

TRANSCRIPT

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

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WITNESSES

Zoe Damman, Coordinator, Rural Development,

Anne Murphy, Representative, and

Lyn Eales, Representative, Youth Affairs Council Victoria.

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 this 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 for attending today and answering some of our questions. What I thought we might do first is maybe you could introduce yourself and a bit of the role that you play or a little bit about your organisation, and then we will jump straight into some questions. Lyn, I might start with you.

Lyn EALES: A little bit ironic – I was working with Brophy Family and Youth Services, one of the main supporters of young people across the south-west. Because of funding I was made redundant not that long ago. Part of that role was that I was representing them on the YSAG, the youth strategic action group, which is a statewide group. We presented a paper and we are now jointly presenting, dedicated to the cause. Here we are.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Lyn.

Anne MURPHY: Hi, I am Anne and I have a similar story to Lyn. I was the previous chair of the YSAG over the five years it has been there. I am a previous executive officer of the Glenelg and Southern Grampians LLEN. I was a member of the local regional partnership and a partner in the social futures report as well. I have been around the space for a little while, but I am now currently retired and looking after a grandchild. But because we put so much work into this paper and we feel it is a really important issue, I came along today.

The CHAIR: Thank you so much.

Zoe DAMMAN: I am Zoe Damman. I am the rural development coordinator for YACVic across the Great South Coast. I would just like to thank you guys so much for coming down and having a regional hearing. It is really, really valuable that you are willing to move down this way and come and speak with us on Gunditjmarra lands. Thank you.

Anne MURPHY: Can I just say we often feel the forgotten people in rural areas. Anyone who comes from rural areas will know how we feel. It really is marvellous and I think we come to some great solutions when we speak to people locally. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Yes, and there are absolutely different challenges in regional Victoria than metro Victoria, so we certainly want to hear from you. Roma, I will hand to you.

Roma BRITNELL: Can I thank you for the effort you have put in today. We are very lucky. We have had some fantastic presenters – I am sure you will be too. I agree with you. I pushed very hard for us to have the inquiry here because we are doing some really good things. I would really like you to have the opportunity to talk to me about the barriers that we face, just explaining to the committee what you do to assist to overcome some of those barriers. What particularly are our challenges?

Anne MURPHY: Who wants to start?

Lyn EALES: I think you should start.

Anne MURPHY: I normally get on my soapbox, so I will get kicked if I talk too much.

Zoe DAMMAN: Literally.

Anne MURPHY: We have a plan. I guess it is fair to say that it is not an even playing field for our rural and regional students. We have a number of barriers. That is not to say that that is our whole story, because we have a lot of successes, but I think it is really real that we need to acknowledge those. Transport is absolutely huge. For a student from my previous area to access TAFE it takes an hour and a half or more to get here and an hour and a half home, and that is after they have already travelled from Dartmoor to get to Portland to get the transport. We are talking big hours. We are talking small numbers, so while we do have interest, we do not

have the capacity to fill a classroom that is viable for an RTO to deliver. That is a big issue for us, particularly in our smaller campuses. I think as well, looking at the issues, we have quite a considerable level of poverty in our region. That is quite considerable. If you looked at the data that we had in the *In Plain Sight* report, that was a great report that was done recently. We have got a large number of people who are living below the poverty line, and that is right across the Great South Coast region. In Coleraine I think it was nearly one in two people living below the poverty line. That is significant.

We, for our advantages, do have a very strong Aboriginal population. We have got a very high population and that is a really positive thing for us. However, we do know that there is a lot of vulnerability with some sectors of that community as well. We have higher levels of people who need care et cetera. We also live in a beautiful part of the land. We are the food bowl of Australia, I would like to think. Certainly some others might disagree, but we do support in lots of ways. We are great communities. We do a lot with a small amount of things. But we are hidden. I guess for me that is one of the biggest things: we are not often seen. Regardless of the best work of our representatives, we are hidden, and any legislation often actually goes against what works in our communities.

For us it is really important that we are heard. Today it is a really important thing for us that we are heard and that our children get the same opportunities. Our educational attainment rate is 25 per cent lower than metro areas. That is not rocket science. That is the fact that the systems are not supporting our rural children to the extent that they are supporting those in Melbourne. If you get kicked out of school here, where do you go? If you have got an option, you have only got one. If you have dirtied that copybook, that is it. You stay at home on the farm. There are lots of factors that are militating against how we are going. But this is not a criticism of the agencies that we work with, our TAFEs and our schools, our industry; people do a really good job and work together really well. But the fact of the matter is we need greater support and we need support that is actually designed for our communities. For me that is a big issue. We need to be listened to and any solution needs to actually be place based and allow us to be part of that discussion.

Lyn EALES: I think also what we find in rural areas, and when I say ‘rural areas’ I am a bit like Anne – we keep going out to Warrnambool, Portland, Hamilton, Coleraine, Dartmoor – is that the more you go out, the more disadvantaged people are. I am also probably wanting to highlight that we have a lot of one-size-fits-all and that is not our world right now. If you look at gender diversity, recently arrived refugees, our First Nations population, our CALD communities, our young people who are more and more statistically identifying on the neurodivergent spectrum, there are a whole lot of extra supports that are actually needed. We could say, ‘There’s a great course at TAFE if we can physically get you there, if you can be supported to buy your own lunch.’ How do we actually get there from locked in the bedroom? I hate bringing up COVID and the pandemic, but we are seeing young people now, the 10-, 11-, 12-year-olds, who are saying, ‘I can’t even get to school, let alone think about what my career might be.’ I think it is really, really important that we actually keep that lens over everything. The world is not and has not been perfect for our young people.

Zoe DAMMAN: I would like to add to that too that we need to take a youth-centred, person-centred approach to these things. Our young people are not the same across the regions, and like you guys said, they are not facing the same challenges. Our communities are not the same, but we are facing similar barriers around things like transport. This is where roles like youth workers come into huge play, because youth workers are the ones who are turning up on the doorsteps of these young people and waiting for them to open the door and not turning away. They are putting them in the car, taking them to work, taking them to education, listening to them, mentoring them, and a lot of that work seems to be invisible. Our youth workers are holding our communities together.

Anne MURPHY: And can I just say on that, Zoe, that we recently had a YACVic rural conference and there were probably 200 people there. We said, ‘How many trained youth workers are there in the room?’ There were two, but there were 200 people because in rural communities it will be your education worker, it will be your health worker, it will be the local council worker.

Zoe DAMMAN: It will be your cousin or your aunty.

Anne MURPHY: But it is that whole thing that in the youth work space there are people who are working for youth but are not necessarily youth workers.

Zoe DAMMAN: I would also love to add to something you said there. If you can get your young person to the TAFE class, awesome – wonderful. But we have young people in regions who, like you said, are travelling multiple hours to attend something, and public transport does not line up with classes starting. If you cannot get a guaranteed number of students to sign up to that class, that class will be cancelled and the course will not run. Never mind whether the industry in the town out in Portland has four jobs waiting for four people who are in the town wanting to be trained. But if the course is in Warrnambool or the course is in Geelong and they cannot get there and there is only four of them, then it gets cancelled. It is a model failing, not an individual failing.

The CHAIR: Have either of you got a question about the youth workers?

Anthony CIANFLONE: Yes. Thank you for appearing and for your submission. It is very comprehensive and fantastic. You said disadvantaged students are less likely than advantaged students to have certainty about the kind of job they would like, with 69 per cent compared to 77 per cent, and less likely to feel well prepared for their future school, with 57 per cent compared to 70 per cent – disadvantaged versus advantaged students. You also talked about how many schools have limited access to career counsellors and counselling as well. Going back to your point about social work, recommendation 1 is to increase funding to scale up generalist youth workers to embed in public schools to support particularly those disadvantaged students and cohorts to also complement the role of career counsellors. Can you elaborate more on how that would work and function?

Zoe DAMMAN: The first thing that comes to mind, obviously, is how schools are facing funding cuts – again, currently. If we continue to cut the basic need services that schools provide our young people, the ripple-out effect in the regions is astronomically larger. Schools' primary purpose there is building our society, our education baseline and our culture as a nation; getting job ready is the next step. I will pass over to you if you would like to add to that.

Lyn EALES: I would probably highlight that recently the Victorian government cancelled the School Focused Youth Service program, which was a dedicated program to put diverse programs in schools and which was aimed at keeping young people who were at risk of disengagement. That program is now complete. That is finished after twenty-something years. The government have said, 'It's okay; we've got the mental health menu, which we have popped into schools now, and that's going to give access to wonderful programs.' I would suggest that I think 79 per cent of those programs are actually metro based. If we can get them out to communities, we then have transport costs and accommodation costs on top of that. Most money – and I would love you to look into this – for the mental health menu, which was to be for great programs to keep young people in schools, is now going to backfill CRT, because our teachers are under such stress and strain that they are not being able to present at school in their whole self to actually support their students. The mental health menu is definitely being used to backfill CRT – temporary teachers – in schools. We know that while they are an amazing workforce, they are not the ones that are actually holding our young people and helping them move forward.

Roma BRITNELL: I have raised that in the Parliament, because the menu –

Lyn EALES: I do know that.

Roma BRITNELL: Oh, good.

Zoe DAMMAN: I would like to build on what Lyn said there, and I am going to invite Anne to jump in. The School Focused Youth Service and the LLENs were bridging the gap between education in schools and employment. They are the experts. They are the ones that have the connections. School Focused Youth Service were doing all that coordination around the background to get intervention programs in place, because teachers did not have the capacity to do that. They are already over capacity, and schools are already underfunded. By losing the School Focused Youth Service you are losing the people who were identifying the intervention programs and getting those intervention programs into a place-based response, and it was not a cookie-cutter, one-size-fits-all approach. The same thing with the LLENs. The LLENs are the ones who are coordinating. Sorry, I will let you speak to this because you are the expert.

Anne MURPHY: Okay. I guess the thing is that really in a rural area we need everybody, and no-one can do it. TAFE cannot do it. Schools cannot do it. Industry alone cannot do it. Community cannot do it. It needs to be a real place-based response, and we need all elements of that in order to really address the needs that we do have in the region. Schools are just so flat out doing what they are doing. They are in crisis. If the truth be

known, they are in crisis as we speak, and they require the additional support they need. But we also do not want something imposed in over the top. What we need is something that is a real place-based response, where local industry, local community and local schools actually come together to address those issues. When that happens, they are highly successful, they work really well and they are highly valued.

An example is the future leaders of industry program, which is just an amazing industry mentoring program where industry hosts an eight-day program, hosting young people, and takes them on work experience. It is not just a one-day 'Let's go to a career expo'. These are all developed in our region. Passport to employment is where young people with a disability are taken through a whole process of skills acknowledgement, building confidence, industry tours and then finalise it with placements. But that is all done in community, with community, for our children. Like with all of the programs, such as the navigator school-focused program, if communities are able to have some remit around developing up their solutions, they are really good at that. We see everyone. You cannot go, 'Oh, we'll get someone in from outside and we'll help you do something.' No, because I'll go to mass with them on Sunday, Monday I have got to go the grocery store and I'm getting my hair done on Wednesday, or I'll see them at the footy. And every time I am asking them 'Hey, will you help us out with this program?' or 'Could you help us there? I've got a young kid, and they're a really good kid. Maybe we could help them and get them a placement. We could get them support.' Rural communities are very strong like that. Those are our skills, but that is not seen from the centre. It seems like they'll impose on you. But if we are allowed to do the place-based stuff, we can do it really well. But it needs to be funded and not like you just do it because you love your family and your community, which is what we are doing.

Zoe DAMMAN: We have those examples in the submission around the Rotary clubs and the Lions clubs dipping into communities and dipping into their own pockets to fund opportunities for young people, which is absolutely wonderful and remarkable and speaks to that community strength. But it is, I would argue, our government's responsibility to make those opportunities happen.

The CHAIR: Kim.

Kim O'KEEFFE: Oh, good. I have been sitting here wanting to jump in. How are you? I am Kim O'Keeffe, Member for Shepparton. I very much feel your pain. It is a very similar cohort of people. We have one of the highest Indigenous populations outside of Melbourne, a very multicultural community and a high level of disadvantage. Thank you for the work that you are doing, and thank you for this submission. I have highlighted many things. I have gone straight to recommendations 13 and 14, which are all about the funding – continuing to fund and making sure we do not have funding cuts, particularly on land, and some of those organisations that are doing incredible work. As you say, if they do not do it, who is going to do it? It will be a real backwards step if we lose those types of groups doing the work that they do.

But one thing I do want to touch on is the dedicated funding, which you mention in recommendation 14, for schools to engage and build positive relationships with parents and families and/or carers in career and advice activities. Because we are seeing that disconnect, how do we actually help and support parents and families to make sure their children have the opportunity and understand what that means to them? Often that will create concerns and reasons perhaps for why they do not engage, particularly when it comes to our multicultural community. But one thing I am really mindful of is how we break this generational cycle of disadvantage and of kids not having education opportunities – to whatever level that looks like or to whatever career path that can help support their aspirations. Look, I think your submission is fantastic. There will be lots of things I will be putting forward as well from your submission, because you absolutely get the level of consequence for people from disadvantaged backgrounds and all the things that create barriers that are holding families, holding students and holding communities back. You are right on target with many of your recommendations, so thank you. But yes, I am just getting back to the family support.

Anne MURPHY: I think there are a couple of things. One of the things that has been really supportive in this space of late has been the transport fund. My LLEN is Glenelg and Southern Grampians. Last year \$180,000 was actually put in to transport students who were unable to participate and do their TAFE course in our region. So they had to get on a bus and travel an hour and a half over to Warrnambool. Actually it was more than that, because then they had to get out to Deakin, so that is another 15 minutes, and then back again to participate in the courses. That cost \$180,000 last year alone for those students. However, I need to put the point through that even though that has been amazing, there are two points. One, it still was not enough,

because we had 70 year 10s at Portland Secondary College who could not do that, because they could not access the courses they wished to in their local area because they were full at TAFE. And secondly –

Roma BRITNELL: Because TAFE was full, did you say?

Anne MURPHY: They were not offered in our communities because we did not have the numbers, but we had interest or else they were full here so then our kids did not get them. And then secondly, the other is in relation to: why should our kids have to spend an hour and a half plus the other – so two hours each way – to do their vocational training? It is too much, and we should have more options locally. How do we support and look at that? And one of the recommendations we had in our YSAG report was, ‘Hey, wait a minute, we need to actually look at that.’ Sorry, I have got off the track, but that is an important point.

But around the parents, some of the work we did around the enhanced work experience was we actually did forums for parents. We also then went and visited. We sat in the Casterton courthouse and we sat in the Dunkeld hall and we sat in all these different places around our community: ‘Hi. We’re here. Do you want a bit of help about your student’s work experience opportunities or opportunities in the future?’ My workers did that, and then parents would come in and go, ‘Oh, little Johnny needs a bit of help, but we can’t get there because we can’t do robotics in Portland.’

Lyn EALES: I would also just add to that the expectation that our young people are going to, you know, have all of their wishes and all of their desires fulfilled. When you are working with families who have a very low expectation, it is: ‘That’s okay, Johnny; you’re going to be on the farm.’ He does not want to be on the farm. He wants to do something else. So it is also working with parents and families to help educate them that we are able to have higher expectations. It is really easy to be deficit-based as a family that lives in a rural community. They have managed to get one of their kids an apprenticeship. He did not like it; apprenticeships are tough. You know, it is actually convincing the parents, and that is an educational piece. And how do you do that in a tricky environment? We cannot spotlight people who do not have aspirations for their children, and we know they have aspirations for their children. But there is a really fine line.

Anne MURPHY: But I would argue – sorry – that it is not only low aspirations. Country people are pretty practical people. You know, we get around stuff, we do what we can do and we get on with it. That is what we do. But sometimes it is just too hard. Sometimes the barriers are too hard, and you go, ‘It’s not that I don’t want to have these things. I know it’s just not for me. My family can’t afford it. We can’t get there. We haven’t got the petrol.’ Heaven forbid now with the circumstances; God knows how that is going to look in the next little while. Do you know what I mean? That is really difficult.

But the other thing I think too is about understanding its importance. For all of us of a certain age who did do work experience in the old days it is sort of like, ‘Oh, work experience – what’s that about?’ But it is a really crucial step in getting pathways. Part of our enhanced work experience was actually talking to parents about this being really important. You know, getting your son or daughter out – even if they hate it – is good, because they are not going to end up in an area that they do not want to be in. They realise they do not want to work in an office or they do not want to work wherever. That is a good thing. So we have done some work around that, and I think that is important, but more needs to be done.

Kim O’KEEFFE: Thank you.

Zoe DAMMAN: Can I just add to that as well that the barriers that our young people are facing are intergenerational barriers for our regions. You know, transport, feeling safe in the workplace, feeling like your workplace works for you – these are intergenerational issues. If a family member has had a negative experience, they will share that with their family, and that becomes another barrier. It is not that these young people and their families are not capable. It is that we are not being flexible and we are not adjusting the moulds to fit the people and the needs in our communities. I also want to touch on a couple of things. We have solutions in our communities – solutions to transport. I was speaking to somebody from the local workforce agency, and they asked, ‘Why don’t we have workers buses that pick everybody up and drop everyone off, because nobody can afford transport right now?’ There is a solution – who is going to fund it?

Kim O’KEEFFE: We had a submission this morning that said the group were actually funding it themselves, and that is exactly what you are saying. They were trying to fill that gap – who is paying for it, and

how can you do that? I mean, there are so many things we know are obvious that we need to do. It is just about getting the right funding and the right processes and support in place.

Zoe DAMMAN: There is another solution ready for us around job readiness programs. These programs exist. Let us take them to our communities. Let us open them up to intergenerational age groups. These are the expectations that will be put on you as a worker, so that you are not going in blind and you are going in from a strength-based position, as a young person or as somebody who has experienced long-term unemployment, of knowing your rights, knowing what your workplace can do for you, but knowing what you are there to do for them, so that the expectations are not a mystery and you are not waiting to fail, you are set up to succeed.

The CHAIR: Thanks. If you have got something to add, you can. I am just mindful of time as well.

Anne MURPHY: No, no, that is fine. I can talk forever, so you keep going.

The CHAIR: I just want to thank you for your submissions and for coming today to answer some questions. I feel like we could keep going, because there is a lot to unpick out of your submission as well. But I just wondered, if there is something further that has sparked out of our conversation today, you are more than welcome to write or converse back with the committee in case we have missed something today that you really desperately wanted to get across. Please feel free to do that. Thank you. Sorry, I have to wrap it up there, but thank you so much for your time today. We really appreciate it.

Witnesses withdrew.