

TRANSCRIPT

LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY ECONOMY AND INFRASTRUCTURE COMMITTEE

Inquiry into Student Pathways to In-demand Industries

Geelong – Thursday 26 March 2026

MEMBERS

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Kim O’Keeffe – Deputy Chair

Roma Britnell

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WITNESSES

Cormach Evans, Founder and Directing Manager, Strong Brother Strong Sister; and

Michelle Searle, Executive Manager, Corporate Services, Wathaurong Aboriginal Co-operative.

The CHAIR: Welcome to the public hearing 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 for coming along today and answering a few questions for us. We are starting to get towards the end of our inquiry, and we have had young people present to us and we have had different cohorts. But our First Nations community – it is really important to hear from you about what we can do. We have just visited the Kitjarra Centre down here in the Gordon too. It was absolutely incredible. Jasmine gave us a really good insight on what they do, but to have you answer some questions today will be really helpful for us as well, so thank you. Kim, I might head to you for the first question.

Kim O'KEEFFE: Thank you so much for joining us. I am based in Shepparton. We have a very large Indigenous population, as you may be aware. I am always trying to support where we can get kids into the workforce or keep them at school in particular. I am just really interested to hear from you what support you think regional First Nations students need to participate in work-based learning opportunities such as work experience and school-based apprenticeships and traineeships.

Michelle SEARLE: As part of Wathaurong we see consistently that access to work-based learning and VET is not just about course placement; it is about whether the system is culturally safe, flexible and wraps around the young person. From our experience hosting work experience and VET placements, early years school leavers and employment pathways, the key supports include culturally safe entry points, so our young people are engaging when learning and work placements are delivered through trusted Aboriginal organisations or in genuine partnerships with them. Aboriginal employment pathways show that Aboriginal-led design, cultural governance and relationship-based approaches significantly improve engagement and retention.

Then there is the practical wraparound support. Students often need support with transport, work clothing, PPE and technology. They need to understand the workplace expectations and hidden rules. A lot of children do not have that work placement experience – so helping them navigate enrolment, the paperwork and the complexities around just coming into the workplace. On-the-job mentoring, not just classroom support – what makes a difference is somebody walking alongside our students during these placements, checking in, problem-solving, advocacy when needed. Programs that include mentoring and coaching alongside these produce stronger engagement, and from where we sit, they engage far more often and the likelihood of long-term engagement is much greater. We need employers who are prepared, not just students. Our experience hosting students includes secondary work experience, and this highlights that workplaces need culturally safe capability, induction, supervision and flexibility. It just aligns with our values and helps make sure that our students and our young people are supported with a wraparound approach. It is not just one size fits all, because each person is so individual.

Kim O'KEEFFE: Is that happening? Are there strong gaps right now? Is that not happening to make sure – a placement is meeting those needs to be culturally safe? I have a lot to do with a lot of our McDonald's and Kmart managers locally trying to get more representation – we have a very large multicultural community as well, so multicultural students, Indigenous students – and I know that our local McDonald's, for example, has been really open to wanting to ensure that, whether it be multicultural or Indigenous workers coming in, they are considered and their needs are met. This is a really strong desire for me because I really feel we do not see enough representation of younger people, Indigenous people and multicultural people in our workplaces, even during school years, in their 15-plus years. That often is a pathway too of confidence – working in a team and being part of a work environment prepares them for this next stage. I am really interested to see where you feel there is not enough being done, what can be done by industries, businesses and education providers right now and what needs to change, because I do feel there is not enough representation already in the younger workforce, let alone heading into higher education and tertiary education. Do you think it needs to start sooner? That is probably my question: do we wait until we get to this level where it has not been happening in the

younger years but all of a sudden there is a leap to an expectation of it as they get older? I just feel there is a real gap; do you agree with me?

Cormach EVANS: I echo what Michelle said fully. I think there are huge gaps that we still see across every sector in jobs, in training and in career pathways, whatever it may be, even just around thinking about starting or getting into employment or training as well. I am sure Michelle would back us on this – ensuring that our young ones have the right mechanisms and supports around them to actually have them ready to step into that space in a really safe, supportive manner. When we look at First Nations communities and people and the issues that have come before us – from the assimilation policies to racism, discrimination, bias and children’s experiences within the school sector with racism and discrimination – stepping into another new space that is unfamiliar is such a big step and such a big scary step. Wathaurong and Strong Brother Strong Sister and all the amazing organisations locally but also across Victoria do a lot of work around job readiness and career readiness and training readiness. But from a Strong Brother point of view and from a personal perspective as well based on being a young person – not anymore, I am a bit older than that – I think we need that piece of reciprocity within training providers and within career pathways as well. We do see a lot of people really wanting to do good but also not knowing the complexities and the backgrounds and the circumstances that First Nations young people face in employment, training, education and everything else. How do we shift that? From my personal experience and through the work we do it would be around really going back to the start to deconstruct systems and policies and procedures that can ensure First Nations youth are considered fully in a sense and ensure that they have the right mechanisms to have a really safe journey from thinking to completing realistically. I think we always see that short-term investment, but there is not always a long-term investment for a long, healthy career pathway. But also within policy, within grant rounds and all that sort of stuff there are those sorts of gaps in that long-term investment, especially for First Nations youth.

Kim O’KEEFFE: Thank you for that. We do see a higher rate of Indigenous kids dropping out. This is my concern as well. How do we keep that connection to education and support the families, support the schools? There is a lot of work to be done, absolutely, but I still think it needs to start sooner. Where do we start with it to get them the support they need, to get the school supported? There is so much in it, and I still think we have not come far enough. I am really interested to hear from you about all of this, because we want to have a starting point too, you know, where we are seeing more and more Indigenous kids working in Kmart and McDonald’s and being part of community opportunities and workplaces that embrace them. I think we are not seeing that enough, and I am just concerned. Are we moving in the right direction, let alone until we get to tertiary education. We want to get them there. That is obviously the next thing, to give them that pathway, whether it be an apprenticeship or a trade or whatever opportunity they are hoping for. But we have got to close this sort of divide somehow and get the workplaces more on board, I think. This is what I hear, and I do hear a lot of workplaces that are very open to that. They do not sort of understand what they need to do. I have had those conversations. ‘How do we provide more support and make sure that everyone is aligned?’ So that you are feeling your needs are met – amongst our Indigenous people – and that workplaces understand their expectation and that there is this connect. I think it is a bit of a disconnect still at this stage.

Cormach EVANS: Totally. I think also just to add to that – and I reckon Michelle can speak to this as well through the work Wathaurong is doing with the Booln Booln Cultural Centre – Strong Brother has Murran, which is a First Nations hub, retail store, art gallery, cafe, co-working space and event centre. So that is around Aboriginal communities being able to be those leaders in this space as well, to sort of lead by example I think for non-First Nations organisations, businesses, whatever it may be. I am sure Wathaurong is the same with the Booln Booln Cultural Centre. There are other opportunities outside I guess the generic employment pathways that there have been for First Nations young people as well. You know, we want our kids to be architects, designers, engineers, astronauts – dream big, I think – and we have sort of seen in the past a lot of our kids only be expected to do sports and trade, which is great. That is amazing. But how do we uplift that bar and that standard for our kids to know they can achieve whatever they want with the right supports, which is such a beautiful thing. I think that comes also to the point around economic participation with First Nations communities. Economic success creates generational wealth. It creates economic participation, so when an Aboriginal business succeeds, an Aboriginal community succeeds, an Aboriginal family succeeds, the young people succeed and we spend money within our own communities and so the money is always sort of contributing to all those success stories within our communities. But how do we uplift that so more opportunities come for our young ones in training, in education and skill sets and in everything else? I think when you look at the work that both our orgs are doing in community, there is that economic piece, but I think

that, yes, there probably needs to be more done to support those and uplift those to create further opportunities for our young ones to gain training, to gain employment, to have those pieces, because we know those are safe spaces for our kids. They can get ready to then step out to that next stage, I would say, as well.

Michelle SEARLE: And you are right: that early opportunity starts from birth – you know, that engagement within community. We have so many different programs within our holistic wraparound support here in Geelong. Just getting the kids to come in and to feel comfortable with community – it starts then. It does not start when they get to high school and they are thinking about careers. It is that early engagement to make them feel safe and supported. We have a really good engagement with a lot of our local schools within the career education support and we have our LAECG, so we have a lot of engagement where our families' voices can be heard, and then it is follow-through with the pathways into education. It is a long process. It is not just, 'Once they get to high school, let's think about it then.' It is the process along the way and the journey along the way for our kids to feel safe and supported through the whole journey.

Kim O'KEEFFE: Thank you so much for that.

Cormach EVANS: And Kim, I think you hit the point on those drop-out periods too. We know that our kids drop out in 5/6, and years sort of 10 to 11. So I think there is that piece as well, so thank you for raising that as well.

Kim O'KEEFFE: And you probably know we have the big Munarra centre here, and I do not know if you have ever been to Shepparton, but please come. It is incredible. 'Thunder, thunder!' We make the noise – apparently munarra means 'thunder' – but for the right reasons. It is an incredible facility, and we want to see that functioning really well. It was built for a purpose. I was mayor for four years when that was happening. It is a very amazing opportunity here, but how do we maximise that as well? So I really appreciate you coming in and having that conversation, thank you.

Cormach EVANS: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thanks, Kim. John, I might head to you next.

John MULLAHY: What supports do regional First Nations students require to help them to transition from secondary school to work or tertiary education?

Cormach EVANS: I think that, just based on the work that both Wathaurong and Strong Brother Strong Sister do already, they are demonstrating that. Their youth programs are led by our First Nations young people. They are designed by First Nations young people. I guess it is so familiar because those young ones that have gone through that journey or are going through that journey are the ones that are leading that space. You know, it is all fair and well for someone like me to design a program, but it is not going to be specific to exactly that individual's experience because my experience is completely different to the next. I think the way that we work for us is having those personally tailored supports, looking at what their passions are, what their hobbies are, what the strengths are, what things bring them happiness. It is how we utilise those to uplift and have a really amazing journey, but also along the way utilise those things to be able to address those stresses, those concerns and everything, to have, again, a really safe and supportive journey through those transition periods.

The previous people highlighted that the education system has not changed in a very long time, especially for our young ones as well. There is probably a whole heap of other complexities there as well. There is some amazing work being done within schools, but I think that also is determined. It is no disrespect to any of our teachers or anything, but I think it comes down to an individual and their passions as well within those schools. Sometimes when those amazing teachers and support people leave, there are different people and there are gaps and those sorts of things. So it is how we ensure those gaps do not become a problem again, in a sense.

I think the other key piece is listening to the voices of our young ones. It is the most important piece. They are the ones that are the professionals. They are the ones that know what their futures are and what they need and how to do it. They are the ones with the lived experience, so I think it is up to us to listen and back them in every way. I think the Victorian government does a really good job of listening and backing our young ones in many ways. I think it is just being able to do that.

Michelle SEARLE: I guess following on from that is listening to voices. Here we listen to our community voices. We have our community meetings for our families and so forth, but we also have our youth hub. It is led by youth. It is directed by youth and their voices. We have many different programs out there, but we also have leadership and mentoring programs which elevate our youth's voice. That is who we need to hear. Through that we get a lot of really good ideas and really good initiatives that are led by our young people.

Cormach EVANS: Yes. I was even saying to Michelle just before that our next goal is a school to fill that gap. Down here on community we do not have a school, so to be able to just continue to fill gaps. That is what we do I think as First Nations people. We look at what is missing and how we can fill it. To be able to have a school specifically for First Nations young people – I think, to go to Kim, we have the Munarra Centre and we have the ASHE academy in Shepparton as well. There are all these amazing things that create opportunities and safe spaces and safe faces for our young ones. I think what works really well is those key people that our children feel safe to access, to be open with and that as well.

John MULLAHY: Great. Thanks for that.

Kim O'KEEFFE: That is a good point. I will just quickly jump in because I know we have got to finish up. We do also have a lot of external industries and mentoring and support people. We are all on the same page of how we can get more offerings across the board, whether it be mechanic apprenticeships – I know Furphy's here do an incredible job going in, really talking and showing opportunities. There is some really good external mentoring as well – sort of a support cushion, if you like, around it, that we want to help. But it has to be driven by you guys. How do we support that? I think that is the way we have to work together – let you drive it. Everyone has got a role to play. It takes a community, it takes a village, as we say, and we all want to be part of that. You should not have to feel alone. You should feel supported. So yes, good work, and thank you for coming in.

The CHAIR: Thanks, Kim. We might have time for one more question, so, Roma, I will give it to you.

Roma BRITNELL: Yes. Sorry, we are running out of time. Thank you. I have been following Wathaurong for many, many years. I worked in Kirrae Health Service for 15 years many years ago and would visit Wathaurong quite a lot and saw the great work. It has always been a very well organised Aboriginal community controlled organisation. I was in health, not education. What I have seen, though, are fantastic programs and there are more examples of that, and strong families who are very connected within Wathaurong organisation. Have you been following the data of people that you have been working with and what has actually worked for individuals where you have had success because it is a pretty strong community down here of Aboriginal leaders right throughout the state, sitting on VACCHO and whatever else?

Michelle SEARLE: I think the success is evident when you see our young people that have grown up in community. Simon Flagg, our CEO, is a perfect example of what it takes to be a community kid and be supported and surrounded to now leading our organisation. So to see our young people in high-level jobs, taking on managers' and executives' positions, you know, that growth is amazing. And to see then their kids coming through and the opportunities that creates as well. For me, I have three boys and you know moving to Geelong, Cormach unbeknown – well, he knows – has been a big part of leading the direction, even though not within a specific program, but just being there for them and just mentoring them and just, you know, reaching out and touching base. That leadership from another strong Aboriginal man has led them to pathways where we see the results. Sometimes it is data, but, you know, it is actually seeing the results that come out of the educational pathways into really good careers and then their children coming through as well.

Cormach EVANS: Thanks.

Roma BRITNELL: Cormach, can I clarify you felt that it was a possibility that we should be looking at Indigenous-specific schools?

Cormach EVANS: Yes.

Roma BRITNELL: New Zealand did that some years ago, didn't they?

Cormach EVANS: Yes, and I probably speak from a personal perspective. I have got two children and quite young, but they are at an alternative school and it sort of really centres the child and their wellbeing, I

think, to have that model for our young ones as First Nations students. So Strong Brother Strong Sister back a few years ago worked with the education department around addressing low attendance rates with First Nations students and a lot of the gaps were around parents not feeling safe to be able to send their kids to school. That was due to whether it was not having lunch, you know, for the day to be able to send them to school and they were concerned that child protection would get involved and the kids would be removed. So it is looking at, I guess, the multilayered years of different circumstances and experiences that their families have, whether it is their grandparents, their parents, that sort of thing and those small little gaps and concerns that they had.

A lot of the time kids had attendance rates as low as 10 to 20 per cent. But just going back to what I was saying to you, John, earlier around just understanding those passions and strengths and hobbies and all the key things was able to really shift that sort of perception for the young person as well with school and the family, with school attendance rates really rising within a few short months to 80 to 90 per cent. It is just having culture at the forefront when the kids were having a tough day – being able to come and spend time out on country, learn cultural education and different experiences and have mentors to walk alongside them. So what we are looking at is that one-stop shop where there are health workers, there are psychiatrists, play therapists, and there is culture at the forefront of the schools as well. I think that is that missing piece.

Dylan WIGHT: Are there any examples of schools that do that really well?

Cormach EVANS: I would say –

Michelle SEARLE: Grasmere has mostly Aboriginal children.

Cormach EVANS: Yes. I think Worawa as well. There are a few private Aboriginal-led schools that do it really, really well. Are there any other ones, Michelle?

Michelle SEARLE: Not –

Dylan WIGHT: I know The Grange in my electorate seems to do it really well.

Cormach EVANS: Yes, totally. I think yes, there are some really great leaders in the space. And I think that what it is around is just being able to bring those people together to get those learnings. I think it is all around just working collaboratively for the future success and healthy, prosperous futures really.

Michelle SEARLE: I do want to just really quickly highlight an initiative that is happening within the Geelong region around employment pathways. Our First Nations employment collective is led by First Nations people. It has been driven from the beginning. It also includes quite a number, I think we have got 15 signatories now on our group, that are, for example, CEOs – we have got TAC, we have got Barwon Water, we have got fire brigades – so they are really high up. But we are meeting to address the needs of employment and the gaps around Geelong and the surrounding areas. That is a really key piece of work that has been happening. For us it is around seeking support to have an employment hub set up here in Geelong in the long-term future.

The CHAIR: Is that about getting employers upskilled and on board?

Michelle SEARLE: Employers on board? Absolutely – ready to put out there how we can work as a collective to bridge those gaps for employment for Aboriginal students and people in general across our wider Geelong region, including pathways, including opportunities for shared knowledge, upskilling our staff – we are happy to send people over to different employment opportunities – and just how we are going to work as a collective to address the needs of employment within our region.

The CHAIR: That is fantastic, thank you. I am so sorry we have run out of time today. We could have kept chatting all afternoon. Thank you for coming today and answering a few questions for us. It really gives us great insight.

Witnesses withdrew.