

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

Ryan Batchelor

Anasina Gray-Barberio

Renee Heath

Ann-Marie Hermans

Rachel Payne

Lee Tarlamis

WITNESSES (*via videoconference*)

Zoe Damman, Rural Development Coordinator, and

Katy Jarvie, Youth Support Worker, Youth Strategic Advocacy Group Great South Coast.

The CHAIR: Welcome back to the last session today for the Legal and Social Issues Committee inquiry into public education Funding in Victoria. I am Joe McCracken, Chair of the inquiry, and we are going to go through and introduce the other members of the committee as well.

Michael GALEA: Michael Galea, Member for South-Eastern Metropolitan, Deputy Chair of the committee.

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

Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO: Hello. Anasina Gray-Barberio, Northern Metro.

The CHAIR: 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 you provide during the hearing is protected by law. You are protected against any action for what you say during the hearing, but if you go elsewhere and repeat the same things, those comments may not necessarily be protected by that privilege. Any deliberately false evidence or misleading of the committee may be considered contempt of Parliament.

All evidence is being recorded. You will be provided with the proof version of the transcript afterwards, and ultimately, once you have had a look through it and approved it, it will go online and be made public.

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

Zoe DAMMAN: I am Zoe Damman. I am representing the Youth Strategic Advocacy Group for the Great South Coast and YACVic Rural.

Katy JARVIE: I am Katy Jarvie. I am a youth worker also here on behalf of the YSAG and YACVic.

The CHAIR: Zoe and Katy, welcome and thanks so much for being here today. I will hand over to you guys for a quick introduction of 5 minutes or so, then we will fire some questions away, so welcome and over to you.

Zoe DAMMAN: Thank you. I am going to start. I am Zoe Damman. I am a member of the Great South Coast Strategic Advocacy Group, and I have taught in regional and rural Victoria for eight years, from grades F to 10, and then I have worked in community development in youth spaces for the last five years.

Thank you for inviting the YSAG to speak today. We are speaking on behalf of students, families, educators and the community in rural Victoria. We live and work in rural Victoria and understand the intersectionalities and complexities of our communities. The current and proposed public education funding cuts will have significant and long-lasting negative impacts on an entire generation of young people, particularly in our communities. Rural public schools work with the most marginalised students in the state. Regional and rural public schools are already suffering from long-term underfunding from the state and federal governments. Rural young people are telling us that education, connection and mental health supports are what matter most and are what they struggle the hardest to access.

When I speak to teachers, they are telling me that they are already struggling to meet basic student needs. They are having to combine classrooms because they cannot get teachers. Teachers are telling us that principals are often having to teach, making it harder for rural schools to keep up and catch up. Families are telling the YSAG that they cannot afford the 'voluntary' school fees, which means their children are missing out on rich educational opportunities. School parent associations are doing their best to fundraise within their community to cover the gaps households cannot, so it is putting pressure on communities that are already struggling. Community members are paying out of their pocket so children and young people do not miss out. This is not

sustainable, and it is not fair. Families and teachers are telling us they feel like the 'Education State,' a state that values giving everyone a fair go, has deserted them.

The SRS funding freeze is sending a message directly to young people, and the message is that their government is not willing to invest in them. We know that education is the key to self-determination and a future of possibilities. The Victorian government needs to address that the SRS funding cuts are undermining the state's message that education is important and that young people's futures matter to the government. I would like to hand over to Katy.

Katy JARVIE: Hello, I am Katy Jarvie. I am a Youth Worker in regional Victoria working in out-of-home care. As a student, I attended Mortlake P-12 College, a rural public school, for the entirety of my 13 years of public schooling, graduating in 2022. I am here today to offer insight into the experience of attending a public school in Victoria in hopes of encouraging our government to give Victorian public school students the education and resources they deserve. As a student I witnessed teachers working overtime and doing unpaid hours just to meet the disparities in education that we experienced in rural public schooling. My education was only satisfactory purely due to the few teachers that worked unpaid hours, dedicating their free time to helping me and my peers. And as a youth worker, I see these same issues currently with young people in rural and regional areas in Victoria. Thank you.

The CHAIR: No worries. Thank you very much. Sorry, I just bit into a biscuit when I started talking there. I will hand over to Mr Galea, and he can recover for me.

Ryan BATCHELOR: He is not eating a biscuit.

Michael GALEA: Thank you, Chair. Fortunately, I am currently not eating a biscuit. Thank you very much for joining us today for your presentation and of course for your written submission as well. One of the key themes that we have been talking about today is not just the funding amount but what you do with that to make it as effective as possible. I would love to hear from the perspective of the region that you cover in the Great South Coast, particularly when it comes to, for example, workforce shortages. We know that at a statewide level, we are seeing a decrease in the shortage of teachers over the forward few years, but there is still some work to be done. What specifically are you seeing in your community, and how can we most effectively (1) retain good teachers, (2) encourage more people into the profession and (3) remove any barriers off people who are trying to become a teacher and make that difference that they might be facing?

Zoe DAMMAN: Are you happy for me to start?

Katy JARVIE: Yes. Go for it.

Zoe DAMMAN: Thank you. Thank you for the question. Yes, workforce shortages are a big issue in regional and rural Victoria. We often have schools using up their allocated CRT budgets by the end of the first or second term, and then they are scrounging to try and get funding to cover CRT budgets for the rest of the year. I would like to echo the comment made by Lauren Frost in the last session about that \$2.4 billion. If we had that back, that would just meet the basic standard of SRS funding. It would be wonderful to have another \$2.4 billion to address the issues that we are seeing in our schools and that are causing the gaps and disparity for our young people and the opportunities that they get to have in regional Victoria. In terms of encouraging and retaining staff in education., I myself left teaching after eight years due to burnout. We are too much trying to respond to situations rather than do that preventative work and address the bottom of the ladder. We cannot keep addressing the top where things are falling off if you do not have a stable bottom. Would you like to add anything?

Katy JARVIE: Yes, definitely. As a student, I saw a lot of gaps and workforce shortages. I also have two younger siblings that also attending a public school in rural Victoria. My siblings speak to me about teachers coming and going and always having CRT and relief teachers. I experienced challenges when advocating for my siblings due to unmanageable workloads and lack of staffing. As a student, there definitely were workplace shortages, and the mentors that were in my life would come and go. I would be in VCE and have to do subjects by distance education because my teachers would leave school. I just think that workforce shortages are a big factor, and unmanageable workloads and lack of staffing in rural areas are really a big problem. Look, I do not have all the answers for you, but like Zoe said, staff burnout is definitely high. Many of my teachers left to work in the private sector or moved to metro areas and that sort of thing. So I really think that rural education is

something that is experiencing a lot of challenges at the moment, and there certainly is a big gap between rural education and education in metro areas or the private sector. So that is my 2 cents.

Zoe DAMMAN: I would just like to add to that the issue of how in a rural or regional school you might have one teacher who is an expert in a subject and if that teacher leaves the school that subject can no longer be taught. So then you have students either having an entire pathway closed to them or having to do distance education with all its challenges to zoom into subjects so that they can try and get that pathway that they are seeking.

Michael GALEA: Thank you. I actually would love to dive deeper into that, but my time is about to expire, so I will leave it there. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thanks very much. I will take over the questions. Where do you start, I guess? I had a look through your submission. This inquiry is about the \$2.4 billion in funding cuts that we have seen from the government. You said in your submission that funding cuts in rural schools means fewer teachers, fewer subjects and fewer pathways, which obviously impacts people. I know Mortlake pretty well. I imagine at the school – how many kids would it have there? 150ish, maybe; maybe getting up to 200 or thereabouts – it probably changes from year to year. I taught in Colac myself, so I get what it is like. Just so we have got it on the record, what impact do you think that these funding cuts have, the real day-to-day impact, on the running of a school? You talked about casual relief teachers, you talked about lack of resources, but what does it look like on the ground when students actually experience that?

Zoe DAMMAN: Do you want to start?

Katy JARVIE: Yes, I can start. I think definitely my experience of being at a public school is like you said: the day-to-day experience would be you were not sure if your subjects would be filled out. A lot of times I would have many CRTs or even my principal teaching my class for a day. I think that inconsistency really affects the education and the outcomes that students are offered, if they cannot even have a consistent teacher or would not be sure if next year their subject would be offered. I think these real day-to-day issues affect students, and whether people want to admit it or not, students can see the way that teachers are stressed all the time and principals are always working overtime. This is an issue that students can see. I think it also really impacts students: they worry about whether they can still complete the subject that they really want to in the next year coming or the next term. I think these staffing shortages and these sorts of issues really can have detrimental impacts on the consistency of education provided to students in rural areas.

Zoe DAMMAN: Another impact of these cuts is we are hearing from families that the school are having to tighten things, so for their gala balls they cannot afford to have a photographer. So it is causing a difference between students' experiences year to year, and it is making them feel this sense of, 'We don't matter' or 'We're not a high enough priority to receive this funding.' Another result of tightening is your rich educational experiences. Quite often in a regional or rural area, in order to experience something, you have to travel. So you need funding to cover a bus. You need funding to cover a driver. You need funding to cover the class teacher who is taking the students out for the day. It gets to a point where schools cannot justify that expense, and so the people missing out are the young people. They do not get the opportunity to go and sit in the local courthouse to hear what happens. They do not get the opportunity to visit a theatre or to hear a talk from a public speaker, because the school cannot justify them leaving the campus.

The CHAIR: I think that is a very insightful comment to make – sorry to cut you off there – because as you quite rightly say, travel and those sorts of expenses are quite significant, not just in terms of the cost but the time it takes as well. One of your comments – I cannot remember which one of you made it before – was that the Education State has deserted you. Do you think Victoria can claim to be the Education State, because it seems to be that rural Victoria does tend to be forgotten compared to some of the other parts of the state.

Zoe DAMMAN: I think what I am hearing from students and what I am hearing from families is that they feel like they do not matter. There is this sense that they would have so many more opportunities if they could live in metro areas.

The CHAIR: It should not be about where you live, though, should it?

Zoe DAMMAN: That is not the reality; that is not an option.

The CHAIR: Yes.

Zoe DAMMAN: It is a feeling of being separated out because it is a choice you have made to live in the country – which is not necessarily the case – and therefore you are sacrificing the future opportunities of your children.

The CHAIR: Yes. Thank you. My time has just run out, I am sorry. We could talk about it for hours, I am 100 per cent sure, but I will hand over to Mr Batchelor.

Ryan BATCHELOR: Thank you, Chair. And to both of you, thanks so much for joining us today. Do you want to just unpack a little bit more this question of teacher retention, availability and particularly impacts. We had some evidence earlier today from some students, which was talking through the impacts that CRTs on a regular basis are having on students' educational outcomes. So I am interested just a bit more, if you have got any perspectives on that, and how, from what you are observing, those arrangements may be impacting on students in classrooms.

Zoe DAMMAN: I would like to jump in and talk a little bit about wellbeing and safety. We know that students and young people need to feel safe at school. One of the ways that that happens is by having consistent adults in their life, and sometimes schools provide the most consistency a young person will experience. For that to become an unstable place has ripple effects, so that would be something I would just like to flag on the wellbeing of our young people. Young people cannot learn if they do not feel safe. Schools are so much more than just one thing. They are a community centre, they are a community hub, they are role models and they are places of potential, but chiefly they are places of safety for young people, and they should be.

Ryan BATCHELOR: Can I just unpack that a little bit? I take it you are meaning safety in the sense of not just an absence of fear but a sense of security?

Zoe DAMMAN: Yes, absolutely.

Ryan BATCHELOR: I hope you get my distinction there, but I think they are very different.

Zoe DAMMAN: I do.

Ryan BATCHELOR: I just wanted to clarify that with you.

Zoe DAMMAN: Yes, absolutely. I am talking about security, absolutely. I am talking about feeling like you can explore an idea without being embarrassed or shamed, that you can engage in discussion and interesting ideas in a way that you know you can test the ground and the waters and you will be held in that.

Katy JARVIE: Definitely. I think that the concept of emotional safety as well is a big one in schools. You were asking what the impacts of retention are. Like I said, CRTs and relief teachers are something that are becoming more common across rural schools, and that is something I experience and my siblings and peers experience in their schooling right now, today. I think that this concept of emotional safety – you build relationships with these trusted adults and mentors who are in your life, these teachers that you see every day, and then if they become unavailable or leave for whatever circumstances, CRTs and relief teachers would be in their place. You just do not get the same learning outcomes or the same educational experience if you do not even know the person who is teaching you, you do not know who is standing up at the front of the class and you do not have a relationship with them. I think that causes really big effects educationally, probably more than people realise.

Ryan BATCHELOR: How far in advance –

Zoe DAMMAN: I just want to add to that as well: when you know your student and you know the context of that student's life, you can help them explore their world and learn in ways that are safe for them and that will not be distressing. Not everybody is entering your classroom in the same frame of mind. CRTs do not have that context. Another thing is that quite often in regional and rural schools it used to be that teachers were long term and students would be able to return to the same teacher multiple times throughout their schooling journey and have different experiences that were all within that realm of safe engagement.

Ryan BATCHELOR: The use of the CRTs obviously comes from a range of different reasons. Sometimes it is because there is no permanent position available, sometimes it is unexpected absences but other times it is planned absences. Do you think there is any benefit in alerting students, the community and parents to when we know there is going to be a planned absence? I am just trying to think of what steps we can take to mitigate some of the downside risk associated with the things that you are talking about and what we can do to try and help that.

Katy JARVIE: I think that of course knowing these things in advance is great, but I do not think it is the presence of CRTs and relief that causes these issues; it is the consistency of them. As a student, I would not mind if every now and then or for a couple of weeks of leave I had a CRT, but it is the fact that maybe half of my classes would be filled by CRTs, some teachers that I did not know. So I think the presence of CRTs is not the issue. The fact that they happen is not the problem. It is just how consistently this happens in a day-to-day subject.

Ryan BATCHELOR: All right. Thanks. Thanks, Chair.

The CHAIR: Thank you. I will now hand over to Anasina. Over to you.

Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO: Thank you very much, Chair. Thank you both for appearing before the committee today and your submission. In your submission you have spoken quite intensely around the impact of the delayed funding, the \$2.4 billion, and the impact that it is having on pathways, access, opportunities and equity of being able to have access to appropriate curriculum for students. But I just want to come back to your opening statement. You said community members are paying out of their pockets. How much are they paying? Can you give us an average or just a rough estimate so we can understand what that looks like in a rural context?

Zoe DAMMAN: I can give you a couple of examples I have been told of, but I cannot speak across the board. I was informed of a community that were putting on fundraising to cover the travel costs to take their students on an excursion – to cover the costs that the students could not make. It was not a specific amount, it was as much as you could give, and that is what the fundraising was going towards. I have had another parent inform me that they had to pay \$600 for their student who attends a public secondary school to access a subject on offer at the school, and if they could not pay that \$600 the student would not be enrolled in that subject.

Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO: Thank you. Today we have heard from various witnesses statements like education is crime prevention and education is a protective factor. Today, you said education is key to self-determination. Why?

Zoe DAMMAN: Would you like to start or shall I?

Katy JARVIE: I can definitely start. In my experience especially, I always remember two of my mentors, who are two of my senior high school teachers. They are some of the most trusted adults in my life I have experienced to this day. When you speak of self-determination, they supported me in being confident in myself. They encouraged me to reach out and do the things that I like and they encouraged me to attend university and access all these opportunities that I have to this day. I think that these trusted adults and having a really good foundation of education and schooling really helps students figure out who they are, what their identity is and who they want to be. In a safe place with safe, trusted adults I think is really key to this concept of self-determination.

Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO: That actually answers my next question, which was around what was in your submission that sometimes school is the only place that students can access mental health because of that trusted adult relationship. Perhaps for you, Zoe, can I just ask about the poverty line indicator in your submission? You spoke about how in the regional context it is a lot higher than the Victorian state average of 29 per cent. How is this impacting access and, obviously, public school equity in the rural context? Do you think schools are being intentionally segregated?

Zoe DAMMAN: I really appreciate this question. In order to address it, I just want to flag that it is not just one thing. The poverty line indicator is not just one element. It is so interconnected in so many other aspects of a young person's life and experiences. We are seeing higher rates of – sorry, I am just gathering my thoughts as I am thinking this through.

Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO: That is okay.

Zoe DAMMAN: There are higher rates of complexity before the young person is even in the school room. They are coming to their classroom, if they are able to get there, perhaps without having had the opportunity to eat breakfast that day or a meal since the day before. They may have witnessed something or experienced something that was frightening or dangerous. They may be absorbing the tension at home because family are struggling to meet basic needs. And so parents and carers –

Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO: So not having access to SRS, which is based on student needs, does that just then exacerbate and compound their situation and their environment?

Zoe DAMMAN: Absolutely. The basic funding does not even – we are not even addressing the school breakfast programs or lunch programs. It is not even addressing the uniform programs or the access to technology. A lot of our students do not have internet at home or access to suitable devices to do study and homework at home, let alone in the classroom. Not all of our schools have adequate internet access, so this SRS funding, that \$2.4 billion, is just the basic bare minimum. We need to be seeing so much more funding in rural and regional areas because there is already such a disparity between the students who are attending those schools as opposed to metro.

Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO: Thank you very much. Thank you, Chair.

The CHAIR: Zoe and Katy, that brings an end to our time today, I am afraid, but it has been really good hearing from you. Thank you so much for your evidence. As I said, we will get you a proof copy of the transcript so you can have a look through it if you like, and if there are any minor changes, please feel free to make them. From us to you, thanks so much. We really appreciate it.

Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO: Thank you for your time.

Committee adjourned.