

# TRANSCRIPT

## LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL LEGAL AND SOCIAL ISSUES COMMITTEE

### **Inquiry into Public School Funding**

Melbourne – Wednesday 25 March 2026

#### **MEMBERS**

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Michael Galea – Deputy Chair

Ryan Batchelor

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Sheena Watt

Richard Welch

**WITNESSES**

Cameron Peverett, President, Principals' Association of Specialist Schools; and  
Julie Phillips, Chairperson, Disability Advocacy Victoria.

**The CHAIR:** Welcome back to the next session of the Legal and Social Issues Committee inquiry into state funding of education in Victoria. I am Joe McCracken, Chair of the inquiry, and we are going to go through and introduce the rest of our committee members.

**Michael GALEA:** Good morning. Michael Galea, Member for South-East Metro and Deputy Chair of the committee.

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

**Sheena WATT:** Hello. Sheena Watt, Northern Metropolitan Region.

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

**The CHAIR:** And we may also have some members online. They might come in and out, but we will see how we go there. You will see them on the screen down there.

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 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, and once you have had a chance to look through it, it will ultimately be made public and put on the committee's website.

Just for the Hansard record, are you happy to say your name and the organisation that you are appearing on behalf of, please? I will go to Julie first.

**Julie PHILLIPS:** Julie Phillips, Disability Advocacy Victoria.

**Cameron PEVERETT:** Cameron Peverett, Principals' Association of Specialist Schools Victoria.

**The CHAIR:** Perfect. Thanks so much. We really appreciate you both being here today. Who would like to go first in terms of opening?

**Cameron PEVERETT:** After you, Julie.

**Julie PHILLIPS:** Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Over to you. Thanks, and welcome.

**Julie PHILLIPS:** Thank you. I just want to say that apart from being Chair of Disability Advocacy Victoria I am an individual member who does a lot of volunteer work in the education sphere and I am also the CEO of the Disability Discrimination Legal Service, so that is the evidence base from which my information to you today comes. Naturally, I will be focusing only on children with disabilities because that is the cohort we work with. I want to make my comments on the premise that the majority of teachers aides and principals want students with disabilities – and all students – to do well in school, to not be subjected to violence, to have full access to communication, to leave school with functional communication, to be able to access Auslan if they need to and obviously to leave with some sort of education.

It is my experience and the experience of the organisations that I just talked about that this is not always happening and in fact with kids with disabilities it is often not happening. The question is why – if we go back

to the premise of the fact that most teachers aides and principals want children to do well – and really you have to question whether the answer is funding. My experience is that there is plenty of money around for lawyers, both in-house and external lawyers, that the Department of Education engage prolifically to defend themselves from cases of discrimination, from WorkCover claims and all that sort of thing. There is also the compensation from personal injury claims against the department, so it might be very useful to find out what those figures actually are. I would suggest they are millions. We also have money in different pots that the department is spending. You have divisions like the complex matters team, whose job it is to alleviate the stress of principals when the principals go to them after they have been sued or something terrible has happened. It is all money that is reactive rather than money that is actually going to the schools themselves so they can increase their support and the problems that I am talking about do not happen in the first place. It is interesting when we talk about money for schools, because that is a lot of money that the department is spending, but it is not on schools. To give an example, I am dealing with a country school at the moment that receives \$22,000 for one individual student who is deaf, but an Auslan interpreter costs \$55,000 to \$60,000 full-time. If you want to do the maths, you can see that they are in an impossible position, and they will probably, and they have, get sued for discrimination – absolutely pointless. That is happening all over the place.

The last recorded statistics from the department in terms of physical restraint and false imprisonment are 2940 per year. That would be, probably, nearly all kids with disabilities. That is completely traumatic for those kids, and it is traumatic for staff who do that sort of thing. They are doing it because they are not getting the money that they need to put in the supports for intensive behavioural support. There simply is not the money going to those schools. That is a figure that is unacceptable and that the department has made no moves to do anything about. As I said, it is traumatic and very serious both for the staff who are put in that position and for the children. I suppose we can look back on the reports from the Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission. From 2012 there have been so many reports done by statutory authorities, inquiries and reviews, including last year's review into education, and they are all presenting a fairly catastrophic situation for children with disabilities. The rates of discrimination claims et cetera are not receding. Again, you have to ask why. Assuming good faith on behalf of staff – and that is what schools often report – it can only be to do with the fact that there are not enough resources going into schools to be able to allow them to support kids with disabilities in the manner which is required. There are constant settlements and expenditure on firms like MinterEllison – I am not criticising them – and all the top Melbourne law firms. Imagine if that money was going to schools instead. We would have a big, completely different picture, and one that is much more desirable than this reactive, 'Let's respond to catastrophes legally'. That is it. Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you very much. Cameron, over to you.

**Cameron PEVERETT:** Thank you. For context, my working life has been almost exclusively in specialist education for students with intellectual disabilities. I am currently principal of Lake Colac School, which is a school for students with intellectual disabilities who have an IQ of 70 and below. I have had over 21 years in special ed, 15 of those as a principal, so I understand all the flows of budgets, how they have worked over the many years, the changes of disability funding models and all of the complexities that sit around those. To be brief, I know a lot of the other associations and stakeholder groups who work with the Department of Education will have already spoken about the challenges around the delay in the funding itself. Our position is going to be around the additional inequity that does pose for students with disabilities in our settings, particularly since we have additional resourcing needs. Operational costs, maintenance costs and all that tends to be significantly higher in our schools.

With the reforms in the disability inclusion profile funding that are coming into schools, while there is a slight uptick in the funding that is coming into schools through that mechanism, the delays in getting that funding are quite significant. So we are flying blind, for want of a better term, for often three, if not four, terms while we are waiting to find out exactly how much funding support these students will get. Therefore, obviously, we have to run a relatively conservative budget, and that means that we are not necessarily always able to adequately resource these students appropriately with the staffing and additional resources that they require, because we just do not know how much money we are going to have for such a substantial period of time. While I am not poo-hooing the model entirely, it certainly needs some refinement. At least under the old PSD model, we would know by April fairly solidly how much money we would have for that year. As much as we were going into the year not knowing, by April we would know. Now we do not know until November or December of those years, and then as more students come through, it just avalanches, I suppose, through it.

I think part of our issue is some of the changes to the credit and cash carryover thresholds that have now come into play, where the department is taking some of the money back at the end of the year if there is any additional funding sitting in our student resource packages. Specialist schools were told initially that we would be able to retain 10 per cent of our global budgets basically into perpetuity, which gave us some stability. For some reason that changed 12 months after the announcement, and now we are dropping down to 7.5 per cent and then eventually to 6 per cent from next year, so we are able to hold over fewer funds than what we previously were able to. In schools with specialist settings, we cannot operate from a single-year budget – as much as we want today’s funding spent on today’s kids – because of the complexities around the specialised equipment, buildings and basically being somewhat not funded well enough in those areas. We need to be able to retain those funds so then we can actually improve our grounds, make places safe and have high-quality play equipment, buildings and facilities, like our hydro pools and all those other things that kids with additional needs have. We do not have any additional funding sources for those, and we are very reliant on the disability inclusion profile funding to pay for that. Ultimately that should be being spent more on education, but we have to carve off a little bit to actually just maintain our buildings and whatnot. So where already we have complexities and delays in accessing that funding – even though the kids are there, but the funding is not – and when we are also waiting for the SRS funding to come through as well, it just exacerbates the problems for us.

Finally, just one other thing, which I did not put in my original submission, is that specialist schools tend to be funded as if they are primary schools, as in support for students and the core funding that they receive, but the vast majority – I would say 90 to 95 per cent – of our specialist schools have secondary-aged students. We are already underfunded for the age of the students, so when it comes to offering programs and supports for our secondary-aged students, we are having to use the primary-aged funding equivalent, which is significantly less.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you. Sorry, I was just writing that down because it was a good point. I am going to go to questions now, okay. I will hand to Mr Galea first, and we will just go back and forth. Mr Galea, over to you.

**Michael GALEA:** Thank you, Chair. Thank you both. I will just start with you, Mr Peverett. Obviously, there has been significant investment in the past 10 years in the capital, in the sites themselves for these schools. Just on point 5 in your submission, I would be curious to know what the specific needs and any shortfalls are. Is it a question of capacity, or is it a question of changing needs and the students and the cohorts that you are dealing with having different needs to previous generations? What are you seeing the biggest needs are?

**Cameron PEVERETT:** Well, the investment was long overdue. Having come out of Lake Colac School, for example, we have just had a significant investment. We were not actually part of that package. We managed to secure a bit of funding just before COVID hit and have moved up to a new site. We were still operating out of 1970s asbestos-ridden relocatable buildings. We did not have a single permanent structure onsite. I would not necessarily say it is a change of the needs, but it was just severely underinvested in for a long time.

**Michael GALEA:** Apologies. Obviously there have been very significant changes – and I hope and trust that is not the environment that you are working in now – because of the capital investment. I am asking: since that investment, what trends are you now seeing, and are there any gaps in particular that this committee should be mindful of?

**Cameron PEVERETT:** I think we should be mindful that sometimes the schools are – I mean, they are built by architects, and sometimes there is a lot of nice-to-haves that are sitting within those buildings as opposed to the need-to-haves. Our students, for example, require a lot more storage facilities for wheelchairs and additional equipment like hoists and all that, and sometimes those things kind of go to the wayside unless you have a very strong principal that is able to help guide what the cohort for that school needs and be able to project for future growth. What I have certainly found traditionally is that we are often built for the current number of students and not the projected growth or the projected growth is not significant enough. Once again to use my school as an example, my school has grown 40 per cent in its student population over the last three years, and I am in Colac, so it is small and regional. Part of that is obviously I feel that we have made some very strategic decisions around investing more appropriately in the way that we teach, the way that we promote ourselves in the community, making sure that every student that comes into our school has a fair go to basically achieve those things that Julie was talking about. I am not the only school doing that – we are all doing that. So as our pedagogy has somewhat changed and we are getting better at instructing our kids and developing their communication skills and functional skills and their independence, our environments and the programs that we offer need to also shift, and unfortunately, we probably have not had a lot of investment in that.

**Michael GALEA:** So it sounds like you are a victim of your own success, in a way, that you have become a very attractive proposition to more families. Is that fair?

**Cameron PEVERETT:** Yes. The philosophy is the right school for the right child. Where we can find those balances and all that – we do not want to just have kids just for the sake of building an empire; far from that. But, yes, if we actually have something that is attractive, that is seen as providing those opportunities, yes, it is a victim of our success.

**Michael GALEA:** Can I ask you as well about workforce challenges, specifically to specialist schools? We have heard, obviously, a lot of evidence in this and previous inquiries about the ongoing issue. And yes, the pressure is easing, but there is still some work to be done.

**Cameron PEVERETT:** Yes.

**Michael GALEA:** What does the picture look like specifically in specialist education?

**Cameron PEVERETT:** There would be very few that are fully staffed, even just with teachers and educational support staff. Many schools are fortunate that they can employ allied health teams. As you go more regionally, like my school, I do not. I actually cannot find the staff to be able to do that. So it is teachers just bringing in the best pedagogical practices they can. Some of our class sizes are getting larger than what we would prefer. I am certainly sitting in that at the moment. I am understaffed with teachers. Education support staff at the moment seem to be okay, at least in my setting, as an attractive school to the community, but finding teachers is a real challenge, especially when we are looking for highly skilled teachers to come into our workforce. There is possibly also a little bit of inequity that there are – I am on the fence with this one, because in our specialist schools, teachers who do secure an ongoing position are supposed to have an additional year of special education qualifications. That is becoming less and less prevalent because it is more difficult to get, and we just need teachers in front of kids. So to a certain extent, our expertise is being diluted, especially where we are trying to retain that higher level of expertise. The flip side to that is a lot of our teachers who are fortunate enough to be five-year trained and have been a part of that are not actually remunerated for doing so.

**Michael GALEA:** I see. Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** I will go next, Cameron. I know the work that you have done in Colac. Obviously I have been around the town and I know it fairly well, so you should be commended for the work that you are doing. I know some of the kids that have been there as well, so well done. We are here to look into the impact of the \$2.4 billion worth of cuts and what that means for people like you and the staff and the team that you have got around you to deliver the best possible outcome for the students in your care. What does that look like? I know one of your recommendations was to restore the funding to 75 per cent – which is a minimum standard – by 2028. What does it look like for you? What does it mean for you practically on the ground?

**Cameron PEVERETT:** I think for us, our specialist schools tend to have a higher disadvantaged cohort of families – not always, but sometimes, particularly when we have different ethnic backgrounds and different understandings around how special education works. So I think for us, we are having to find that we need to get a bit more creative with our funding in order to support the learning needs but also the wellbeing and welfare needs of the students. It is not great, but because we cannot find enough staff through workforce challenges, that does free up a little bit in order to actually invest in making sure that our kids are happy, healthy and safe before we focus on their education. My school, once again, has heavily invested in wellbeing staff, in having a family liaison officer to help negotiate and navigate families and their journey within the school, using NDIS navigators to actually help support to navigate the NDIS for our families, but each of those are underfunded, and in each of those I am topping up out of other school funding buckets to be able to support the families make the best decisions for their kids with their education.

**The CHAIR:** I guess what I am going to is, if you had the funding at least at a minimum standard, those decisions that you are having to make would not be happening as often or at all.

**Cameron PEVERETT:** Yes. It would certainly be far easier to make some of those decisions to make sure we have the appropriate equipment, resources and staffing in order to better provide for the kids. We could get a bit more creative with attracting staff, particularly into regional areas as well. Special education has not been actively promoted as a positive experience often in the media, but I certainly find that the vast majority of my

families and certainly all my staff love the work, they love the kids and we get these fantastic gains. But we have to get really creative in the way that we do it, and I feel like sometimes we have to hide a little bit in the shadow just to be able to do what we know works best for the students.

**The CHAIR:** You would have seen the strikes yesterday – 30,000-plus teachers on the streets of Melbourne here. Do you think that pay and conditions are a big part of attraction and retention of teachers, particularly in your specific field?

**Cameron PEVERETT:** I would say so. Across the state it would be. That is partially, also leaning on Julie's point a little bit, that our students are more complex and sometimes exhibit behaviours that require additional training and support and nuance in the way that we engage and teach and all of that. It is a more complex environment, so it does require additional support and training and, to a certain extent, cognitive load for the teachers in the brainpower to help support the kids. To be able to acknowledge that additional work and really being super dedicated to the kids and to the cause does require I think additional remuneration in order to do that – not just the attraction piece but also the retention piece.

**The CHAIR:** Thanks very much for that. I do want to talk to you, Julie, as well. We are obviously here to talk about \$2.4 billion in cuts or delays, whatever you want to call it. What is the key message that you want to send to the government about this from what you are hearing?

**Julie PHILLIPS:** Well, I think it is a false economy, not putting that money back into the schools. I think if you did the maths and saw all the money that is being spent in response to a situation which is created from not having resources for the schools, it just does not make sense. I think Cameron would agree that trying to retain staff – we all read even just in the paper about how stressed they are and a lot of the confrontations between parents and staff. Some of those are coming because parents are not happy about the level of support their kids are getting. You know, it is a bit of a mess, and that is being euphemistic. I think what needs to happen, without a doubt, is after these years of reports saying pretty much the same thing we have to move from the situation where things are dire and teachers are going on strike – not just for their pay, but I would like to concentrate on the conditions, because that is a significant part of it, isn't it – and get that money and put it in the front end and not deal with WorkCover claims from stressed teachers. It is about proactive preventative supports for schools so they can recruit the people they need, have the numbers of people they need in a job that is not requiring them to do things that are traumatic and then spend less on the negative outcomes that occur from that. It is a no-brainer, really. You do wonder why, decade after decade, we are in this situation when the movement of funds could really assist the situation.

**The CHAIR:** Thanks. My time is up. I am sure you could talk about it a lot more, but I appreciate that. Thank you. Mr Batchelor, over to you.

**Ryan BATCHELOR:** Thanks, Chair. Julie and Cameron, thanks so much for coming in today. Cameron, I just want to start with you and obviously the really critical role that specialist schools play in our system. I spent a bit of time with Juliet down at the Hampton East School, which is the Katandra and Berendale merger, seeing the work that school has done and particularly the engagement – I think it came across in your evidence – to sort of get kids through the system, ready and engaged with the outside world and jobs. It is a really phenomenal effort that many of the staff in these specialist schools are doing at the moment, and I just really want to put on the record how amazing that is and credit them. Obviously I have had more to do with Juliet at Hampton East but across the board. One of the things that came up in your submission – and we had some evidence from some primary principals earlier today about the administrative burden and the complexities that principals in particular are facing. I was wondering if you could give us some perspectives of any of the particular challenges that you think exist for principals at specialist schools in terms of the administrative workload, anything in particular that you think are growing administrative workload challenges. Then we might get into some of how we try and deal with that.

**Cameron PEVERETT:** Yes, I often like to say that the way that specialist schools operate is more or less like the other schools, but then we have particular areas that we have to spend more time investing in. So when it comes to developing the pedagogical practices and obviously staffing appropriately and all the HR things that are wrapped around that, it is the same for specialist schools and then some. A big part of that is that usually there are different policy requirements that affect specialist schools that do not affect the other school types. We also have far more students, if not pretty close to 100 per cent of our students, who have funding through

disability inclusion profiles. That requires a significant admin cost, either through utilising our current staff or it falls onto the principal. In smaller schools like mine I do have to pick up some of that load, obviously just with the different staffing types, but we have allied health teams and that as well. That all makes a difference. Also, when it comes to school reviews and meeting minimum standards, we are held to the same account as other schools and then some, particularly around Child Safe Standards and specific enrolment policies, so there tends to be more work involved in that. It feels like with most policies that exist there is always a little bit extra that specialist schools need to do. There are some things that we have some choice over; so obviously we do not have to worry so much about NAPLAN. Some of our smaller schools do not offer formal senior secondary certificates, but when we do, like we are doing in Colac with the Victorian pathways certificate, it is the same thing. We are adding that and then obviously having to add nuance and navigating all those other systems. So it is the same and then some, really.

**Ryan BATCHELOR:** You talked about the little bit extra that you have got to do. Do you think that the funding model adequately accounts for that? And in an administrative sense, do you get any little bit extra, or is there a bit more that we could do there?

**Cameron PEVERETT:** Well, I think that if we had that additional funding coming through, we would be able to invest deeper in having our admin support staff help take some of that load and have maybe more specific roles. But to a certain extent we do have this little bit of guilt that we do not want to put so much of our funding into admin because it should be spent on the kids, but you cannot get that money in with the kids if you do not have the admin, so we are always playing that balance. I think that if we were to receive that funding and felt like we had more permission to invest in maybe executive officers for schools or a principal support officer or something like that – not an assistant principal, because they have hopefully got their own mostly pedagogical framework and staffing support – we could just be able to take on a lot of that admin OH&S compliance and all of that stuff. OH&S in a special school, as you can imagine, is once again exacerbated with the requirements.

**Ryan BATCHELOR:** It is a really interesting word you used there – the ‘permission’ to do that. We will give some consideration to what we might be able to say as a committee about how the department and their policies and guidance might create that environment where it is permitted, acceptable or expected that there will be that kind of additional support.

**Cameron PEVERETT:** Especially when you are operating like my school – pretty much all specialist schools are operating in a deficit for at least three-quarters of the year – you do not want to be throwing money at admin.

**Ryan BATCHELOR:** Yes, absolutely. Thanks. Thanks, Chair.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you. Ms Gray-Barbiero, over to you.

**Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO:** Thank you very much, Chair. And thank you both, Ms Phillips and Mr Peverett, for being here. If I could just quickly start with you, Mr Peverett. We are hearing you are having to do a lot more to ensure that the environment, the conditions and the retention of educators, especially with specialist skills, are being maintained. What kind of co-design work has the Department of Education done with you at any time to ensure that you are not having to carry this load all on your own? Has there been any kind of commitment or work towards co-design?

**Cameron PEVERETT:** I would say that is in the pipeworks. To this stage, there has not been a strong –

**Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO:** Can you just define that a bit? When you say ‘pipeworks’, are you referring to this year, next year, in the next five years?

**Cameron PEVERETT:** With some of the funding constraints and budget constraints that are happening in the Department of Education at the moment there have been some initial conversations around how we improve the pedagogical practices and supports in specialist schools, mainly through the academy of teaching and learning rather than through the department itself.

**Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO:** Have you reached out to the department at any time?

**Cameron PEVERETT:** Yes. I suppose at the moment there are other priorities that are being explored, particularly through getting the disability inclusion profile funding process sorted out. I do regularly meet with the inclusive education division. That seems to be the main avenue that I get to take.

**Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO:** Are they an arm of the Department of Education?

**Cameron PEVERETT:** Yes. But with that it is still very much more of a broader lens on inclusive education rather than on the nuances that special education requires. I have initially had discussions around whether we could have somebody who has special education experience, maybe an ex-principal or a leader who understands the nuances and can actually help to guide and support the department in what is actually happening on the ground but then also guide and support schools.

**Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO:** And the response has been, or has there been any action taken?

**Cameron PEVERETT:** No. At the moment they are saying that there is no capacity to bring on any new staff at this time.

**Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO:** Do you think this is fair, that children with disability are constantly left behind as an afterthought and being discriminated against because of their disability?

**Cameron PEVERETT:** Our argument for a very long time when it has come to even just changing of curriculum and pedagogical practices is, yes, the department tends to operate from a model where – ‘Let’s capture the 80 per cent first and build that and then –

**Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO:** But is that model geared towards able-bodied children?

**Cameron PEVERETT:** It is geared towards students in mainstream settings who do not necessarily have any disabilities, so the nuance tends to come after the fact and sometimes feels little bit shoehorned into, ‘We have built this now; how do we afterwards try to cater for the rest?’ Sometimes that flow and that equity can be a little bit of a challenge.

**Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO:** I heard you in the beginning when you were talking about credit to carry. You are constantly getting funding reduced – from 10 per cent to 7.5 per cent and now 6 per cent. How does this go towards equity for children with disabilities?

**Cameron PEVERETT:** I think the argument through the department would be that there is a perception that we are holding over funds that should be spent in that particular calendar year. However, as I mentioned earlier –

**Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO:** Do they do that for mainstream schools at all, where they take funding back at the end of the year? Is that a normal practice?

**Cameron PEVERETT:** It is the same, but it is a new model.

**Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO:** Which came in what year, do you know?

**Cameron PEVERETT:** Two years ago, I think it was.

**Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO:** Two years ago.

**Cameron PEVERETT:** Specialist schools do have higher thresholds, so we are able to retain a larger amount from one year into the next. There is some accommodation there, but it is certainly not enough and certainly does not account for the fact that while we do have students who graduate, the vast majority of that funding in that year will be spent on the same students. We need to have a multiyear budget to be able to appropriately accommodate –

**Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO:** I just do not see how it makes sense, because you are operating at a deficit for most of the year. You are waiting for funding that is delayed as it is. You are having to do so much with so little. It is ridiculous. That is not at you, by the way. I am so sorry; I am running out of time, and I really want to come to Ms Phillips.

Ms Phillips, you talk about false economy in your submission and the lack of funding for people with disabilities costing governments more in the long term. Do you believe that this underfunding or this shifting from education is actually going to the welfare system?

**Julie PHILLIPS:** Sorry, I do not quite understand the question.

**Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO:** I will just rephrase it. Do you understand this underfunding as a shifting from education to the welfare system for children with disabilities and their families? You spoke about the Auslan example where an Auslan educator costs \$50,000 but the student only receives approximately \$22,000. Who makes up that shortfall?

**Julie PHILLIPS:** The shortfall is not made up, so then you have the discrimination claims and the complaints. The irony is that government are funding independent disability advocacy organisations and community legal centres. They are being funded to respond to complaints that arise from a lack of funding from government, so you have got this movement of funds around. But I think if you put your focus back on kids with disabilities, children who do not get an Auslan interpreter, who are deaf and need one, do suffer from language deprivation, going back to welfare. When you traumatise children or they are neglected, education is what we call a 'multiplier human right'. It affects all your other human rights after school, because if you do not get an education, what happens is that you are then on welfare, you are on the disability support pension, when you may have been able to contribute to society and pay taxes. Some of these kids are acquiring psychiatric illness from their treatment at school, and when you have language deprivation, you just go straight to welfare. The facts indicate to me that the government does not care about education for kids with disabilities. Do not believe what anyone says; have a look at the facts and the outcomes. Have a look at how many parents are pulling their kids with complex disabilities out of school entirely and into homes, because it is just not working for them. How many disability discrimination complaints are being made? How many complaints are being made to disability advocacy agencies? Compare that over the last 20 years, and you will see that in some cases it is getting worse – restraint and seclusion. What does that tell you? There is just not preparation to put the money in, because they are not seen as worth it. There is no other reason that one can possibly give.

**Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO:** Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** I am going to hand over to Ms Watt now.

**Sheena WATT:** Thank you, Chair. Thank you both for coming in and for your submission. I particularly had a couple of questions for you, Julie, if that is okay. In your submission you talked about how many of your members have made advocacy, particularly around reasonable adjustments. Can you talk to me a little bit about reasonable adjustments in a school setting, funding around reasonable adjustments and what we are seeing? Because I am trying to work out – is it that there is more need, or is there more equipment and other things that are being developed? I am kind of interested in understanding what reasonable adjustment changes are being made in a school setting and therefore what advocacy needs to come around for reasonable adjustments.

**Julie PHILLIPS:** Sure. You probably know that over the last 15 years there has been quite an increase in neurodivergent kids in the system. A lot of those kids have multiple cognitive disabilities – so maybe not just autism but autism, ADHD, severe expressive and receptive language disorder, oppositional defiant disorder et cetera. So that has been a change. What has not changed along with that is an increase in funding. As Cameron said, even though the funding model has changed – and we know even the department found after review that it was absolutely flawed – you have now got this other type of funding which means that for months there is no funding. So what happens during that period of time? The kids that I just described might need a speech pathology-overseen program to help them access classroom teaching because of their severe expressive and receptive language disorder. They may even need a speech pathologist who is expert in augmentative and alternative communication to assist them in setting up a communication device. They might need a behaviour analyst who can come in to examine the environment, if there are behaviours of concern, and work out what the function of those behaviours is, write a behaviour plan, train the staff in the implementation of that behaviour plan, train the staff in the taking of behavioural data and analyse that behavioural data regularly. If we just focus on that behavioural support – and just remember that behaviour is environmental; it is not in the DSM as a symptom of ADHD, for example – that is more money than a school will ever receive through what is now the DIP.

You cannot fit a square peg into a round hole. The Auslan interpreter is just a really easy one, because you have got a person at 55,000 bucks and you have got the kid that, unless they have that person, cannot get an education. But the nuances of complex disabilities for kids who are neurodivergent are huge, and it is just not possible to provide all those adjustments and supports with the money that the schools are receiving.

**Sheena WATT:** Right. That is helpful. Is there anything you want to add about reasonable adjustments in a school setting?

**Cameron PEVERETT:** No. I think, from my end that probably the greatest challenge within mainstream settings is that you do not have the critical mass, I suppose, of specialist schools, so we have more opportunity to be creative and hopefully get those reasonable adjustments in play a little bit easier at times, whereas I know the mainstream schools would often struggle because they just cannot pool their resources in the same sorts of way that we can.

**Sheena WATT:** Are there different experiences really with reasonable adjustments at mainstream schools versus specialised schools that you are talking about? I am trying to work out the inequities here around reasonable adjustments. Is there more than just neurodiversity? Are there other challenges and financial pressures on reasonable adjustments in schools?

**Cameron PEVERETT:** There are around 94 specialist schools in Victoria, and they are of a wide variety of different types, so who they are able to cater for or who is eligible can be quite different. And when we go regional, you will have students who do not sit within that eligibility criteria, so, yes, it does become pretty nuanced.

**Sheena WATT:** No, no, I am just hearing a pretty detailed explanation around neurodiversity as one particular area. Are there other areas of disability adjustments that have some funding challenges?

**Julie PHILLIPS:** Like physical disabilities.

**Sheena WATT:** Are there physical disabilities beyond that are challenged at all? I have done some advocacy around physical access to buildings and other such things. I represent the inner north and right across the northern suburbs, which have some ageing schools where making reasonable disability adjustments is incredibly challenging right now, so I am interested to hear if there is anything.

**Cameron PEVERETT:** Probably the biggest one that keeps popping up and is a challenge for all schools is language disabilities and delays, and how you support students to be able to access their communication both receptively and expressively in a mainstream school where you have 25-odd kids. In special schools you can do it for a whole class and all the students would benefit from it, whereas doing it in a mainstream school can be a little bit more challenging. I think that is where students somewhat lose their voice.

**Sheena WATT:** My reflection was just on some of the adjustments in schools that have heritage overlays and some of the additional challenges. When you are talking about \$250,000 to put a ramp in, these are some enormous financial pressures on schools and their budgets for what ordinarily at another school might actually be far, far less. I am just seeing an equity issue around some of our older schools in some of our more established suburbs. I will leave that one there, and I will return to the Chair if I can. Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Thanks, Ms Watt. I am just going to ask if there are any final comments you would like to make before we finish up at all. I might start with you, Julie, and then Cameron.

**Julie PHILLIPS:** Yes. If you look at the data, the complaints against both types of schools – mainstream and special schools – are pretty well much the same. Even though that is true, you can share resources. The fact is that the needs of those kids are so high that even when you can do that, you simply cannot afford the individual assistance, and they have much higher rates of restraint/seclusion.

To segue – I cannot remember if it was the VAGO or Ombudsman report into what they termed ‘workplace violence,’ which is a terrible term to describe behaviours of concern from kids with disabilities – I would just like to finish by saying that, again, it is just so obvious that kids with disabilities are not able to reach their potential with the current lack of funding that affects the resourcing of schools, mainstream and special schools. Parents should have a choice, and they do not often have one. The department should be starting to produce

data, which it does not have at the moment, in terms of how many of these kids are pulled out of the system entirely. That would really help you, I think, with your considerations. It is really about time, after 20 years of reports, that this issue was addressed. And not everything is about money; a lot of it is about culture and all that sort of thing. But a lot of it, unfortunately, is about money, so you have got to put the money in the front end so you can see great results at the back end and not have so much teacher stress, WorkCover claims et cetera.

**The CHAIR:** Thanks, Julie. Cameron.

**Cameron PEVERETT:** Just to jump on what Julie was saying, I think the proactive access to funding would make a significant difference to our students. To jump on what Mr Batchelor was saying about the outcomes for students in their work, I think that that is something that specialist schools particularly have had to get really creative in doing, because ultimately that is what we want. We want our students to be employable and be able to have choice over what their future holds. Some schools are doing a fantastic job. In my school we have had 100 per cent of students go into employment, mostly in open employment rather than supported, but it takes a huge team and a lot of resourcing in order to do that, and many, many years. Unfortunately, we have to get way more creative, or we ought to, just to make sure these kids are given a fair go.

**The CHAIR:** One hundred per cent. We will finish up there, but thanks once again for the work that you do and also for the evidence that you have given today. We really appreciate it. You will get a proof version of the transcript to have a look over, but from us, thank you. We really appreciate it.

**Witnesses withdrew.**