

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

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Tom McIntosh

Aiv Puglielli

Sonja Terpstra

Sheena Watt

Richard Welch

WITNESSES

Elisa Webb, Parent and School Council President, and

Kara Barbuto, Parent and School Council Vice-President, School Council and Parents Association, St Kilda Park Primary School.

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

Michael GALEA: Good afternoon. Michael Galea, Member for South-East Metro, and I am Deputy Chair of the committee.

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

Sheena WATT: Hello. Sheena Watt, Member for the Northern Metropolitan Region.

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

The CHAIR: Thanks very much. 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 thing, you may not necessarily be protected by that same 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 afterwards to make any minor adjustments, but the transcript will ultimately be made public and put on the committee's website.

Just for the Hansard record, are you able to say your full name and the organisation that you are appearing on behalf of, please. I will go to Kara and then Elisa.

Kara BARBUTO: I am Kara Barbuto, and we are here representing St Kilda Park Primary School, the school council and the parents association.

The CHAIR: Thank you.

Elisa WEBB: Elisa Webb. I am the School Council President of St Kilda Park Primary School.

The CHAIR: Perfect, thanks so much. Thanks very much for appearing today. Elisa, I will hand it over to you for a start, and then we will go to questions. Welcome.

Elisa WEBB: Good one, thank you. My name is Elisa Webb, and I am joined by Kara Barbuto. We are the President and Vice-President of the school council at St Kilda Park Primary School. Between us we are also members of the school's committees tasked with fundraising, the fete, education and policy, buildings and grounds, Harmony Week and SKIPPA, which is our parents association.

Our written submission to the inquiry highlighted the concerns we have around funding shortfalls for allied health, literacy and numeracy support. The funding gap is very real and means that children in need of mental health support must be triaged because there is not enough money to meet all of our counselling needs. It means that there is not enough funding to provide all the extra support for children who need intervention to achieve their literacy and numeracy potential. It means we are forced to do more with less due to the number of highly qualified teachers we employ. We are sure you have many similar submissions from schools detailing the impacts on teaching and learning, so we would like to use this opportunity to convey the impact of the funding shortfall on our families and our community.

Voluntary contributions – while we have a relatively high number of families paying voluntary contributions, one year's figure is no guarantee the school will receive the same amount the next year, and this impacts the school's ability to plan ahead. For example, as voluntary contributions are paying for our school nurse and we

have no way of knowing how much will actually be contributed, our nurse is only paid to be onsite between 10 am and 2 pm, and we have only been able to offer them a six-month contract. The families who do pay the voluntary contribution are subsidising the education of the families who either choose not to contribute or do not have the means to do so. While the families who do pay at or above the requested amount do so willingly, they should not have to prop up a government system.

Fundraising – SKIPPA, our parents association, was in previous years a group whose primary goal was to build our community. In order to meet the targets that we have set ourselves as a school to cover necessities not funded by the department, SKIPPA events such as the much-loved jazz in the park event, the winter solstice festival and the lunch order program are now forced to include an element of fundraising. It is exhausting for families to be continually asked to reach into their pockets, particularly when we have some very vulnerable families in our community who simply cannot afford to contribute financially. Private schools who run events like this often raise money for local charities. That is not an option for us. We have become the charity. We have nine fundraising events scheduled at our school this year. I am going to outline the details of just a few of them and the sorts of essential resources we are raising money to pay for.

The Mother's Day lunch raises much-needed funds to cover the costs of school camps for families who would otherwise be unable to send their children on these incredibly beneficial experiences even with government support. We are lucky enough to be a polling booth for elections, which allows us to run sausage sizzles when these events occur. No-one actually wants to spend their Saturday chopping onions or standing in front of a smoking barbecue, but we cannot afford to pass up the opportunity to raise \$3000 when we have the chance. We held our school fete two weeks ago, and this involved an enormous amount of effort from a dedicated group of parents who contributed time, goods and money to help our school raise in excess of \$60,000, which will go towards outdoor infrastructure. Parents devoted countless hours to evening meetings for months beforehand and were onsite for more than 12 hours on the Saturday of the event, along with many of our teachers and leadership team. Parents and teachers also came back on Sunday to clean up and to reset the school so that learning could carry on uninterrupted on the Monday. How can we expect families and staff, particularly staff who are the lowest paid teachers in the country, to continue to devote so many hours of unpaid labour towards an education system that is supposed to be government funded?

Last year fundraising efforts that were slated for upgrading the crumbling benches alongside our basketball court had to be diverted to purchasing \$180,000 worth of laptops and tablets, as mandated by the department, with no funding attached. This policy decision not only derailed our planned maintenance, it also meant that parents paid for devices that are now a department asset. SKIPPA funds paid for new furniture for our grade 3 classrooms over summer because we had no department funds to do so. When the old furniture was put on Marketplace, it was purchased by another teacher in our area, who was paying for it out of her own pocket because her school did not have the money to buy new furniture or to reimburse her.

Public education should level the playing field. Our school receives very limited equity funding, but learning challenges exist in every community. Full funding would enable our school to deliver tier 2 and tier 3 intervention programs. It would reduce the reliance on existing staff to provide fragmented intervention. Victorian government schools are expected to deliver high-quality, evidence-based teaching and early intervention systems that support every student to succeed. However, without full funding of the SRS, schools simply do not have the resources required to do this effectively. The result is an unsustainable burden on families and the avoidable entrenchment of disadvantage on children who most need the department's help.

The CHAIR: Thank you. You are good. Do not worry about the time.

Elisa WEBB: I raced through it.

The CHAIR: I saw you looking up.

Elisa WEBB: I was like, 'Oh crap, I'm not going to make it.'

The CHAIR: No, do not worry. It is just a guide anyway, so it is all good. We are not too strict on it.

Elisa WEBB: Well, they cut you off at the City of Port Phillip in question time – 2 minutes, that is it.

The CHAIR: Well, we are not the City of Port Phillip, so that is all right.

Ryan BATCHELOR: We are much nicer than the City of Port Phillip.

Elisa WEBB: Yes.

The CHAIR: I will hand over to Mr Galea now.

Michael GALEA: We have been saying we should replace these with school bells today. Thank you very much, both, for joining us. I would actually like to start with one of the first things that you mentioned – I might ask you, Ms Barbuto – voluntary contributions. I understand from ACARA’s website that St Kilda Park is, in terms of its socio-economic advantage, one of the more advantaged school communities. That is not to say of course that you do not have particular different issues. But can you give me a sense of how many parents at your school do contribute to the voluntary contributions, and is that a number that is changing up or down?

Kara BARBUTO: This year – and I think last year – it sits at about 70 per cent. That is quite high. I know that there is a school very close to us that is more like 40 per cent, so we consider ourselves lucky to be there. Having said that, the amount has gone up considerably. I think this year it was \$890 per family, whereas in 2018 it was \$460 per family. So it is going up. We know that the percentage of people paying it is going down, but we are still relatively high at 70 per cent.

Michael GALEA: Yes. Thank you. You spoke about the fundraising work that you do, and I am happy that politicians’ elections are a helpful part of that. Can you talk to me about the nature of the school community? What sorts of supports are in place for children, especially those who are a bit more disadvantaged or at risk? Is it mostly through the formal staffing side of the school? Are there elements of what you do through the parents association to support families as well? Can you just paint a picture for that?

Kara BARBUTO: I am not sure about the formal set-up in terms of the teachers and what they are sort of doing there. I know that through the parents association we have some things we have implemented, like free lunch orders – there are a small group of students who receive free lunch orders – and heavily discounted lunch orders. That is just a cost that the parents association bears the brunt of. For our fate there were some students who received free ride tickets so they could still enjoy the fete without having to pay the \$40 to go on those rides. Is that sort of what you are asking?

Michael GALEA: Yes.

Kara BARBUTO: We do try where we can to make sure that those students feel included – they can have a lunch order, they can come to the fete, they can come to the events.

Elisa WEBB: There is also the pantry. We have a community pantry where anyone can just drop off whatever they want to donate to that pantry, and anyone can take anything that they might need from that shelf as well. It is just a no-questions-asked kind of situation.

Michael GALEA: Thank you. I take the full point of the crux of your submission on the SRS funding, but on the peripheral things, such as the Camps, Sports and Excursions Fund, free glasses and dental for kids and breakfast clubs as well – are these things that are taken up by the school?

Elisa WEBB: We do not have a breakfast club. I do not know about the glasses – I do not think that has happened. I know the dental checks do happen – what is that organisation?

Michael GALEA: Smile Squad.

Elisa WEBB: Yes, we have Smile Squad come through. What was the other thing you mentioned?

Michael GALEA: The Camps, Sports and Excursions Fund.

Elisa WEBB: Oh, camps – yes, we do have families that are supported by that fund, but it does not cover the costs of the camps. That is why we have the Mother’s Day lunch.

Michael GALEA: It helps, but it is not – yes. My understanding is that the breakfast program has been rolled out or at least offered to all state schools. Are you aware of why St Kilda Park does not have it?

Elisa WEBB: I could not answer that.

Kara BARBUTO: I am not sure either.

Elisa WEBB: We might have to ask our principal about that arrangement.

Michael GALEA: No problem. You have talked about class sizes as well, and even though we may still compare favourably to the rest of the nation on this front, if they are becoming larger, that is obviously a cause for concern. What is the breakdown like in your school, if you are aware?

Elisa WEBB: I know that it ranges depending on year level. My child is in grade 5 and that is one of the bigger groups. I think there are about, I am going to say, 27 kids in that class. We were running a composite program a couple of years ago, and so the preps, the foundations, were on their own and then every other year level was a composite – 1–2s, 3–4s, 5–6s. I think as part of that whole rollout of explicit teaching it was just easier, and because those gaps were kind of getting wider, it was easier to break that up. There were particular year levels where that was going to be a problem, because that was maxing out the number of students you could have in a class just because of the make-up of the school.

Michael GALEA: Yes. Thank you. I remember I hated composite classes when I was at school. If I get time later, I would like to ask you a bit more about the outcomes of that. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you. I will go now to my set of questions. I have got a few, so I will try and get through them as quickly as I can. Excuse me if I am firing them at you. I think you mentioned in your opening about fragmented intervention – that it is patchy. Tell me in just a bit more detail about that.

Elisa WEBB: The school can identify the kids – now that they have these screening measures, they can identify who needs help, but they do not have the funding. Is it \$6000?

Kara BARBUTO: Yes, so –

Elisa WEBB: I think it is \$6000 this year in funding for intervention, as opposed to just after COVID – what was it? It was more like \$82,000 in 2021 and \$94,000 in 2022. Now we have \$6000 to do that same work.

The CHAIR: That is huge.

Kara BARBUTO: Yes. My daughter began in 2023, and she has had early intervention since she began school. This year, for the first year, the principal told me that she was not going to be able to access it. Because when you have \$6000 across a whole school – she needs some help, but she is not, I guess, critically at risk. I guess she was one of the ones who was sacrificed and not able to access that support. We found it very beneficial, because she was just marginally behind, so it was just closing the gap – she was kind of keeping up. Now this year will be the first year that she will not have access to that.

The CHAIR: Obviously this inquiry is about \$2.4 billion in delays or cuts, whatever you want to call it. Obviously you would be hoping that at least if we got to 75 per cent of the standard, that money would go towards supporting people like your daughter in the way that she needs it.

Kara BARBUTO: Yes, definitely.

The CHAIR: You also mentioned in your submission about school maintenance. I think in your submission you said that your children are trying to learn in facilities that require maintenance and upgrades that the school cannot afford. Can you give me some examples?

Kara BARBUTO: Our school is an older school. I do not know exactly when it was built.

Elisa WEBB: Eighteen-something.

Kara BARBUTO: It is a beautiful old building, but old buildings need a lot of maintenance, and it is just constant.

Elisa WEBB: We have toilets where the tiles are falling off the walls and the doors do not close properly and the buttons are broken. They are just pretty foul, honestly, and kids do not want to go to the toilet at school

because they are just so awful. We have applied for capital works funding to repair them. We have been knocked back, so we are just kind of on our own to raise the money to fix those, which we have not managed to do yet.

The CHAIR: Those sorts of things take a lot of money.

Elisa WEBB: I mean, we do not even need to rebuild it. It could be done pretty cosmetically, and there is just no money.

The CHAIR: Wow. I mean, it is just a basic thing. You know what young kids are like; if they are a bit uncomfortable, they will not go to the toilet. I know that sounds crazy, but it is true.

Elisa WEBB: One hundred per cent.

Kara BARBUTO: We have at least one student I know of who has permission to use the staff toilets because he was holding throughout the day, so it was something that his parents organised with the school.

The CHAIR: And that is obviously having a very real impact on the students that put their hand up and say, 'Look, there's an issue.' But I know what kids are like. Sometimes they do not always talk up and say that there is an issue. Something as simple as that has a very real impact on learning outcomes. You also mentioned the lowest paid teachers, and you obviously saw the strike yesterday. What are you hearing from the teachers that you are connected with at the school?

Kara BARBUTO: I think something that I hear from the teachers is that a lot of them are paying for things out of their own pockets when they are already the lowest paid. I feel embarrassed that that is happening. I think it is embarrassing for our society that that is happening. Both Elisa and I obviously are quite connected to the school and we are on a lot of committees, so we see the hours they are doing. All of the committee meetings happen at 6 o'clock at night to ensure parents can get there, but that is a building and grounds, a fundraising, a finance, an education and policy, a parents association – all those meetings our principal and vice-principal also attend, so they are also coming in at 6 o'clock at night to attend those meetings, and that is their own time. When we had our school fete, our principal and vice-principal were there at 7 am and they were there till 9 pm. On the Sunday they were there the same cleaning, because we did not want to hire a cleaner, because it would have cut into the fundraising money we were trying to raise. I just think it is embarrassing.

The CHAIR: I just had a quick question on the fundraising too. I think you talked about the impact of families and voluntary contributions going to pay a school nurse that you would only have for a six-month contract and from 10 till 2. Is that right?

Kara BARBUTO: Yes, and the reason that it is a short contract is because you do not know who is going to pay the contribution; it is voluntary. So they were hired based on, I guess, a projection of who we thought was going to pay this year or the percentage of parents who would pay, but it is a case of, come mid-year, that will be reviewed and decided upon – if we can afford to keep them. Then it is between 10 and 2, so you are making the assumption that there is no major injury, there is no anaphylaxis, there is no-one who is sick, there is no-one who has epilepsy, there is no-one who needs their ADHD medication at 2:30 or 9:30. So it is –

The CHAIR: A bit of a gamble.

Kara BARBUTO: Yes. It is a bit of a gamble of when something is going to go wrong in the schoolyard, but not ideal – definitely not.

The CHAIR: The best you can do.

Kara BARBUTO: Yes. Previous to that our office manager was office manager/school nurse. She is not qualified. She has done probably basic first aid training, but that was not what she was hired to do.

The CHAIR: My time is up, I am afraid. I am going to hand over. I could probably talk for hours, as we all could probably, but I will hand over to Mr Batchelor.

Ryan BATCHELOR: Thanks, Chair. Thank you both for coming in today. 1882 is when the school was built, part of the wave of new schools that were built in that time in Melbourne, in particular, in Victoria, after

the passage of the *Education Act 1872*, which was world-leading really at the time. Anyway, a diversion – but it is interesting because there are a lot of schools that are having their 150th anniversary. Yours is probably coming up in a few years. It is an issue, particularly in the inner south and the inner east of Melbourne and the inner north. A lot of schools of a similar age are facing similar issues about things like the condition of their toilets, for example, and really having to deal with those, which is why the ongoing need for investment in capital has been pretty significant. So we absolutely understand that, and it is something which we have been hearing a lot as we are out in the community as well.

Your submission talks a little bit about the range of additional allied health type supports that many of the students in the school are requiring. Can you talk through a little bit from a school council's perspective what you are sort of seeing at the school in terms of how things are changing in terms of the range of supports that are required? Then we can talk a little bit more about how to deal with those, but what are you noticing at the school about that range of extra supports?

Elisa WEBB: I think there are more kids presenting with more issues and they are more complex than they used to be. So it is things like speech therapy and occupational therapy – that is one side of it – but also the part that I really find just kills me is the mental health support. We cannot help everybody. There are kids that need emotional support, that need critical psychological support because they are at risk of suicide. We have to help that kid, which means we cannot help the five other kids that are waiting behind that child. I just cannot believe that we cannot help all these families that need it, and if we cannot help them, then they are forced out to the private system or the public system. But either way, there are massively long waiting lists. If they go private in an attempt to get help earlier, that is incredibly expensive, even with a mental health plan from Medicare.

Ryan BATCHELOR: When you say 'go private', you mean help through the private health system?

Elisa WEBB: Yes, seeing a private psychologist.

Ryan BATCHELOR: We had the principals in earlier today, and one of the things that they talked about – and we heard from a prior inquiry this committee did – was on the really increasing expectations that are being placed upon our schools to do a whole lot more stuff: deal with not only teaching kids how to read and write but also be a place where that broader range of support services is provided – obviously we would like to be able to. How do you see the connection and engagement between schools and other platforms for support services, whether they be community health or council-run programs? What role do you see schools playing in being a bridge to provision? Or should they be trying to provide things themselves?

Elisa WEBB: I mean, I think it is interesting when you have schools that are built in a hub where the maternal child health centre is there and the kindergarten is there. I think that model kind of works to provide that wraparound kind of service a bit more easily. But from where we are, it is all just people coming in to help kind of on an ad hoc basis. We do have a lot of kids who need extra support in the classroom for things like developmental delays, autism, ADHD and that kind of thing. Again, the funding model is broken. We have to pay up front for those services because those kids need that help, but we do not know that we will get the funding until September of that calendar year, and so we just have to hope that what we have spent will be covered by what the department provides.

Ryan BATCHELOR: What are the challenges that emerge from that sort of timing issue?

Elisa WEBB: It just means at every council meeting we look at the budget and we go, 'Well, that looks pretty bad. But we are hoping that the disability inclusion funding will come through and cover that shortfall.' But it is the same kind of thing as the school nurse: we do not know what we are going to get. We cannot rely on – if we could guarantee that every kid who needed help of whatever kind –

Ryan BATCHELOR: And would that be from one year to the next? Do the kids who are getting support one year normally get it the next year?

Elisa WEBB: I think it depends on what their issue is. With occupational therapy, you can kind of get to the point where they do not need that support as much. Same, I think, with speech therapy, but it really depends on the child and what their particular requirements are.

Ryan BATCHELOR: Thanks, Chair.

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

Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO: Thank you very much, Chair. Thank you both for being here and for your submission. The \$2.4 billion shortfall, from what I am hearing, has translated into a lot of barriers and challenges for the parents, for the students, teaching staff, all the way up to the principals. I just want to talk about access to what I think is really important, such as a school nurse. You are having to fundraise and, if you could just correct me if I am wrong, 70 per cent of parents pay the voluntary payments. So that is about, did you say, \$890 per year? That is what it is right now?

Kara BARBUTO: Yes.

Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO: Effectively that is upwards of \$200,000, the cost shifting towards parents going in to make up the shortfall that the government really should be providing, but because of the underfunding you are having to raise, or at least financially voluntarily make up those costs. That is a lot of money, I have to say.

Elisa WEBB: And that is just the start.

Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO: Yes, just the start. I mean, you said there are nine fundraising activities throughout the year. There is no guarantee of you receiving funding in September, so you are putting a lot of blind faith into the government that they will come through for your parents, for your students, for your teachers and everyone in the school system. I just want to hear from you – accountability. Who is accountable here?

Elisa WEBB: Yes, it is difficult. When we are talking about this stuff with the school community about fundraising and what we are going to raise money for and a bit about why we need it, particularly around the strike and everything, we are very careful not to say we are poor managers of our school budget. It is not because we cannot manage the funds that we have, it is because the funds that we have do not cover the requirements that we are expected to deliver. We have a lot of teachers who have been at the school for a long time, and so they are at the upper limit of their pay scale, but you just get this much money for teaching staff. It does not matter whether that has to cover a whole bunch of new graduates at that entry-level pay rate or whether all of your teachers are at the higher level, you just have to make do with what you are given. It is really frustrating, and it is exhausting that we are constantly asking for money and constantly thinking about how we run this event so that it is fun for the kids and it is nice for the families to all get together and talk to each other but also that we can make some money. It should not be like that. It should not be that we are papering over the cracks in the funding system of public schools. And it is only because we do have quite a number of really generous families who are able to contribute above and beyond that we can even get to the point that we are raising the amount of money that we are because –

Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO: But even that is not a guarantee, as you said earlier, because you do not know what is going to happen the following year, if you are going to have the same amount of funds.

Elisa WEBB: Yes, that is right. And things happen. I have not paid our voluntary contribution yet this year, because I was made redundant. I will pay it, but I have not yet. So, you know, you cannot –

Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO: How is all of this interacting with cost of living?

Elisa WEBB: Yes, that is definitely having an impact as well. When the school is setting that voluntary contribution amount for each year level, there is always the consideration that costs are going up. Where is the point where we can say ‘This is how much we need’, but it is also an amount that we feel like the highest number of families can afford to contribute? Because if you put it higher, the percentage of families able to contribute drops lower.

Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO: We heard from principals associations earlier this morning about framing the language used around funding, that it is seen as like an expenditure item versus an investment into students, their future and agency and autonomy. What would you say, in terms of the \$2.4 billion that is being underfunded into the public school system, is the ripple effect, and how is this intensifying the disadvantage and inequities happening in our schools?

Elisa WEBB: It means the kids who need help do not get it. It is the kids who need it most that suffer, the kids who maybe need extra support and are not at that critical level within the school. Maybe their families do have the means to get a tutor outside of school or somehow support them outside of the system. They might close that gap and meet their potential or achieve their potential, but the kids who do not have that option at home, the public school system lets them down. The gap is just widening and widening, and it is not the fault of those children. You should be able to receive the same education at your public school as everybody else, regardless of whether your family can contribute, regardless of where you live and what your school's socio-economic make-up is. It should not matter, and it does.

Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO: Thank you so much.

The CHAIR: Thank you. I will hand over to Ms Watt.

Sheena WATT: Thank you, Chair; and thank you both for appearing before us today and for your very thoughtful and considered submission. I went to a neighbouring primary school, Elwood. I will just put that on the record – very briefly, I must confess.

The CHAIR: Great school.

Sheena WATT: Great school – an outstanding experience there. I want to ask about teacher retention, because there are some incredible teachers around your way. What are some of the initiatives that the school council and perhaps the parents association are involved in to contribute towards staff retention? That is something that you highlighted in your submission that I am particularly keen to hear from you about.

Kara BARBUTO: I think we are lucky to have some really longstanding staff, which also makes it harder, because they are at the upper end of the pay scale. When you get given your amount per year per student it does not really work, but that is a different question. I would say the parents at our school love our teachers. We really try to show them that. I know there are small things; this morning we had all our children wear red to tell them that we supported them in what they did yesterday. For World Teachers Day we always pay for them to have a lunch. I know there was some money that was put towards their end-of-year staff Christmas function. We do try, in whatever way we can, to make them feel loved, because we do not want them to leave.

Elisa WEBB: Partly because of groups like SKIPPA we do have quite a strong community at our school, and we do have families that are really committed to making the school the really special, inclusive, slightly different place that it is compared to some of the other schools around us. I think the teachers appreciate that environment as well. It is a symbiotic thing. The teachers are there because the families that are in the area want this education where they call their teachers by their first name, where the kids do not wear a uniform, because they are allowed to just be whoever they want to be. It is quite a different environment, and I think it really works for our community. That is one of the reasons why teachers tend to stay, because it is just such a wonderful, lovely – at times it feels like a bubble, but it is a beautiful bubble to be in.

Sheena WATT: That it is. Thank you so very much. You have got some other very interesting initiatives that I am keen to have you talk about, and they are about sustainability. It seems to be a very strong value of the school community, sustainability. Is there anything you want to talk to me about what you do there and what additional funding costs are met by the school community to make that value real in the school community?

Elisa WEBB: We have an amazing kitchen garden program. It is really just the most beautiful garden, but it is kept running as it is by the volunteer work of one of our teachers, who works two extra days unpaid to keep the garden and do all the weeding and the planting and the whatever. We have a member of the community who is retired who comes in to do extra work in the garden as well every week. On the year levels that do the kitchen garden program, we can only afford to run it for grades 3 and 4. Those families are charged a little bit extra in their voluntary contribution or asked for a little bit extra to cover the costs of purchasing extra ingredients and just running that program. We have a 'recycling for good things' box. Every so often there are a bunch of kids who help tip out the box of cans and bottles – the 10-cent recycling cans.

Sheena WATT: I was going to ask about resource-smart schools. Is that something that you are involved in? Because there are a whole range of funded sustainability initiatives like support for the CDS or resource-smart schools that many schools participate in.

Elisa WEBB: I do not know. We have got water tanks. Have we got solar panels? I think we do. We have done a little bit of that stuff. We won a prize for our kitchen garden last year. We won a prize for our scarecrow at the Melbourne International Flower and Garden Show last year. But all those little bits of \$1000 here, \$5000 there, \$500 here for little bits and pieces go towards keeping that program running and buying mulch and all the sorts of stuff that we need.

Sheena WATT: It is a very unique offering that you have.

Elisa WEBB: Yes.

Sheena WATT: I want to have it highlighted because it is not so common in some of our newer schools and those that have a very different footprint. But thank you very much, and I might return to the Chair for the remainder. Thank you. Back to you, Chair.

The CHAIR: Right. We have still got about 10 minutes left. I thought I might do a bit of a rapid-fire round where everyone has got a minute. It is not speed dating. Who would – I am a bit reluctant to make you go again, Sheena, but I was going to go all the way down here. But are you happy to go first, or do you want me to let someone else?

Sheena WATT: I wanted to talk about your roof.

The CHAIR: All right, you go first.

Elisa WEBB: Okay, yes. It was great when my kid came home – were they in grade 3 then? ‘Mum, we have got buckets in our classroom because our ceilings – when it rains, there is water in the class.’ I am like, ‘Yes, cool.’

Sheena WATT: It is a very unique challenge of our inner-city schools. My colleague here, Mr Batchelor, spoke to it because we have got some older schools that have some really big, expensive capital asks layered with some heritage considerations. Is that something that you feel more acutely with your school than perhaps some of your neighbours?

Elisa WEBB: Yes, we had to have that roof completely replaced and it is that heritage slate. It had to come from Canada. It had the lead flashing.

Kara BARBUTO: It looks good.

Elisa WEBB: It looks beautiful, and now there are no birds nesting in it and there is no water in the classrooms. But initially I remember our principal Neil applied for funding with the VSBA to do that work. They said, ‘You could have’ – I do not even know, some very small amount of money. He went back and said, ‘That’s not going to cut it.’ So then they took over the project, but still he was the project manager and it blew out. It just took forever. It was a total nightmare. There was scaffolding all over the school. It had to be done but –

Sheena WATT: I appreciate that.

Elisa WEBB: It means that, yes, that is the capital investment that our school has had, as opposed to maybe we would like to build a hall. We do not have anywhere indoor for our school for everyone to fit. So we have assemblies outside, rain, hail or shine.

Sheena WATT: All right.

The CHAIR: I will hand over to Mr Batchelor.

Ryan BATCHELOR: Roofs – I deal with a number of schools in this part of the world that have got beautiful old slate roofs. Some of them now have beautiful new slate roofs and they look great. I do not have anything else. I was focused on the roof and I could not get my mind off the roof. But I am going to come out and have a look, I am sure it looks great.

Elisa WEBB: Yes. We also – another piece of capital works that had to happen, which was again not something that we chose to do but had to be done, was we had mould in the flooring of our art room and kitchen garden room, so the whole lot had to be ripped out. They redid it all, put it back in, again it took way longer than anticipated, just blew out for weeks and weeks and weeks. We had to have kitchen garden sessions in the staff room.

Ryan BATCHELOR: Do you have issues with – speaking of Elwood Primary, do you have issues with movement of the building?

Elisa WEBB: I do not –

Kara BARBUTO: I think when that mould was found, it was rising damp and then – I am not a builder so I do not know – but from what I understand, they found that our rainwater plumbing goes under the ground but is not connected to anything. It just goes under the ground, and so there is movement because it is not –

Ryan BATCHELOR: There is just water.

Kara BARBUTO: Yes, yes.

Ryan BATCHELOR: 1882.

Kara BARBUTO: Yes.

Elisa WEBB: Exactly. That is not even the old part of the building. That part of the building is from the 70s, I think. So it was not even the 1882 excuse.

Kara BARBUTO: Yes. Right.

Ryan BATCHELOR: 1970s then, yes.

Kara BARBUTO: I think it is just one of those constant things of you are always like, ‘Do we try and do a big job and fix it?’ We are more sort of bandaiding. We are just ‘Well, bandaid that.’ And it is –

Ryan BATCHELOR: It is a big challenge.

The CHAIR: Mr Galea.

Michael GALEA: I am trying to stop myself from launching into this discussion too, because it is very fascinating. I am sure we could extend it much further. Explicit teaching, phonics – it would be great to hear your feedback on how that has gone in your school. The last time this committee looked at education, it was just being announced and we had very good feedback at the time. Early results at the broader level are good, but how is it working in the schools?

Kara BARBUTO: I think in our school it is working really well. I think in the beginning the kids found it hard. It was a big change. I know my children were coming home saying, ‘It is so much learning. I am so tired.’ I think particularly our leadership at our school heavily invested in trying to do it the right way and researching and collaborating with other schools that were sort of leading in that area. And I feel like it is going well.

Elisa WEBB: Yes, I think they are definitely seeing results. It will be interesting to see what happens with the NAPLAN results this year, but I think they have definitely seen evidence that it is catching, especially for the younger year levels and the kids that all have started with that model in foundation and will be going through. I think it will really benefit them.

Michael GALEA: As they move through the system – great to hear. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Obviously this inquiry is looking into the \$2.4 billion worth of funding cuts to education. What is the main message that you want to send to the government, particularly given that this committee is going to make recommendations and findings? What is the message you want to send?

Elisa WEBB: Pay the money.

The CHAIR: Restore the funding?

Elisa WEBB: Yes. Obviously budgets are tricky and the context of the budget at the moment obviously is very complex, but to call yourself the Education State and not fund public education at the level that everybody agreed to fund it at is just outrageous. It has this effect where all the news reporting, rightly, is drawing attention to it, but it scares families off and they go, 'I can't send my kid to a school where they're not going to get the help they need. I'm going to send them to the private system.' It is a self-perpetuating problem.

Kara BARBUTO: I think we also need to consider the future of teachers. Our kids spend 40 hours a week at school. They are not just learning reading and writing; they are shaping who our kids become, their motivation, how they view themselves, their empathy levels, how they see the world and what they learn about racism. It is not just reading and writing. I think to myself all the time, 'I don't want my child spending 40 hours a week with someone who feels undervalued, burnt out and exhausted.' You want them to be with people who are happy, motivated and positive about life. That, to me, is more important than the reading and writing part, because that has an effect on our children's mental health and how they view themselves. Not even just for now but for the future of teachers, we want people to take up this profession. I know, personally, my two babysitters are both teaching students, and they have both said to me they have no intention of ever being teachers. They want to just do CRT work because supposedly they get paid more by doing CRT work – by never actually staying in a classroom in a school full time. That to me is worrying. I do not want my child to be taught by casual relief teachers that are constantly changing, who they cannot bond with or feel motivated by.

The CHAIR: The relationship is just not there.

Kara BARBUTO: Yes, the relationship is not there. I think it is scary for the future of teaching staff.

The CHAIR: Yes. Thank you very much. Ms Gray-Barberio.

Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO: Thank you, Chair. I think you have described where the system is going, and we have heard evidence around the instability, the uncertainty and the lack of familiarity that comes with the revolving door because of the workforce challenges being presented to our teachers, who are doing such a wonderful job. We have heard evidence today that the delay of the \$2.4 billion assumes that children can wait. This includes your children as well.

I am really concerned about the toilet issue because of the health implications that it has for kids. With one child being able to use the teachers' toilets, what happens to all the other kids and the continence care around that? I mean, no child can learn properly if they are sitting there and they are busting to go to the toilet and cannot do that because they are afraid of the condition of the toilets. Do you have any final comments you want to make?

Kara BARBUTO: My son is in foundation, and he says he does not use the toilets at school. The general consensus is that they are scary because they have got paint peeling off the walls, the gap in the bottom of the cubicle is this big and people can look under and they are just considered not a nice place to be. You are right; that should be a basic human right. Having a toilet where you feel like you can go should be a fundamental. I do not even know what to say about that. I just think it is crazy that they are not being better maintained and looked after. You have got students that are getting into years 5 and 6, when puberty hits and things are happening, and they need to feel like they can use the toilets. It is crazy, yes.

Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO: Thank you.

The CHAIR: That brings this session to a close. I want to thank you again for your evidence and the time you have taken to come and be here today. You will be provided with a proof version of the transcript. Once again, thanks very much. We really appreciate your time.

Witnesses withdrew.