

T R A N S C R I P T

LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY ECONOMY AND INFRASTRUCTURE COMMITTEE

Inquiry into Student Pathways to In-demand Industries

Warrnambool – Wednesday 25 March 2026

MEMBERS

Alison Marchant – Chair

Kim O’Keeffe – Deputy Chair

Roma Britnell

Anthony Cianflone

John Mullahy

Nicole Werner

Dylan Wight

WITNESS

Matt Porter, Co-founder and Executive Officer, Neil Porter Legacy.

The CHAIR: Welcome to the public hearings for the Legislative Assembly Economy and Infrastructure Committee's Inquiry into Student Pathways to In-demand Industries. All mobile telephones should now be turned to silent.

All evidence given today is being recorded by Hansard and broadcast live on the Parliament's website. While all evidence taken by the committee is protected by parliamentary privilege, comments repeated outside of the hearing, including on social media, may not be protected by this privilege. Witnesses will be provided with a proof version of the transcript to check.

Thank you so much, Matt, for coming along today and talking about your organisation and what you do. We really appreciate it. We do not really have a lot of time for opening statements, but do you want to just give us a little feel about who you are and what you do first?

Matt PORTER: Yes. We are the Neil Porter Legacy. We are a not-for-profit charity that is in memory of my father. We work with every secondary school in the Moyne, Corangamite and Warrnambool shires to include modern careers education as part of every student's schooling.

The CHAIR: Fantastic. That must be a busy role, though, doing that.

Matt PORTER: It is good. We have expanded our team to six people, up from two or three, so that is good. Yes, we are getting some progress.

The CHAIR: Considering we are in Roma's patch, we are going to let Roma ask the first question. Thank you.

Roma BRITNELL: Matt, just for a bit of background, I was explaining to my colleagues here that we have had a long time where we have struggled to get employees into workplaces, and you guys sort of got together because you recognised that. We had TAFE here prior to you, and some six or seven years ago it was not uncommon to hear that industry was just not feeling like the flexibility was there to deliver the students, for the workplace to be appropriate – you know, they needed to be going out and going to TAFE when it was not appropriate, at the busiest times, all that sort of stuff.

Matt PORTER: Yes.

Roma BRITNELL: And we have also had a really interesting program that you have got your joint submission with, Beyond the Bell, which recognised that we were not doing the right thing by our kids to make sure we were putting them through the pathways of either tertiary – university – or VCAL, VETs. So we have been looking at this for over a decade. Do you think, with our TAFE system and our RTOs, that we have actually turned around that challenge that industry has seen? You are not able to speak for Beyond the Bell, but the data that we have collected – is that proving stuff that we can put to government to verify why we need specifically different ways to do things, which is what you rose out of?

Matt PORTER: Yes. Dad passed away in 2018, and from that we created scholarships in his memory. He was someone who was one of the first ones to do the work placements for vocational students, so he had great industry contacts. After two years of the scholarships we were getting good business support, and a local businessperson went, 'The schools are very insular. Industry are trying to get in there. They can't.' But it is the same thing. We understand – I am an ex-teacher. Schools are so busy, they do not have time to ring five different industries and see which one will work with them. So yes, I think we have broken down a lot of barriers between the schools and industry to, say, when I went through school in the 90s – secondary school – if you were an industry, you could just ring the career adviser and say, 'I've got a building apprenticeship,' and you would get 70 applications and you would get to pick the cream of the crop. Now it has changed and employers need to be able to say to the young people, 'This is what we offer and this is why it's a great career,' because they have got so many options. But how do they connect? Because an industry will ring a school and they might get the wrong person or the message might not get through to the right person, and then they say schools are not doing their job, which is not true, it is just the communication barrier. So we have started from industry to go, 'We're just going to be the connectors.' We can talk education and we can talk industry because our board has several people who own several businesses. We have got the Department of Education and things like that. We are just connecting, because in the past, the schools were so – and it is still an issue – just 'ATAR,

ATAR, ATAR, uni, uni, uni.’ An example is a careers adviser. A Department of Education person went to a local secondary school and they spoke, and then the Department of Education person went, ‘Why are students disengaged? Why aren’t we getting them into apprenticeships? Why do we have skills shortages?’ And he said, ‘I will tell you the problem. You’ve been here 45 minutes and you’ve only talked about uni, VCE. Now, that is 15 per cent of our students. What about the other 85 per cent that you haven’t even asked about?’

We do not think that it is the school’s job to make a workforce, but it is the school’s job to make school leavers confident in their career path and with the ability, like career mobility, to move in different directions. We want students to be informed of their choices, and I think some of the issues are that you have industries going, ‘Right, let’s put \$200,000 into ag.’ But then when you ring the school to say, ‘We’re running this ag program,’ they go, ‘Well, no, we’ve planned our curriculum for the year,’ which is fair enough. They know whoever is running the ag program has got an ulterior motive, because they are trying to get employees. Whereas we do not have any KPIs and we do not have any specific industries we are trying to support. We are just, ‘Let’s make the connections so the students can actually see the careers, experience it and talk to employers so then they can make informed choices.’

Roma BRITNELL: Are the employers in industry feeling more like they are getting kids that the TAFE, for example, can flex to meet the employer’s needs so that child can go through the education of having a supportive environment to be learning in and be able to meet the workplace needs for that skill set they are acquiring? Is that still the challenge?

Matt PORTER: Yes, I think that is still a challenge. One of the main problems is that the school is so focused on academics that the students want to leave and their parents say, ‘You can only leave if you’ve got a job,’ so they take the first job they are offered, they last a month or two and they go, ‘No, this career isn’t what I thought it was.’ They have not had any experience in it; they have just used it to finish up at school. So then you have the low completion rates, and maybe that affects TAFE as well because the apprentices are not completing their courses. I think we do need to do more.

Roma BRITNELL: Can I just drill down on that. We have changed that children cannot leave school now until a lot later. So are you saying if we can support them to stay in school but go to different industries? We heard from TAFE about the taster availability to keep them engaged until they find that place they feel comfortable to develop their career in.

Matt PORTER: Yes. Our theory is based on the Timboon Agriculture Project, who will speak later – the TAP. They make careers a part of their whole schooling, and that is our approach, but with more schools and not only agriculture. From years 7 to 12, what we want to do – and what we do – is year 7 teachers teaching angles in maths: why learn it from a textbook when you can go to a building site and have a builder go, ‘I can tell you the angle of that truss using this formula. I don’t have to measure it.’ So then you are not ramming careers down a student’s throat, but they are getting careers as a by-product of what they are learning in the classroom. And you have students, say, a year 9 class is doing legal studies. We have this example – it might have been year 9 or 10. They are doing legal studies, and they are studying class actions. So we organised for them to go to Maddens Lawyers, who talked about a class action that they had run, so it was a real-life example of a music festival, which was relevant to the students. And now the students learned the curriculum, but they have also got careers as a by-product. They have spoken to a lawyer, they have had chances to ask questions, and it is also giving the employer a chance to connect with young people before they finish school. Because what is happening at the moment is students get to year 10 – and it is not the school’s fault; they are under-resourced – and we say, ‘Right. You’ve got to pick your subjects for year 11, and it’s going to affect your future life, your uni, your career.’ It does not. Like, there are so many different pathways. But how do we fund? We cannot fund career advisers. If you want them to do the job we expect them to do, you would need 50 per school. We have, for example, locally one person who has a day a week to work with 800 students. How do they do that? So by the time the kid gets to year 10, you have lost them.

We value the career advisers and the teachers, but we want to work with the students from year 7 to 12 to get them into industries and see the careers. We are not taking time off the teachers, because the curriculum is so crowded. We are not going, ‘We need 10 hours a week of your curriculum.’ We will fit in with what they are teaching. But then careers are everyone’s responsibility. The employers need to, and they do – we worked with 350 businesses last year or something – put time in with the students during their schooling so then when it comes to decision time for what career they are going to do, they have got experiences. Then that would

hopefully help the TAFEs and the unis because the students have had experience and exposure to it and the employers would be used to being part of young people's education. So then they could work with TAFE if they needed to and say, you know, 'This course needs to include this, this and this.' Because at the moment employers only get contacted by schools to host the work experience, to host the work placement or to give them sponsorship.

Roma BRITNELL: Good. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Anthony.

Anthony CIANFLONE: Thank you, Chair. Thank you for appearing, Matt, and for the submission. It is a very comprehensive, great submission. Just talking about how your foundation facilitated over 7800 hours of career education, 18 schools and 2400 students supported – that is really phenomenal and something that your dad I am sure would have been really, really proud of.

Matt PORTER: Thank you.

Anthony CIANFLONE: And that is why, to pick up from Roma's point, my question is around the role of your organisation and not-for-profit organisations. I mean, how can the Victorian government, through this committee hopefully, leverage your work and further look to embed and ingrain your work between the schools, the TAFEs, the industries? If you are doing something that is working so well, how can that be better supported potentially from a government point of view?

Matt PORTER: There are a few things. It will cost us 600 grand to run this year, and that is all raised through local businesses, grants, philanthropic groups. We realise that is not going to be sustainable forever. We are asking businesses for their time, but they also hopefully get something out of our programs – exposure to young people. But then we also ask them to support us. But because we are independent, we will not take money to say, 'We'll get you five panelbeaters or five lawyers'. We just say, 'You support our work to show young people all their opportunities.' Yes, so funding is a massive thing. The paperwork to take students out – we are having ridiculous troubles with some schools. Some schools require over a month's notice to take students into industry. Some schools are filling out the Department of Education's risk assessment form. I do not know if you have seen that; it is, like, a five-page document. They are filling that out, never having been to the business. How does that make anyone safer if the teacher is just guessing and they have never been to the actual venue? So that is a requirement. And we are having teachers say, 'Well, it's too hard to take students into industry. I've got to do all this paperwork.' And we are not risk-takers. If a student gets hurt in one of our activities, we are finished, which – obviously we want to keep doing our work. So we are very cautious, but so are local businesses. We need to put some trust in them. We have one of the gas operators in Port Campbell. A teacher wrote, 'A student might be exposed to a gas leak or trip over a cord,' and we are, like, 'No, they're a \$100 million business; they're not having cords across their hallways.' What we have done is we have got a volunteer from the local Rotary who used to run her own work safe business – not WorkSafe officially but that area. She volunteers. We say, 'Right, we're going to these businesses in the coming months,' and she goes in and fills out the risk assessment with the business. Some schools want the person's working with children check or their insurance certificate.

It would be a massive help for us – and people from the Department of Education have been trying to help us for nearly a year – if instead of the business being the risk assessment focus our organisation could be the focus of the risk assessment. Instead of 'We're going to this gas operator', it would be 'The Neil Porter Legacy are running this excursion. This is the Neil Porter Legacy's safety operation, and this is our insurance.' We are all ex-teachers. We have still got teaching registration. Because what you find is you have generous businesses that might host six different schools. They are getting rung by all six schools: 'Can you do this risk assessment?' And it is the same info. We are trying to pool that data so we can just send it off to the schools, but then you also have businesses going, 'What do you want this info for?' So that paperwork is a massive barrier.

And just changing the philosophy of careers and teaching – as I have said a couple of times, there is so much focus on, 'You've got to learn this because it's going to be on the test, and then you've got to get a good ATAR.' Where is the focus on learning this because you are interested in it and you could get a really cool, rewarding career? We had a group from one of the regional schools. There were only four students in the class doing chemistry. We took them out to Deakin's Hycel, where they make hydrogen, and they powered a toy car.

I said to a female student in year 12, 'Has this been good?' And she goes, 'Yeah, I've been learning this stuff out of a textbook for a term, and now I can actually see it, and we've powered a toy car with it.' She goes, 'This is unreal. Like, I get it.' And then I said to the teacher, 'Did you hear that? Next term we'll take you to a forklift place that uses hydrogen to power their forklifts.' She goes, 'Oh yeah, we'll have to look at the curriculum and see if we can fit it in.' We need some balance between – we are not just creating a generation of academics. How do the students use that knowledge? Connect them to the careers that they are interested in, and then I believe we will fill these in-demand roles. But at the moment the students – do you reckon they know 5 per cent of the jobs, 10 per cent of the jobs? How do they know these careers?

The CHAIR: You would see that, obviously, going into schools. They do not.

Matt PORTER: Yes, we are in schools every day. At the moment every student that is doing vocational wants to be an electrician. It is hard to be an electrician, because they have changed the guidelines. You have to have an A-grader with the apprentice over the whole four years, so that is affecting the electricians. There are so many students that want placements, but they only know 'electrician'. If a student is looking for a placement – and this happens with some schools as well – they look up the phone book or the internet to look up all the electricians. They do not realise Fonterra has electricians and the hospital has electricians. They do not realise about those positions. We went to the hospital. I only learned this a couple of weeks ago; they have biomedical engineers, I think they call them, that work on the heart-rate monitors and all the machines. If you want to be an electrician and you cannot get a job with an electrician, you are still working with wires and similar things in the hospital. You are in demand, so you are going to get a good wage, and you are going to get looked after.

I think we also need to say to young people that they do not need to pick a job title and say, 'I'm a builder.' You might just say, 'Right, I like working with my hands.' These are all the options you can explore working with your hands. Also I think it is unrealistic to expect the career advisers to know 12,000 jobs and all the local businesses. So that is where we are lucky. We have worked with hundreds of businesses. We are trying to formalise that relationship so possibly in the future you could have in the career adviser's office a website with all the local businesspeople that would donate 10 minutes of their time. The student could go into the office and if they want to be an accountant, book in 10 minutes online to chat with an accountant in two weeks. You would just sit in the careers adviser's office, but you could talk to someone who is working in that industry. I have probably gone off track, have I?

The CHAIR: No, you are all right.

Matt PORTER: The other thing I think is all the students need all of the options. At the moment they are not getting told all the information. They get separated into vocational and tertiary. We have, I know for a fact, talked to parents where they say – in this instance, it was a son – 'My son wants to be a builder, and the school said, "You're too smart to be a builder."' And he said, 'Well, he can be a smart builder at your school or he can be a smart builder down the road.' What are we saying to students? Because if that boy wants to be a builder and we make him be a dentist or something that is high prestige, he is not going to be mentally happy and he is not going to stick with it. I think we need to say, 'Yes, be a builder, be a smart builder and you will probably run your own company in 10 years.'

The CHAIR: Yes. We have heard about just having the breadth of knowledge of career advice that students are not getting. You are right; they do not know what their options are out there. I am going to go to Kim for a question. I will head to you, Kim.

Kim O'KEEFFE: Hi, Matt. Thank you so much. This would be by far one of my most favourite presentations that we have had along the way. Your passion is absolutely incredible and thank you. From your dad's legacy to your work, it is incredible, you absolutely obviously want to make kids have great careers and great opportunities, so thank you.

Matt PORTER: Thank you.

Kim O'KEEFFE: I am based in Shepparton, so a very large multicultural community and quite a significant rate of disadvantage. There is nothing more important to me than making sure we give kids opportunity and education pathways. I hope you could maybe model your model across the state, because you are filling many of the gaps that we have heard about: obviously the career advisers through to choice, through to stigma around choosing the career that is right for you. One of the things I would like to ask you is

particularly about disadvantage and multicultural communities and connections with families, because families play such a significant role in those choices and in guiding their children. How do you see that? How do you see those things being addressed? What advice can you give to us where things could help families in those circumstances?

Matt PORTER: Yes, good question. Was it multicultural and –

The CHAIR: Disadvantage.

Kim O'KEEFFE: Yes, we have a very large multicultural community.

Matt PORTER: Connecting with parents is a really tough one, because, being a parent myself, they are so busy; they have got sports, they have got arts, there are so many things happening. We have tried various techniques. We put out a newsletter for parents once a term that has all sorts of advice from career advisers on how to talk to your children without either of you ending up in tears about careers and informing parents that you might think the schools are resourced to do careers really well, but they are not. We have had four parent information seminars over the last couple of years. The first couple were really well attended, like 70 parents. We had one last year where we only got about 10, which was disappointing. Yes, it is trying to connect with the parents to give them the information to say, like down here, work experience is still the traditional model, but parents do not realise you can organise work experience yourself. We try and put it on social media and in our newsletter and say it at the seminars: if your young person is interested in something, we have all got connections and we all know people or know someone who knows someone in these smaller communities. Organise it yourself and just say, 'My daughter is doing work experience in an aged care home next month,' to the school, 'can you do the paperwork?' And they will because the schools care. So it is empowering parents. I think we have been very, I do not know what the word is, but when we run parent stuff, we do not connect it with particular schools, because as a parent, you do get a lot of communication from schools and sometimes it does not all get read, so we run it as an independent event. We try and get lots of industry members there to show that there is value.

I think one thing – I will pump up our tyres – the NPL does well is we do not protect our contacts and we do not say, 'We're running this event. No-one else can come.' If we are running, say, a careers expo down here with about 1200 students and 70 businesses, the LLEN who is talking after this volunteers and helps us out, but also we say to them, 'During lunch, do a lap and ask all the businesses if they will host work experience,' because we are all after the same goal. It is really difficult to connect with parents, but we are trying several different avenues of how to do that.

With the multicultural, we are involved in the Koori careers and aspirations day with the KESOs, the Koori education support officers. One thing that is hard down here is transport, so we are working with one of the schools who have structured work placements for their VM students. We surveyed the students, and 12 of them did not have placements because they do not have transport to get to them. We are looking into ways, like, can we borrow one of the community buses from the RSL or one of the pub buses that bring people in? They are not getting used during the day. Can we do something like that? Can we get Rotary volunteers to drive them in? It is just trying to find a solution to these issues because it is different. I am not sure if you know of the Trade & Tech Fit expo in Melbourne. It is run by the Department of Education – it is massive – at the exhibition centre. We heard about it in 2022, which was our second year of operation, and asked the schools: 'This is a great opportunity for your female students to learn about careers in male-dominated fields, why aren't we going?' And they said simply, 'We might have 10 students that are interested, but it is three and a half grand for a bus and \$400 for a teacher.' So we just emailed a couple of businesses and said, 'How about you all chip in 300 bucks and we will pay for their bus and you can give out some flyers on the bus?' We have been going since 2022 to the expo. In 2025 or 2024 we took 99 students – we nearly cracked three figures. We try and make it a great day and get sponsorship to shout them lunch on the way home and give them some tools, because those students are not getting that opportunity. The Melbourne schools can jump on a tram, I imagine, whereas for our schools it is three and a half grand, and there is no-one in the schools that has time to coordinate them all working together. We offer it to every school in the region and say, 'We'll pick you up on the way through. We'll just make it work.'

The CHAIR: Incredible.

Kim O'KEEFFE: Brilliant, and transport has been raised.

Matt PORTER: Yes, and from that, the Department of Education saw what were doing and now sponsor our buses and offer it to all the other regions, which is really cool.

Kim O'KEEFFE: Well done. Thank you so much, Matt.

The CHAIR: Amazing. Thanks. Dylan.

Dylan WIGHT: Thank you. Thank you so much, Matt, for appearing. I will be quick because I have only got a couple of minutes by the look of it. I just want to elaborate on something you have already spoken on, and that is the workplace learning opportunities with local industry. You have already gone through what some of the barriers are with that. I think you used the example of concern over a potential wire at Beach Energy, which I found amusing. I just want to unpack it a little bit more. I know that you said you are trying to address some of those barriers. I think you used the example of the former workplace injury consultant. Is there something more that the government can do? We are going to have recommendations out of this report, but is there something more that the government can do just to make that a little bit easier on schools, on industry and on everyone involved?

Matt PORTER: Yes: scrap that risk assessment. It is not helping. It is red tape that is not actually making students safer. We will do anything that makes students safer, but if the teacher has not been to the business, what is the point in filling out the risks at the business? The other thing is we have contacted the Department of Education several times over the last 12 months to say, 'This is what's happening with the paperwork. You want students in industry, but you're making it a massive barrier for the teachers to actually do that.' There must be a way around it. The other thing is the department will not clearly define what their rules are. They have got stuff on their website, which I have been through 100 times, and it says 'Hit this link', and you go to a 300-page document. You say to them, 'Do we have to get the working with children checks?' And they say, 'That's at the principal's discretion.' You say, 'Do we have to get the insurance?' They say, 'We only have guidelines; it's up to the principal to interpret them.' So depending on which school you are working with, it depends on how risk averse the principal is with how much you can actually do. I get it: principals do not want something to happen, and they cannot sign off their duty of care. It just needs to be refined. The department need to actually say, 'These are our minimum expectations.' They should not be able to just say, 'These are guidelines for each principal to interpret,' because I think that is putting too much pressure on the principal, and I am guessing it is so we cannot go back to the department and say, 'Well, you said this.'

Dylan WIGHT: Understood. I will leave it there just because we are out of time, but thank you for that.

Matt PORTER: No worries. Thanks.

The CHAIR: Thanks, Matt, for coming in today. I am sorry, we have run out time. I actually would love to see your program in action. What you are doing is incredible, so this has given us a lot of food for thought about some recommendations going forward. Thank you for the work you do – we really appreciate it – and for coming today.

Matt PORTER: No worries. Just really quickly, to finish off: I think we need to look at how careers education is delivered. Work experience does not have to be one kid in one business for five days, it can be a bus full of kids going to three businesses for three days and then two days. It does not have to be a workplace. It does not have to be in the careers advisor's office. It should be an umbrella thing over the whole school.

Roma BRITNELL: I think you have articulated that really clearly. That is certainly the message I got from what you said before, which was quite a powerful statement that hopefully does make it into the recommendations.

Matt PORTER: Thank you so much for your time and for the invite.

The CHAIR: Thank you. We will now end the broadcast.

Witness withdrew.