling to offer any events outside schools because of the CRT or the time in lieu, we are really starting to look at how we strengthen. At the same time their ability and capacity to even be there after hours is getting harder and harder. If workforce retention is an issue, we need to consider the environment. We know the workforce is an issue at the moment, yet we are not looking to the environment or co-design with schools to work out how we can fix that. So I look at all my friends and the careers they have had. Some have stayed in teaching. A lot, like me, have moved away from it or have stayed around schools. But it is my teacher friends who are the ones that have to validate their experience at family barbecues. They are the ones that have constantly got everybody else in the room being the expert. If we look at OECD countries, we are one of the few that have to do that at the family barbecue. We need to respect what we have got.

One-size-fits-all programs in schools are failing to meet the needs of regional and rural students. I dare say you have heard apologies – ‘I’ve been in work meetings all day’ – and we will hear more about that. We know that, having done some work recently – I ran a series of 19 workshops in regional and rural Victoria. In nearly every instance, the principal was in a classroom. They were not able to attend to leadership roles because they were so short-staffed. More often than not I had combined classes when I was presenting because they did not have enough teachers to cover all the classes in that regional area, and that is pretty common.

School Focused Youth Service – one of the biggest prevention programs in Victorian schools, which I was privileged to manage for the last 20 years, ceased at the end of last year. It was one of the only programs that went down to year 5, and very few prevention programs exist now where somebody supports schools to find the additional supports they need. We have a mental health menu, and I am sure somebody else will speak to that, but I would be really interested to see the data, because when we are working with schools, rather than using it to bring mental health programs in, it has been used to top up teaching resources and support resources.

I suppose if we start to look at 2026 and the need to strengthen, we need, more than all, to look at strengthening this. We have got demands of cost of living. The gap between poor and rich continues to grow. And the media working as a fourth estate has become a huge issue when it comes to informing community and influencing political agendas. These are the things we are competing with, and state schools are really copping it in this space. The reduction in community services and smaller, often regional agencies being decommissioned in favour of larger one-size-fits-all models is really impacting on regional rural areas, which in turn is putting bigger impact on the schools.

I suppose, in closing, we look at ‘Why fund these things’ and what our priorities are. For me, I am always reminded about how we as a community prioritise things. When bananas became expensive years ago, I can remember everybody complaining about the prices of bananas, but we all managed to find money in our budgets for chocolate. We choose what we do when we want to prioritise, and I think education is one of those things in our state that we really need to start stepping up on. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thanks very much. I am going to just hand over to Mr Galea. He will ask the first lot of questions. We will just alternate. Michael, over to you.

Michael GALEA: Thanks very much, all, for your opening statements and submissions. Lee Carnie, I might start with you. Your submission talks about the school lawyer programs. I know in the south-east I have seen some very good examples of that being effectively used as well. Just on the broader theme of criminalisation of children, you may have heard the previous witness, who is a teacher at a suburban secondary school, talk about the great increase in intimidation that he and his colleagues have reported and a sense of unsafety, for want of a better word, in classes. Where do we draw the line between avoiding the criminalisation of young people but also not disrupting the learning of other students and not harming teacher welfare?

Lee CARNIE: It is no coincidence that as we see rates of family violence rise, we are also seeing how children who have experienced family violence are more likely to express behaviours of concern in classrooms. What we see at Youthlaw is that children and young people who experience family violence at home or at a young age are presenting at school and might be presenting with behaviours that are seen as disruptive to the learning of other students. But these are children who have not had the opportunity to get the support that they

need to really understand and heal from the harm that they have experienced when they were growing up. This is where public school funding is so critical, because if public schools have the funding to provide the level of support that these students who have experienced family violence, trauma and neglect need, then that enables them to stay in the school community and for the community to find ways to support them and any mental health challenges or behavioural challenges that they have, while minimising disruption to other students or teachers.

Michael GALEA: Thank you. One of the things that we have been talking about today is how we can best utilise the SRS and not just say, 'Okay, the money's there. Job done.' What does the best practice look like for how we implement that money to make it as effective as it can be to address what you are talking about?

Lee CARNIE: This is where the Gonski model really comes in, because what it is based off is the idea that the funding needs to follow student need. We know that there are specific postcodes and schools where there are higher proportions of young people experiencing socio-economic disadvantage, who are more likely to end up being pipelined into Victoria's criminal justice system and youth prisons. The funding needs to go towards extra funding for supports for marginalised students to address the structural barriers that they are experiencing. There are a number of cohorts that have been already raised today around supporting students with disability, students experiencing socio-economic disadvantage, Aboriginal students, students who speak English as a second language and students with mental health issues. There are a range of student cohorts who are at higher risk of disengaging from education if they do not get the social supports that they need. We also know that schools have been calling on the importance of not just funding teachers but also of the need to boost the size, specialisations and expertise of school wellbeing teams and the number of qualified social workers, school counsellors, nurses, Aboriginal health workers, educational support workers and specialist teachers for students with disability.

Michael GALEA: Thank you. Ms Bartlett, I might put this one to you. One of the things that we have been talking about today and in other inquiries is the timing of intervention. Would you agree that more intervention taking place to support disadvantaged or vulnerable young people in early education – whether it be through ensuring access to early education or whether it be ensuring as many centres as possible are meeting or exceeding national quality standards or providing free three-year-old kinder as well as four-year-old kinder – has a proportionately larger impact by addressing these issues before some of these children are coming to primary school and by giving them the best possible start?

Leigh BARTLETT: To be honest, I think we need a shift in language. I think we keep talking about intervention, and if we are talking about intervention, it means the flag is already up. We want to get to a point where we can be protective and stop looking for risk. Yes, we know those communities do need additional assets, but the reality is young people do not exist in isolation, they exist within an ecosystem. So we have a number of services. By the time they get to adolescence, it is almost impossible to find a service which has an equal and equitable door for the families. When it comes to early years, engaging families early and ensuring that they have access to all of the things that make education ready to go are really important. Picking up on Lee's comments about family violence and things like that, it is having an early prevention program as students come in and having it set up so that we have got the building blocks around learning how to regulate. That goes across family and teaches families how to co-regulate, investing early in teaching calm and creating that across whole families. If we have got strong school family partnerships in early years, it is going to make the difficult conversations for that small percentage of children who do need additional support later on easy, because you have got schools and families on the same page.

Right now we do not have that, because we do not have an investment in whole of family. We are still teaching children very much in isolation from their families. So yes, early for me is important. Eight to 12 is a policy vacuum across this country, let alone just in Victoria, yet at the majority of the schools we get called into, eight to 12 is when the flags are starting to go up. Looking at creating some really solid family-based structures around that eight to 12 when it comes to frameworks would be huge. Yes, it is access to three-year-old kinder, but access to opportunities where families can go to work and children can have those opportunities to learn which is equal across the state is a huge challenge. I think for me it is not so much focusing on intervention, but it is looking at how we build prevention in that early-years space. We have been doing intervention for a long, long time. We are still doing intervention. If I walk into a school right now, everyone can measure the risk factor. If I ask people to sit down and measure the protective factor of those students, that is a lot more challenging for teachers to do.

Michael GALEA: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thanks. I will start with my questions, and I will go to Leigh online as well. I am really interested in some of the commentary you made. Obviously, this \$2.4 billion worth of cuts is devastating, but you mentioned in your opening there about the flow-on impact of funding cuts, and I think you might have said the mental health menu funding was used to employ casual relief teachers. Is that correct or am I mishearing?

Leigh BARTLETT: We would love to get the exact data, but as someone who has done School Focused for 20 years, since the mental health menu has come on board, we will always ask schools, ‘What are you using off the menu?’ before we implement anything else. They are using it for top-up funding. They are not using it to purchase programs as such. In regional and rural areas the programs do not exist in a lot of areas, so it is not building the capacity. I know the intent, with best intent, was to replace School Focused with it, but we did not actually manage to get enough programs. We have got really good evidence-based programs out there that just simply have not been able to get themselves onto the menu. The other thing too is schools are exhausted – teachers are exhausted. Their capacity to run around and find what works – what worked with School Focused was they had people, coordinators, who did that work for them. It was the only program across the state where it was exactly the same everywhere. Those coordinators did the running around for schools because schools were simply not funded to do that running around for themselves.

The CHAIR: I guess one of the questions we have been trying to grapple with is: if there was this \$2.4 billion that has been cut, what would it be best spent on? Would it be best on measures that give capacity to teachers to actually teach? You take away some of the administrative burdens or maybe some of the extra burdens – I do not know whether you said this or not, but teachers said they are sometimes also a youth worker or a social worker. Maybe it would be taking some of those things off a teacher’s plate so they can focus on the task of teaching. What are your thoughts on where the gaps are and where that money might best be put?

Leigh BARTLETT: I think one of the things that worked really well in schools, having worked in wellbeing and also been a secondary school teacher, is separating out wellbeing support from teaching roles. It is really important. A child does not want to disclose to a teacher at recess and then go into the classroom and necessarily have that teacher after recess. It is separating it out and letting wellbeing do their work. And yes, administratively, I am seeing first- and second-year teachers now who are learning at university a lot more about administration than I ever did with a Bachelor of Education. They are doing it with a diploma, which means I would like to see how much time they are actually spending learning how to be educators, because there is a big difference from what I am seeing at the moment. With where the money goes, I think there are a whole heap of experts out there that you can call on for doing that work. We can give you our opinions, but I think that is –

The CHAIR: Well, the reason I ask is because you are talking to people on the ground. They are talking about where the deficiencies are in the system. What are you hearing?

Leigh BARTLETT: They need time for planning. They need time to breathe. Teachers need time to socially get to learn about their students – to teach their students to regulate before they start to learn of a day. But if we are constantly focused on testing and we are constantly focused on administration, it is very difficult for a teacher to come off all of that and have the time to co-regulate – something as simple as that – and then spend 5 or 10 minutes regulating with their students before their students can get ready to learn. They need the flexibility to be creative. We have an education system that is still bending back to the industrial age. It does not look at the individual; it still looks at the group. They need the capacity to have support in the classroom for children who have got special needs. I have also put five children through state education, so I have got my cert III in that as well, and they are children of all different needs, from needing additional support to being miles ahead, and we had to fight for every square inch of that. State education is supposed to be low cost. Five kids – I bought 19 laptops, okay? For a family that are working, that is a huge ask. Families need support to be able to spend time with their children, but schools need that time to be able to do the creative work – individualised learning plans that are really individualised. I think we need to re-evaluate the look of big tech in our education system and trust in teachers to do what they do best, which is teach.

The CHAIR: Okay. I have only got about 10 seconds left, so it is probably not worth me starting on another thing, but thanks very much for your time. I could talk about it forever, as I imagine you could as well, so thanks very much. I will hand over to Mr Batchelor.

Ryan BATCHELOR: Thanks, Chair, and thanks everyone for coming in. Just to pick up a little bit on what do we think the best and most effective interventions are and what do we think we need to be doing more of. One of the issues that has been discussed in both this inquiry but also in our prior inquiry into the state education system was the role that alternative settings in the state system play in terms of supporting kids with particular and different needs. I am just wondering if any of the witnesses have got any views about how relevant and how important pros and cons are of alternative settings within the state system. Lee Carnie, I do not know if you want to start.

Lee CARNIE: I am happy to defer to some of the other folks giving evidence as well, but I think what we see through our frontline services is that alternative, more flexible school and learning options can be real life savers for children who struggle within that more formal, structured learning environment, particularly when you look at more flexible programs, structures and programming, the higher ratios of supports available, more flexible modalities in terms of how teaching works and more flexibility around accessibility needs and reasonable adjustments and breaks and online learning formats et cetera. Having said that, it can be really difficult for our lawyers and social workers to support children into those kinds of flexible learning schools and alternate –

Ryan BATCHELOR: Why is that?

Lee CARNIE: There can be a number of challenges around how they can get to the school, particularly that there are not that many of the alternative learning and flexible learning schools available. It can be really challenging for parents trying to work, or single parents trying to juggle multiple jobs, to figure out how to support their children, particularly children who might have sensory issues or mental health issues around travelling alone to get to and from school each day. There are challenges around supporting students who have been disengaged for extended periods of time to catch up with their learning enough to engage with school and make sure that the supports are available, particularly if they have been excluded or suspended or failed from a school because of behaviours of concern that have been raised or intervention orders that have been laid et cetera. So there are a number of challenges.

Having said that, students have had incredible outcomes when they have been supported to learn in ways that work for them in flexible and alternative learning arrangements; however, it is not always the best option for all students and we would worry about the increased number of young people who appear to be pushed out of public schools and towards the very small number of flexible and alternative learning options available. That can also lead to students being disconnected from their local communities and can lead to challenges around that sense of connection and place and connection to family, which we know are incredibly important protective factors to address risks of criminalisation.

Ryan BATCHELOR: Lauren? Leigh online? Did you have anything?

Lauren FROST: Yes. I will throw to Leigh in a second. I just wanted to zoom back out for a second about the question about what we would do with this \$2.4 billion, because it is relevant to this question too. And I just wanted to say, I guess there is a bigger picture, but that \$2.4 billion is the money to implement the SRS, and that the SRS is not an aspirational standard of school funding. It was designed as the minimum funding required for students to achieve learning outcomes above the national minimum standards in NAPLAN, reading and numeracy. So that is the bare minimum we need for students to have basic literacy and numeracy. It is the minimum required per student to give every child, regardless of their background, the opportunity to access quality education and to achieve their potential. I feel like we could have a whole separate hearing about all of the things we would love to do with additional funding on top of that, and I guess a core point for us today is that because of the underfunding of that SRS and that basic funding to achieve literacy and numeracy, that money is being pulled from the very limited support services that there are to just cover basic teaching needs. I just wanted to zoom back out and say that for us the SRS is the bare minimum, and then there are all of these things that we would like to do on top. But I will pass to Leigh, because I know you have got some thoughts in this space too.

Leigh BARTLETT: Yes, apologies. I seem to have gone into an office where the plugs are not working, and I have got a computer that is on very low power.

Ryan BATCHELOR: Very resourceful.

Leigh BARTLETT: Oh, do not get me started. I am actually up in Queensland, apologies. Can I just get you to repeat the question? Sorry, I was under a table.

Ryan BATCHELOR: It is all right. I am almost out of time, but it was just a reflection on the role that alternative learning environments, particularly, play within the state system – not private necessarily, but within the state system.

Leigh BARTLETT: I think we have a couple of really big missed opportunities. One, we have got teachers who are spending time in flexible learning who are not going back into mainstream schools. They have got so much learning under their belt where they could do some really solid work back in mainstream schools. I think one of the conversations we need to have is (a) we are not burning them out, but (b) we can take their skills back in and build the capacity of other schools. I think that is a really good opportunity. I do a lot of work, a lot of presenting in flexible schools. I would like to see better plans of the opportunities for how the flexible learnings are then going back to those home schools those students come from. We are constantly ‘doing to’ young people; it is young people that are broken, not the systems around them. We need to take responsibility for the systems bending and changing and growing as well. If they are going in and they are working out really good ways of working, how can that be implemented back in mainstream schools, because that builds the capacity for the next generation of students as well. They are the two main opportunities I see really missing. The other thing that I do whenever I look at anything is, if we are going to build flexible schools, which I think have their place, how regional and rural proof are they, because it is very difficult for children in some parts of Victoria to get there and have access to the same level of flexible learning, so finding opportunities that work across the state needs to be really important. They are my three main points for it. Sorry about the mess around.

Ryan BATCHELOR: All good. Thank you. Thanks, Chair.

The CHAIR: All right. I will hand over to you, Anasina.

Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO: Thank you very much, Chair, and thank you all for being here. I just want to start off with you, Ms Frost, on your point that you made earlier: 75 per cent of the SRS is just the bare minimum. In ACT their SRS funding rate is already at 100 per cent, while Tasmania and Western Australia will reach their 100 per cent next year. We have heard from various witnesses today, not just about the funding cuts and the impact and the consequences that are happening and the ripple effects of that, but also about cuts in tutor learning programs and of refugee support programs being at risk of being cut. You also have the School Focused Youth Service that has recently been defunded. Can you tell us what is at stake as a result of that program being defunded?

Lauren FROST: Yes, absolutely. I think Leigh did a beautiful job of outlining the importance of that program previously. We would love to see that program be funded again for the future, because it really did play a crucial role, as Leigh said, in connecting up all of the fantastic services for young people who are experiencing challenges, so that teachers can connect them in with those services. They exist; let us make it easier for teaching and education support staff to be able to support the young people by making sure that they are not doing the teaching job, and as Leigh was saying, the additional wellbeing support jobs on top of it. So yes, we would love to see the School Focused Youth Service be funded again. We understand that the intention was for the mental health menu to be put in place to replace the services that the School Focused Youth Service had supplied previously, but as I said in my opening statement, we are really concerned about how that mental health menu is being used and the fact that a lot of the funding is being used for casual relief teachers because of the underfunding of teachers and of schooling. For us, there is a direct correlation between the underfunding of our basic educational goals in schools and then the fact that we have to borrow from the small amount of money that there is for wellbeing and support services just to make sure there are enough teachers in the classroom.

Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO: It absolutely sounds like a lot of patchwork and trying to fill gaps and there are just too many gaps that are appearing. Mx Carnie, I would like to come to you. In your submission you said education is crime prevention. You also spoke about the criminalisation of children. \$2.4 billion is no joke. That is a lot of money, and like you said, Gonski reform is all about the student needs and ensuring that those needs are being responded to. Which kids are on the line here? Which kids are going to be disproportionately impacted as a result of this government’s disconnect with the community?

Lee CARNIE: Smart Justice for Young People has released a report called the *Working Together* action plan, which outlines which cohorts of children and young people are subjected to overpolicing and underserving and as a result are over-represented in Victoria's criminal justice system. That includes children in out-of-home care, Aboriginal children, children from multicultural backgrounds –

Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO: Which ones specifically? Which cultural groups?

Lee CARNIE: There is a range of groups. I might have to take that question on notice, but I can provide that – and also children with disabilities. Does that answer your question?

Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO: Yes. Thank you very much. I appreciate that. You also spoke about, in your submission, retention rates of students. We had a witness earlier from the Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare. Disengagement of children and students in school is a real risk, with the chronic underfunding and the decisions made by government. What do you have to say in response to that?

Lee CARNIE: What we see is what happens to a lot of the children and young people later down the track, after they have disengaged from school or have been excluded from school or suspended, and we see children and young people who are entering the youth homelessness system, who have criminal charges and who are in a situation where they are facing risk of imprisonment or they are facing a range of legal problems. They are more likely to have been victims of crime and experienced sexual assault. They are experiencing extreme poverty and financial hardship as a result of the fact that this critical intervention point – which was keeping them engaged in school when they were younger, making sure that they had the wraparound supports that they needed to keep them engaged in education and keep them connected with their families and communities – was missed. When you talk about \$2.4 billion, the cost of imprisoning a child in a youth prison or a young person who is experiencing homelessness or is experiencing family violence in the prison system is significantly higher than investing in the wraparound supports to keep them in school in the first place.

Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO: Thank you very much. My time has run out. I appreciate it.

The CHAIR: Thank you so much. That brings an end to this part of the hearing. I just want to thank all witnesses for their time, their effort and their evidence that they have given today. As I said, you will be provided with a proof version of the transcript. If you need to make any minor changes, that is fine. After that it will appear up on the committee's website. From us, thanks very much for your time. We really appreciate it.

Witnesses withdrew.