

TRANSCRIPT

LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY ECONOMY AND INFRASTRUCTURE COMMITTEE

Inquiry into Student Pathways to In-demand Industries

Geelong – Thursday 26 March 2026

MEMBERS

Alison Marchant – Chair

Kim O’Keeffe – Deputy Chair

Roma Britnell

Anthony Cianflone

John Mullahy

Nicole Werner

Dylan Wight

WITNESS

James McLennan, Chief Executive Officer, Farm My School.

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 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, James, for coming in today and answering some questions. To my other committee members, this is probably going to be my favourite session, because James has Farm My School, which is one of the Bellarine schools. It is a farm on a school site. It is absolutely incredible and I love visiting. My own son loves it as well; he is doing the program and loves it. It is a very unique set-up, and now you have expanded also into Colac. I am going to let the others ask questions because I think that is probably a little bit more useful than me. Roma, I might head to you, because Roma has got an agricultural community as well.

James McLENNAN: Thanks, Alison.

Roma BRITNELL: First of all, I am wondering how down in Bellarine – because it is not as agricultural as, say, Colac and further out west – you attract the kids to be interested in what you are doing.

James McLENNAN: Great question, Roma. If I can give a bit of a philosophy or model of how it is we work, basically Farm My School transforms unutilised school land into commercial market gardens. It is not like your typical school garden that has a few raised garden beds. Both sites are 1.5 acres; within those sites the plan is to have about 3.2 linear kilometres of garden beds growing nutrient-dense vegetables in a regenerative manner for that community itself. Bellarine started three years ago. It is now 3.2 linear kilometres of garden beds. It is producing at this time of year 750 kilos of organic veg a week, which is going out into the community. That averages to be about 250 kilos throughout the year, including through winter, when we have a slump in growth. This is not about the food production itself. That is the by-product of what we are doing. As you have asked, the real richness of this program is actually the student engagement and also the broader community engagement with what we do. As Alison mentioned, this farm is in the middle of the school, so students, teachers and the community are engaging with this on a daily basis. It is integrated into the curriculum, so all subject areas and all year levels can actually be engaging with the farm. Other schools can be coming in to utilise this program with our education program as well. It is basically providing tangible learning opportunities for students of all ages and all walks of life.

Other than the education component, we are also bringing in people outside of school hours to use the school facilities for workshops, whether they be gardening workshops or cooking workshops. We have got corporate experiences for corporate groups to come in and actually engage with the farm as well. Basically all of these components are crucial to make this model, small-scale farming, a commercially viable model. The crux of it is that we are not relying on funding ongoing. We need funding to start in the schools, but by year 4 to 5 we are commercially viable and can support ourselves to continue on.

Roma BRITNELL: That is impressive.

James McLENNAN: Both schools, Bellarine and Colac – Colac only started three months ago – have actually integrated this into the curriculum in varying levels. Both have an ag hort program, but then there are other subject areas – science, geography, even literacy and numeracy –

Roma BRITNELL: Working out sowing rates and fertiliser regimes in maths.

James McLENNAN: Exactly. Year 12 chemistry is making liquid biofertilizers and year 9 geography is looking at global food systems. There is a media class that is doing media releases and recipe cards for us. It does not matter what the year level is. We are both secondary schools, but it could be primary as well. With the key strand of sustainability through the Victorian curriculum, we can make it applicable to every subject. It is not just ag or hort, this is far broader than that. It is also giving students who might be into media a taste of horticulture and agriculture when they may not have ever been exposed to it. Bellarine obviously has a lot of

urban areas; it is not a regional or a farming community. These students who are engaging with the farm are not from farming backgrounds, so it is a really positive outcome.

The CHAIR: Thanks. John.

John MULLAHY: That probably just leads on to the next one, which is: how does Farm My School support students into the agricultural sector?

James McLENNAN: Great question, John. Thank you. I guess the main one from here is, as I mentioned, both schools have a Farm My School elective. It is a year 10 subject. From that it leads into a farmer incubator program, which is basically us employing school-based trainees. We have a farm team employed at both sites, which consists of about five farmers at Bellarine and two farmers at Colac, and the school-based trainees not only come from those host schools but other schools in the area too. It is basically a cert III in horticulture. These students are typically from disadvantaged backgrounds or not going to be finishing their VCE. All three of our students who have completed it so far have finished VCE, have walked out with a cert III in horticulture and are still working for us and on their pathway into agriculture and horticulture. Those three students are not from farming backgrounds as well. They were all looking at other employment opportunities. One had actually started a traineeship as a motor mechanic and hated it. He thought that was a job. He is now employed with us two days a week as one of our farmhands, so the opportunities are endless.

John MULLAHY: Great.

The CHAIR: Kim.

Kim O'KEEFFE: I love this so much. I am sitting here going, 'This is just phenomenal.' I am in Shepparton, and some of our primary schools have their little veggie gardens; they are growing and bringing it from paddock to plate and all that, but I had not heard it to this level. I think this is absolutely phenomenal, and I think it is such a gap. As you have mentioned, it is keeping kids engaged, and if they do not continue on, they have walked away with some form of skill and hopefully a direction. Seeing as what you are doing is working, is there anything that you now need from state government? Is there any direction that needs more support? What are the next steps? Where are you at right now?

James McLENNAN: Brilliant question, Kim. I think this is probably more broadly not just us but small-scale regenerative farmers in general. In the last three weeks I have heard of two local market gardens who are not certified organic but regenerative market gardens who are closing shop. They are completely stretched and have been for a long time. There is not the support. It is interesting in the current state of affairs that those farmers will actually be the ones who are not increasing their prices, whereas large conventional farmers will be due to fertiliser costs and petrol prices as well. Small-scale farmers like us are not reliant on tractors – it is physical labour – and we can produce an abundance of produce.

Roma BRITNELL: You are not reliant on tractors.

James McLENNAN: Correct. We have a tractor onsite. We have got a partnership with Kubota and they provide a tractor and a buggy for us at each site, but we are not reliant on them. That is just for turning compost, moving mulch et cetera. In terms of our inputs, we make a lot of compost onsite from local waste and school waste. We buy compost from local producers as well. There are no artificial fertilisers and no artificial sprays. We do not use any spray; we are spray-free. That is something which I think needs to be looked at very closely in how we can support small-scale farmers. It is good to mention as well the produce we are producing at these farms with both those two farms I mentioned who are closing their doors. We have been doing studies around how the soil health actually impacts the nutrient density of the food, and then if you are eating it, it increases your gut health within two weeks of starting your diet with this and then mental health as well. We have been doing work with the Deakin Food and Mood Centre. The outcome of this study has been profound, and it is flowing into other studies as well. This is much more than just a nice 'look, feel, touch' farm in a school. The outcomes are profound. We need to be supporting small-scale regenerative farmers to continue and somehow subsidise this food to get it into our communities, into our families and into our students and everyone. If you eat one carrot from our farm, you would need to eat about five to six carrots from the supermarket for the equivalent nutrients. That is basic science that we are doing with some of the classes as well, measuring the nutrient density of the food. Sorry, that is probably a pretty large answer, Kim. There is a lot there. I think for us personally, we are in two schools now; we aim to be scaling into a school a year from next year. Seed funding

for us to start that or support doing that would be key so we can continue our impact in more communities across Victoria and Australia.

Kim O'KEEFFE: We have got a very big school here, the Greater Shepparton Secondary College, and have lots and lots of space there, so that would be a good spot. I will ask one last thing because I am just so curious: when you say the produce goes to community, does that go to the families of the schools or does it go out to people at disadvantage? What happens?

James McLENNAN: Great question, Kim. Our schools that we are choosing are low socio-economic schools. We look at the ICSEA first of all to rate the school. Both of our schools hit around the 40th-percentile mark. The third site we are looking at within Geelong is under 10th percentile. We are aiming specifically for low-income families who cannot afford to put food on the table. They are the communities we want to be working with. That is our target, and we want to be –

Roma BRITNELL: Do you make money? How do you make it sustainable?

James McLENNAN: That is the next part of the question. Basically we make money through selling our produce. We do it at a subsidised rate, so anyone from the school community gets 20 per cent off and anyone in the broader community pays the full rate. A large organic box is \$75, and a small box is \$50. That is the main income stream, but then as I mentioned before, the education programs at other schools pay a fee for service. Corporate experiences and corporate partnerships are an income stream too, and then there are the workshops, as I mentioned earlier.

Roma BRITNELL: What is the profitable part then – the veggies are not really making money?

James McLENNAN: The veggies, if we sell 50 boxes a week, which we are on track to do at both sites – we have only been selling for three weeks at Colac, and we are already selling 21 boxes a week – throughout the whole year, that is financially viable for supporting our farm team, and then roles like mine and other head office expenses will eventually, by school number 6 or 7, be supported by the profit from each site.

Roma BRITNELL: Unless the cost of fuel goes up and the price of the box doubles.

James McLENNAN: Well, as I mentioned, our boxes will not because there is no delivery.

Roma BRITNELL: Oh, yes. Sorry.

James McLENNAN: The families are picking them up from school when they pick up their students, or the local community can pick them up from local places. Our guarantee is that boxes will not go up in price.

Roma BRITNELL: No fuel or fertiliser costs either.

James McLENNAN: Yes.

Roma BRITNELL: Interesting.

The CHAIR: Dylan.

Dylan WIGHT: Thank you. I will be really quick. This is really awesome, and I love hearing about different programs, initiatives and whatever to keep kids engaged, particularly kids from disadvantaged backgrounds. I am assuming Bellarine Secondary is where you are in the Bellarine?

James McLENNAN: Yes. Correct.

Dylan WIGHT: Can you just talk quickly about how the program is just helping keep some kids that may be at risk engaged in that career education, schooling process, community or whatever it may be?

James McLENNAN: Yes, great. Specifically, our farmer incubator program does just this. I guess also it is giving these students a taste of a pathway that they may not have thought ever existed. I think if you walked into any classroom in a secondary school in Victoria today and said, 'Who wants to be a farmer?' 99.9 per cent of the students would be like, 'You've got to be kidding me. Is that even a career, or is that mythical?' I think for us, our first two trainees were classic cases. Paul, an Indigenous student, was going to drop out at the end of

year 10, hated school, was completely disengaged and was also autistic. He was the one who was doing his motor mechanic apprenticeship and he hated it. He is loving – he is now working part time at another farm as well, so he has got two farming jobs. And then on the fifth day of the week he is volunteering. So that is a classic case right there. Charlee was our second trainee. She was disengaged, dyslexic and could not even stand up in front of her class and read an oral presentation. She hopped up in front of 450 philanthropists with me in Melbourne a few weeks ago and presented with me, and she is absolutely in her element. She is employed now three days a week doing our deliveries. I could continue with so many stories – anecdotal evidence of how this is a beneficial program and needs to be happening more. The fact that we supported them in terms of it is their school, so it makes sense, they can get there by their bus and actually work for us as well, and in an environment that they feel comfortable in. So it is a win–win.

Dylan WIGHT: Cool.

The CHAIR: And it is a credit to you, James, because you are a great mentor for people as well. You have just created such a really supportive environment that I know the kids just absolutely love being with you and on the farm as well.

James McLENNAN: Thanks, Alison.

The CHAIR: It is incredible.

Roma BRITNELL: How do you clone that to make it successful all over?

The CHAIR: Yes, we have got to clone you, James.

James McLENNAN: We have got a team of 19 staff now across two sites and our head office as well. We have got some amazing staff, so it is happening.

The CHAIR: I am sorry, we have to wrap up. I would have loved to come visit the school as well and show the committee, but we can picture it and we can picture the wonderful farm that you have. Thanks for your time today. We really appreciate it.

Witness withdrew.