

# 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

Anasina Gray-Barberio

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Sheena Watt

Richard Welch

**WITNESS**

Tara Burnett, Teacher.

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

**Michael GALEA:** Good afternoon. Michael Galea, Deputy Chair and Member for South-East Metro.

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

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

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

**The CHAIR:** I am not sure, but we might have some members come through online as well, so we will see if they come in or not.

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 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, and you will be provided with a proof version of the transcript following the hearing today. You will be able to make minor changes and corrections as you see fit, but ultimately the transcript will be made public and posted on the committee's website.

Just for the Hansard record, are you able to say your name and any organisation or capacity you are appearing in or on behalf of. Thank you.

**Tara BURNETT:** My name is Tara Burnett, and I am here as a Victorian public school teacher at the invitation of Anasina Gray-Barberio.

**The CHAIR:** All right. Thank you very much. I will now hand over to you for about 5 minutes or so for an intro, and then we will go to questions. Welcome, and thanks very much for coming today.

**Tara BURNETT:** Thank you for having me. I am a public school teacher in the Victorian system. I have been teaching in the Victorian public school system since 2019. Prior to that I also worked as an education support worker while I was completing my qualification, although that was down in Tasmania, which is similar but not directly related to this. During that time I have worked mostly in schools in the northern and western suburbs of Victoria on a combination of short-term contracts followed by ongoing employment. As of two years ago I shifted to casual or relief teaching due to activism outside of teaching bringing me into conflict with section 44 of the constitution and no longer being able to continue in ongoing employment in the public school system.

I entered into teaching because I felt that it was deeply important. I think that almost any teacher – in fact almost any person – remembers the teachers who made an impact on their lives. I wanted to do that for more people, particularly as someone who had a difficult schooling experience myself and particularly for neurodivergent students. I have seen conditions in the Victorian public school system essentially go from bad to worse over that period. The narrative when I first entered the profession was that you can be a teacher but not do a very good job of it if you do what is required of you in the position description and work the hours for which you are paid. That is definitely no longer the case. Now you cannot even hit the bare minimum with that. It requires a whole lot more. And the school funding system is very much a key part of it. There is increased tension between teachers, between parents, between education support workers, between students, between members of the community, not because of specific things being done but just because that environment of shortage creates that crab-bucket mentality and increased uncertainty, increased pressure on teachers and

danger to outcomes for students. We see students succeeding when there is consistency, when there is security, when there is support, and we see a system that is increasingly leading to the stripping away of that.

We saw more than 40,000 teachers out on the streets yesterday, and while the narrative was very much around the pay, that log of claims speaks to the conditions more than anything else. And while some of that is directly part of teachers' contracts, a lot of that is about the funding. There is a reason why the signs were drawing attention to the fact that Victoria has both the lowest paid teachers and the worst funded public schools in the country, and those are symptoms of very much the same cause, the same ideology, the same mentality that causes our entire public education system to feel like it is being milked for all it is worth. The calling-based profession mentality of teachers – every teacher is in there because they care about their students, they care about the classes, they care about the communities that they are part of and can therefore be relied upon to make up the slack when the system is not providing funding for equipment and for classes, funding for support, funding for specialist training for people who work with students with special needs or understanding of that. All of these issues are there and increasing, and all of these are areas where teachers are increasingly making up the slack, which is how I went from teaching into broader activism, and it was that which led me to be invited along to provide evidence today, and I very much thank you for that opportunity.

**The CHAIR:** Thanks very much. And you have almost perfectly timed that as well, so there you go – a good teacher. I am going to –

**Tara BURNETT:** We know when the bell is about to go.

**Ryan BATCHELOR:** Very biased there, Joe.

**The CHAIR:** I am biased. I will hand over to Mr Galea, and we will just go back and forth for questions, okay? So, over to you, Michael.

**Michael GALEA:** Thank you, Chair. Thank you, Ms Burnett, for joining us today. I just want to make sure that I have not missed anything. We do not have a submission from you, is that correct? You are just here to give evidence today.

**Tara BURNETT:** Yes.

**Michael GALEA:** Thank you. You mentioned that Ms Gray-Barberio asked you to appear today.

**Tara BURNETT:** Yes.

**Michael GALEA:** Have you discussed your appearance and what you might say with her or any other members of Parliament?

**Tara BURNETT:** Not with any other members of Parliament. We have discussed that I will be here. She asked whether there were key issues, but a lot of it is essentially what we have already talked about in engaging with her in advocacy for public education.

**Michael GALEA:** Thank you. And you mentioned section 44 issues. Obviously, that is a fairly topical thing that comes up for different people in different parties. I understand you ran as a federal candidate in the election last year for the Greens party.

**Tara BURNETT:** That is correct, yes.

**Michael GALEA:** Are you running this year in the state election?

**Tara BURNETT:** I am not.

**Michael GALEA:** Okay. No worries. That is all I have at this stage. Thank you, Chair.

**Tara BURNETT:** Totally fine. Fair questions.

**Michael GALEA:** Thank you, Ms Burnett.

**The CHAIR:** Thanks very much. I will go to me. I was looking through some of the summary that we got provided here. You have taught mostly English, is that right? English is the method area. Did you have a second one as well?

**Tara BURNETT:** Yes. My method areas are English and humanities. However, I –

**The CHAIR:** I was a humanities teacher too.

**Tara BURNETT:** Yes, most of my work has been in English, and related to that, EAL and VM literacy. Anecdotally, I have not seen anyone collecting data on this, but there seems to be, even more than most teachers, a high degree of burnout in English, which I can largely put down to the fact that marking essays and stories is a lot more intensive and a lot more subjective, leading to more conversations with aggrieved parents and students than something in the STEM sorts of areas.

**The CHAIR:** I do not know how English teachers do it, to be honest. It is a big workload, that is for sure.

**Tara BURNETT:** Yes. By a lot of unpaid overtime, essentially.

**The CHAIR:** I think – where am I seeing it? – you are doing relief teaching now.

**Tara BURNETT:** Correct.

**The CHAIR:** Are you doing it at one particular school, or is it spread around a number of different schools?

**Tara BURNETT:** Yes. Fantastic question. When I first switched to CRT in mid-2024 in advance of my announcement as a candidate, it was unclear whether section 44 would trigger upon my announcement or upon the calling of the election, but I kind of did not want to risk it. But initially it was at a few different schools, just as, you know, schools got to know me. Then last year it ended up being more long term, so I did half a term at a school in Truganina and did two terms at a school in Hoppers Crossing. These are schools that, you know, found themselves short-staffed and kind of knew in advance that they were going to be.

**The CHAIR:** It was CRT, not contract, though.

**Tara BURNETT:** Yes, exactly, essentially because they knew that there would always be gaps to fill, because if you have that many staff, you know that some are going to be sick. This year that has changed. The increase in budget stress at public schools has meant that CRT at the very least has been identified as a place where principals should be watching their budget. So a lot of schools that previously brought CRTs on and could be relied upon as places for regular CRT work are having to go even more last-minute, to be even more short staffed, and having to go to alternatives such as class splitting, combining or study halls, which are worse for the students but are necessary because of budget stress.

**The CHAIR:** We have heard a lot of evidence throughout this inquiry that schools are relying on CRTs to fill gaps for different reasons. I guess what I am trying to understand is, through your experience, are you filling gaps because a teacher is going to a PD or a teacher has a long period of stress leave? What is your experience?

**Tara BURNETT:** It is both. For example, in term 3 last year there was a teacher who was taking a long period of stress leave. In addition to a bunch of other kinds of gap-filling classes, as is typical for a CRT, I essentially covered all of her classes at 0.6 load-worth of classes for term 3. In term 1, on the other hand, it was at a school that had just been expanded but had not managed to get staff in time or some of the staff they got were having trouble with visa issues, as is all too common for teachers with VIT. So I was covering entire classes for students, who had never met the teacher who was going to be taking that class for the rest of the year, for what would have been at least a term but ended up being slightly shorter than that because of the election being called.

**The CHAIR:** Yes. And were you finding at that particular point in time that there was demand for your skills five days a week, or was it three days? Like, what sorts of hours were you working?

**Tara BURNETT:** Yes, full time.

**The CHAIR:** Full time. Wow. Okay.

**Tara BURNETT:** And, speaking to daily orgs at a couple of schools that I have been regular at and stayed in contact with, it is only budget stress that is causing that to not still be the case this year.

**The CHAIR:** Yes. Okay. I guess CRTs talk amongst themselves as well. You would have obviously done that. Are you finding that that is the case with many others that you talk to?

**Tara BURNETT:** One hundred per cent. A lot, you know, are quite shocked and surprised and wondering where all the work is that everybody was getting called in for, not just every day but in advance to ensure that schools were covered throughout all of last year. And this year it has been a really hard pivot, talking to other CRTs. Talking to someone from a CRT agency, it is just a really big thing for schools across Victoria.

**The CHAIR:** Yes. Okay. Well, thanks. My time is up and I am going to pass over to Mr Batchelor now.

**Ryan BATCHELOR:** Thanks, Chair. In the absence of a submission and given you have covered all the CRT questions I was going to ask, I am good for this witness. Thanks.

**The CHAIR:** You are good. Ms Gray-Barberio, over to you.

**Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO:** Thank you, Chair. Thank you, Ms Burnett. We heard from the previous witnesses just before you about disability. In the summary that we have it says you have worked with children with disabilities – deaf, autistic and behaviourally challenged – and you have also worked in the sector for 10 years. Have there been any changes along the way in terms of resources for children with disability?

**Tara BURNETT:** Yes, absolutely. The majority of students who need support are not able to access it. Funding requires that a threshold be met, and my understanding is that it is similar to the NDIS, where it is asked, ‘What is it like on a good day?’ But most days are not good days, so a lot of students who need support are not able to access it. There are also complications where if a student moves schools during the year – and with a lot of uncertainty in employment and in rentals, parents are moving and therefore students are too – that causes increasing disruptions and increasing lack of access. Post the COVID lockdowns there was the introduction of the tutor learning program, where they were often able to – because it was directly supporting students with numeracy and literacy – support students who had those needs that there was not the funding available for. But that has since been phased out as well, so we are finding more and more students coming into secondary schools with identified needs but no support. That is an addition to what a teacher has to deal with and an addition that complicates things when there is no money for CRTs, so that student gets put into a split class or a study hall situation. Essentially there are increasing needs and decreasing resources to deal with them.

**Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO:** Also in your summary, you have taught VCE students. Are there any specific challenges that they are facing at the moment?

**Tara BURNETT:** By far the biggest one for VCE students is the stress of an exam system that does not do a good job of testing what it claims to and instead places a tremendous amount of pressure on students, on parents who carry their children’s stress and indeed on teachers who carry their students’ stress. With regard particularly to special needs students there are some who are able to access provisions and there are others who – essentially a lot of the time it comes down to the luck of the draw when you are filling out the paperwork and knowing in advance what bits to fill out on the paperwork to ensure that you are going to get support. You have students who really need support going into an incredibly stressful environment not only without access to any but specifically prevented from having any, which causes additional tension. Again, referring to the lack of support creating that crab bucket mentality in communities, there is tension between students who can be perceived as needing more support than others but having access to less and specifically being prevented from accessing that support. This is in an environment where, in spite of every year there being a message of ‘You’re not defined by this,’ there is – especially in more working-class and migrant communities – a lot of pressure placed upon the outcome of that. I have absolutely seen multiple students have complete mental breakdowns and be pulled out of school for periods of time. It is horrible.

**Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO:** Thank you. I do not have any more questions. Thank you, Chair.

**The CHAIR:** No worries. That is all right. Ms Watt, over to you.

**Sheena WATT:** Chair, thank you so very much. Our earlier witnesses – I am not sure if you were able to tune in – were representatives of both the Principals’ Association of Specialist Schools and Disability Advocacy Victoria. In their submissions and in the answers to some of the questions put before them they were able to paint a statewide example of the experience of being a teacher and a parent and an advocate around the areas of specialist schools and disability inclusion in our school settings. Through that we were able to ask a range of questions, with particular interest in the lives and experiences of students with a disability. I then had a question about experiences for students with a disability, and my fellow Member for Northern Metropolitan Region down the other end has actually asked you that. So can I just say thank you very much for appearing today, and I appreciate that you had some very thorough answers to the questions placed before us. The work of teachers is always so valuable, and I certainly do not discount the work of our CRTs. I know that we have got an enormous thanks to give to them as they step in and provide really urgent support to our schools and our students in some cases that are really challenging. So to you, can I say thank you very much for being a CRT teacher, one of a sometimes under-recognised group but nonetheless incredibly valuable to our school system. It is in fact CRT teachers that can sometimes see something in students that others cannot see. To you I say thank you very much for doing that. I imagine it is a very challenging time as we face shortages in the sector and so many people that are educators and teachers have chosen to step out of it, including people that I know and are very close to. Thank you very much for stepping in.

I do want to talk a little bit about relief teaching and how that system broadly works. Can you talk to me a little bit about how a shift is assigned for a CRT?

**Tara BURNETT:** Yes, absolutely. I, like a majority, I would say anecdotally, of CRTs, work through an agency most of the time. It used to work with phone calls. These days there is an app and we will see a notification pop up if a school would like us to work there. Some of the people who work at those agencies will, for example, if it is going to be a longer-term booking – for example, a school wants you for a fortnight or even a term – call you in advance. Or if it is a school that you have not worked at and perhaps one that has provided specific challenges to CRTs in the past –

**Sheena WATT:** So you have a profile as a CRT, and you upload this onto the app?

**Tara BURNETT:** Correct.

**Sheena WATT:** So does that mean that you will only be assigned opportunities specialist to your skill set?

**Tara BURNETT:** No. I think that some may prefer that, but I think it is very much, given the teacher shortage, given the last-minute nature of a lot of it, beggars can’t be choosers. So for example, last year when there was a bit more money available to schools, they would book, as I noted earlier, CRTs in advance so that they would know that they had coverage for when teachers were not there. But this year, now that there is less, it has gone back to the old-fashioned way of: you set your alarm; you sit by your phone for 2 hours, hoping for a notification to say that you will be getting paid today. Then you either do drive out to whatever school it is and hope that you get there on time, or you do not and then there is no pay that day.

**Sheena WATT:** Look, I can understand that that is enormously stressful as an operating system, as somebody who was brought up by a family working in similar circumstances on factory floors right across industrial Melbourne. It is a method of work that is very, very challenging. I reckon I might leave it there if that is okay, Chair. I am not sure if we will circle back, but I might have some further questions with the benefit of time. Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Thanks, Ms Watt. That is much appreciated. I have got a couple more quick questions. I do not know if I will need my 5 minutes, but just to be fair I am going to put 3 minutes on the clock to make sure we are all above board and I am not going to go over. I know in your opening before, Tara, you mentioned increased tension between teachers, students and parents. Can you expand on what you have seen in your experience?

**Tara BURNETT:** Yes. For example, schools are essentially required to provide X amount of teacher contact hours, of, like, hours in lessons, and any student-free days, for instance, are going to come out of that. The way that that has been dealt with by some schools is that they reduce the amount of parent-teacher interviews that are available. They might go from one a term to one every two terms to even one every year, because the time off in lieu for teachers does not fit into the budget and the time off for students does not fit into

that. So parents are quite angry at teachers, being like, 'Why aren't you making yourself available?' It is a school problem, but obviously teachers, being the key point of contact for parents, are the ones held responsible for that. Then there comes the pressure from the leadership saying, 'You need to make the time during your planning and marking time to have those conversations with parents.' Teachers are already going to struggle with the amount of planning and marking time available, and then that also comes into conflict with the 30 plus 8 model as part of the VGSA, the *Victorian Government Schools Agreement*, for what is considered acceptable work in various times. I am sure that everybody who has worked in an office has struggled with 'I can't get all this work done because I'm constantly in meetings,' but if you consider a classroom as a meeting, then more than half of the time is in meetings before you add the actual meetings on top of that. So that leaves parents feeling like they do not have enough time, you have got teachers feeling like they are expected to give up even more of their free time to have conversations with parents, you have got students wondering where the communication is actually coming from.

**The CHAIR:** I was going to ask you, do you think these inquiries about the changes in funding, the delay or the cut, is the causation of the tension or a contributing factor?

**Tara BURNETT:** I would say it is a contributing factor. It is very death by a thousand cuts in the school system. Again, all of the media has focused on the pay, but most of the demands are around conditions. A lot of the discussion here is around funding as a major abstract number. There appears to be funding for something flashy, like a new building that someone can do a photo shoot with, but not for ongoing things such as staff to assist with students with needs, or classroom equipment, for instance, which is a massive one even before the spiking cost-of-living concerns.

**The CHAIR:** That is fair enough. I know Mr Galea and Mr Batchelor do not have any more questions, do you? Ms Watt, I might go back to you, if you have got any further questions. If not, we might finish up there because I know Ms Gray-Barberio is out as well. So I will hand it over to you, if you like.

**Sheena WATT:** You gave me the benefit of time to think, and unfortunately, Chair, I must confess that I was not able to come up with a question. But can I just again thank you, Ms Burnett, for the work that you do and for appearing before us today. I will return back to the Chair.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you. It looks like you have answered everyone's questions. Thanks very much for your time today, we very much appreciate it. You will get a copy of a proof version of the transcript to have a chance to have a look through it and everything. But from us, thanks very much. We appreciate it.

**Tara BURNETT:** I appreciate the thanks and look forward to seeing the thanks put into the conditions that we are fighting so hard for, so that we can keep providing for young people and for our future. Thanks.

**Witness withdrew.**