

TRANSCRIPT

LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY LEGAL AND SOCIAL ISSUES COMMITTEE

Inquiry into Early Childhood Engagement of CALD Communities

Melbourne—Monday, 14 October 2019

MEMBERS

Ms Natalie Suleyman—Chair

Mr James Newbury—Deputy Chair

Ms Christine Couzens

Ms Emma Kealy

Ms Michaela Settle

Mr Meng Heang Tak

Mr Bill Tilley

WITNESSES

Ms Kim Little, Deputy Secretary, Early Childhood Education, and

Mr Mathew Lundgren, Director, Early Learning Participation Branch, Early Learning Division, Department of Education and Training.

The CHAIR: Good afternoon. Welcome to the Legal and Social Issues Committee's Inquiry into Early Childhood Engagement of Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Communities. I declare the meeting open. At this stage all mobile phones should be turned to silent.

I welcome Mr Mathew Lundgren, the Director of the Early Learning and Participation Branch, Early Learning Division, Department of Education and Training; and also Ms Kim Little, Deputy Secretary, Early Childhood Education Department of Education and Training.

I need to state this as well: all evidence taken by this Committee is protected by parliamentary privilege, therefore you are protected against any action for what you say here today but if you go outside and repeat some of the things, including on social media, those comments may not be protected by privilege. And of course, all evidence today is being recorded by Hansard. You will be provided with a proof version of the transcript for you to check as soon as possible. Verified transcripts, PowerPoint presentations and handouts will be placed on the Committee's website as soon as possible.

I now invite you to provide a 5 to 10-minute statement to the Committee, and then we will continue on with some questions. Thank you.

Ms LITTLE: Thank you very much. I would like to start of course by acknowledging the traditional custodians of the land that we are meeting on today, the people of the Kulin nation. I would like to give my respect to their elders, past, present and emerging, and to any Aboriginal elders or people here with us today. Of course I would like to acknowledge all Committee members, including the Chair, the Honourable Natalie Suleyman. Thank you very much for your warm welcome today. I would also of course like to introduce my colleague, Mathew Lundgren, who has also been mentioned by the Chair, who is going to be supporting me today.

On behalf of the Department of Education and Training, I am very pleased to present to the Committee the department's written submission, which has been provided at the end of last week, to this Inquiry. It does include contributions from our colleagues in the Department of Health and Human Services, who will be appearing later today, and the Department of Premier and Cabinet. It outlines the key programs relevant to CALD engagement within the early childhood context and the data and qualitative information that we have available. I intend to focus on the early learning programs delivered by the Department of Education and Training today. My colleagues from DHHS will of course cover off the content relevant to their department.

As you would know, the Education State is about excellence and equity in education. The plan is to build a world-class education system so everyone, regardless of background and circumstance, has access to a great education and the best possible chance to reach their full potential. A key part of that is ensuring that early childhood, school education and vocational training are all accessible to all Victorians across the state. This includes ensuring that our CALD communities and their children can have an experience that is inclusive of their diversity and difference so that family background, language or financial circumstances do not dictate their children's opportunities in life. We want to also ensure that in addition to accessibility and inclusiveness of services there is equity across impact, with professionals who translate high expectations for all children into effective practice that is adapted to the individual needs of children.

The Education State *Early Childhood Reform Plan* is a 10-year plan that sets out a program of reform to help every Victorian child and family access high-quality, equitable and inclusive services. This includes the introduction of the Australian-first School Readiness Funding, which I will touch on later, and other supports for kindergartens' quality and access. Since the release of the plan the department has also of course commenced implementation of further major government reforms, including the introduction of universal

three-year-old kindergarten, another Australian first, and the early childhood languages program, which I will say something about in more detail in a moment and I am happy to answer more questions on.

Kindergarten programs in Victoria: the department recognises of course that Victoria is made up of very many diverse communities with many people born overseas or having at least one parent born overseas. Very importantly, we recognise the richness that comes from this and the strength that gives to our great state. We want to ensure that different cultural communities are responded to by services in early childhood and the needs are dealt with at a local level as well as across the state. All of this work is underpinned by something called the *Victorian Early Years Learning and Development Framework*, which I will refer to from this point on as the VEYLDF, which supports professionals working with children aged 0 to 8 and includes eight practice principles. The principles of equity and diversity are enshrined within these eight practice principles, and they reflect the expectation that early childhood services such as kindergarten are inclusive and a safe place for all children and families. We want all children, including those from a CALD background, participating in high-quality four-year-old kindergarten and, importantly, as it rolls out, three-year-old kindergarten across the state as well. In terms of CALD participation, the enrolment data that is set out in our submission indicates there has been a strong increase in the number of children in four-year-old kindergarten who speak another main language at home other than English. That number has almost doubled over the last five years, from 9437 in 2013 to 18 195 in 2018. It is a really, really significant increase, and I can say more about what we think might be behind that, including better data recording.

I would like to note to the Committee that we do not have a participation rate for CALD children. You may have noticed that in our written submission. While we have the enrolment data for children who speak a language other than English at home, there is no comparable population estimate to give us a denominator. I would also like to note that even if that information were available the key thing would be to ensure that it was disaggregated, because a general CALD average participation rate of course can conceal as much as it reveals. Actually the qualitative data we have indicates that the experience across different CALD communities is very different, and so we have instead invested in looking at what are the particular issues and challenges that face local communities across the state, rather than working on producing a single CALD participation rate, which as I said is currently statistically unavailable.

In terms of barriers that have been identified through that qualitative and quantitative work, while we deliver a range of initiatives and subsidies to support all children to participate in kindergarten, we do, based on our best evidence, think the participation is lower amongst certain CALD communities. So the overall data is positive, but more local fine-grained information indicates that children from some CALD communities are less likely to attend kindergarten. The submission goes through the range of barriers and challenges that have been identified by different communities in order to do that, and I am happy to talk about that in more detail. In particular we have done work with the Somali, Vietnamese and Chinese communities as examples of the barriers being faced. Practical issues as well as information-sharing issues have been identified through those, as well as people's need to feel safe and included within services.

At the request of the Deputy Premier, the Parliamentary Secretary for Early Childhood Education, Ms Sonya Kilkenny, is leading a project that was commenced prior to the commencement of this Inquiry to investigate and address kindergarten participation and attendance issues. It includes but is not limited to CALD participation. This project includes a stream of work focused on better understanding and supporting CALD participation, and further information about this work is included in the written submission, including community engagement and consultation activities; the development and trialling of communications materials, including digital stories—so those are stories from the community to the community about the experience of kindergarten and its positive benefits for children—and partnerships with Foundation House, fka Children's Services, who I understand have appeared here this morning, and the Brotherhood of St Laurence. This work will continue into 2020.

I would just like to flag at a high level, before of course ending my opening statement, two particular programs which are of relevance to the CALD community. The early childhood language program, which commenced this year, is enabling kindergartens to deliver language programs at no additional cost to parents. So far 136 services have started delivering the program. It will be delivered in 15 languages, including Arabic, Punjabi, Mandarin, Vietnamese, Greek, French, Italian, Auslan and some Aboriginal languages. It is an

opportunity for young people to experience a new language in a high-quality, play-based learning environment that they are familiar with. This will of course bring many benefits to CALD and non-CALD children, including building cultural awareness and an understanding amongst children from all backgrounds, as well as an appreciation of the value of multilingualism.

For example, at Havilah Road Preschool in Bendigo children are learning Karen, which is helping them to understand and develop relationships with the local Burmese refugee community. At Jindi Kindergarten and Extended Care in Mernda children from a wide range of cultural backgrounds are learning Punjabi together, reflecting the service's commitment to fostering and valuing children's home languages.

The other initiative I wanted to flag at a high level was school readiness funding. School Readiness Funding is effectively equity funding for kindergarten. It is being rolled out over three years. The first year was this year, another tranche geographically next year and the final tranche the year after. It will also be available during the rollout of three-year-old kindergarten. So funding is allocated based on the level of educational disadvantage in each kindergarten service as measured by their student family occupation index, which is essentially the same measure used for equity funding into government schools as well.

So there are essentially three key priorities through that funding, the third of which may be of particular interest to this Committee. The first priority is around oral language development, because we know children from educationally disadvantaged backgrounds are more likely to struggle with their oral language development, which is the foundation for literacy and success in school as well as communication with others. The second priority is around social and emotional wellbeing, which includes children who may have experienced trauma but is not limited to those children; and, finally, there is participation and inclusion. In that context significant work is being undertaken, including with fka, in order to support kindergartens to be more welcoming and inclusive places for CALD families.

This funding also provides a bilingual library consultancy service, which helps kindergarten services to set up and effectively use a culturally appropriate and bilingual library to engage and support children and families from diverse backgrounds. I am also happy to talk at length about transition programs about the early years of schooling. In conclusion, the department is committed to continuing to work closely with CALD families to build on the supports already in place in kindergarten, transition to school and the early years of primary school. Critically we recognise that this work is never finished. This work is an ongoing process of engaging with local and changing communities, finding out what their needs are, and mobilising across services and communities to do the best possible job for children and their families. Thank you.

Ms SETTLE: On the language program, we heard from a few people this morning that wondered if there should be more oversight on the languages that are selected and whether kindergartens should be encouraged to focus on the community's language rather than—I think we heard examples from both of your electorates—languages that did not necessarily relate to the community. I just wonder whether what we are seeing is the language learning is really just around the understanding that there are many more cultures and therefore it does not matter, or is it about the children in the community feeling that their language is acknowledged?

Ms LITTLE: Yes. The process of selecting languages was undertaken through the expression of interest process where we invited kindergarten services to put themselves forward because obviously the kindergarten needs to want to deliver it and want to take on extra staff and to change their programs—particularly for the bilingual program, which up to 10 services undertake, but also for the lighter touch languages program. They were asked to nominate up to three language preferences, and those were chosen based on consideration of the needs of the local community, the views of parents and families, supporting continuity of language learning for children into primary school—obviously all primary schools have a focus on a particular language; in some cases it was felt to be important by that community that you have continuity of learning between what was happening in the kindergarten and in the most likely local primary school for those children to go to—and the availability of qualified early childhood teachers with language skills in that language.

You can imagine a situation, and perhaps this is what has happened in the case that has been referred to, where you may have a preference within the community for a particular language but it may or may not be the case that there is availability of language teachers against those languages and there might also be some competing considerations about the key language being offered in the local primary school or primary schools. So that was

all considered through the process. I am sure that there would be a variety of views on whether or not the results are exactly right, but I can assure you that the community's preferences and the views of parents and children going to those services were certainly considered. I know there were efforts at all of the services to survey parents and engage with parents going to those services.

I think there are a variety of different purposes served by the language program, which goes to your question. In some cases the main purpose being served is about the language that perhaps the majority or a significant minority of children might be speaking at home and connecting with that language. In other cases it might be that the kindergarten is so diverse that there is no obvious community language, and sometimes parents might have an interest, for example, in their children learning a language that they think of as a language that will be beneficial to them in the world beyond that community—so, say, Mandarin, for example, or Hindi or Auslan. In some cases there is an interest in learning languages that only very few children, and perhaps only very few people, might be speaking in Victoria. An example would be some of the Aboriginal languages. There has been a huge interest from Aboriginal Community-Controlled services but also services that are not Aboriginal Community-Controlled in engaging with that. We have been working very closely with the traditional owners about what is appropriate and acceptable in those circumstances.

I think the premise of your question is absolutely right. There are a variety of different purposes being served. It does depend on a community-by-community preference, and sometimes there will be different considerations that might pull against one another in choosing the language. As I say, three preferences were asked to be submitted by each kindergarten through that process.

Ms SETTLE: May I ask a follow-up question on that? It was really just around the workforce. One of the things that I thought was interesting that came out this morning is that we will have a big intake of Syrian refugees now, but that might change in five years time. So how do we train the linguists? You say there is already an issue with having trained people. Is there work looking at how we make sure we have got those linguists in the classroom in terms of training—workforce building?

Ms LITTLE: Yes. The two things that these programs require to be successful, besides of course the collaboration and support of the parents and the community and the service itself, include people with appropriate early childhood qualifications, preferably university-qualified teaching qualifications but in some circumstances where that is not possible vocationally educated educators, so they might have a diploma qualification. People who have the appropriate qualifications to be working every day with young children combined with people who have the appropriate language and language teaching skills, and as you might imagine there is actually a very close, almost case management approach with each kindergarten. In some cases they have been able to very quickly and easily locate someone who fits those descriptions and have them come and work. In other cases it has been quite difficult. We have had to work very closely with those services about finding kindergarten teachers or educators who would be appropriate for doing that work. Some of our early years managers, which is what we used to call kindergarten cluster managers, have a range of services within their remit. They might share a teacher across a number of different services, which helps with those workforce issues.

One of the things that I would flag that is likely to support a pipeline of people from CALD backgrounds coming into early childhood education, not just for the languages program but more broadly—given the feedback that we have received from community that having people from your community working within a service helps to make it more welcoming and inclusive—is that from next year the Government is introducing free TAFE for early childhood education. The two qualifications from the VET—vocational education and training—side that are required under the national law which governs all early childhood services in order to work in an early childhood service are either a certificate III in early childhood education or a diploma qualification. Those people work in a certain ratio with teachers in early childhood services. So by introducing the free TAFE offer to those qualifications it means that it really opens up an amazing opportunity for people from all kinds of communities, including CALD communities, who might otherwise have experienced the cost of that as a barrier, to participate and to receive jobs. And the thing of course that three-year-old kindergarten does is provide another 6000 additional jobs, including 2000 VET-educated jobs, across the course of the next 10 years.

So we would be seeing the introduction of free TAFE, the introduction of scholarships for university-qualified teachers—very generous scholarships, which I am happy to say more about—and the job opportunities created by both the growing population and the languages program and also three-year-old kindergarten as providing a fantastic opportunity to work with those communities, to get women and men within them the opportunity to train and work in service.

Ms COUZENS: Thank you very much for that comprehensive presentation from the department. Obviously you are doing some amazing work. You have already covered a number of questions that I had, but I suppose my focus is more on the regional and rural communities, the influx of refugees and whether the department is actually keeping more comprehensive data to accommodate addressing the issues of those young children that are not necessarily accessing kindergarten, whether it be three-year-old or four-year-old kinder. I am just wondering if you could give us a bit of an idea of whether you are actually looking at that and then how that would be considered.

Ms LITTLE: Yes, absolutely. I might turn to my colleague in a moment and ask that he give you some information about a project called the central enrolment project, which I think is a really key part of this in rural and regional and in other communities. But just to go to, I suppose, the heart of your question, which is are we engaged in whether or not refugee families, or indeed any families, might not be enrolling in four-year-old kindergarten and in future three-year-old kinder, the answer is: absolutely. We want every child to receive the benefits of kindergarten. The international evidence is very well established: high-quality, teacher-led early learning changes children's lives for the better. So there are no children who would benefit more from that than children from refugee backgrounds.

We work very closely at the local level when new communities arrive and are established to make contact with community leaders, whether by ourselves or working with Foundation House, for example—we talk in our submission about the partnership we have with Foundation House around refugee families who are arriving; indeed they recently won an award, an early years award, for some of the work that they have been doing—to locate and connect with local communities as they arrive, to figure out what their needs are and what the barriers and challenges to being engaged are. Some of them are really simple and really practical, like the time of year people arrive. At the risk of digressing on that particular issue, one of the things we have introduced over the last couple of years is what we called Pre-Purchased Places. So basically we go to services and we say, 'Can you please generate and set aside a set of places for families?'—whether they be new migrant families, refugee families or families who are transitory, perhaps experiencing difficulties in their life—so that if Mum and Dad and family for whatever reason cannot get themselves enrolled six months beforehand, which is not within everyone's gift to do, there are places waiting for families within that service and that they have been planned for.

Another example of the work that would be going on is again about the School Readiness Funding that is available. We are only in the first year of rollout of that. We have got two more years to go to reach the whole state, so I suppose I am talking about some of the things that are happening now but also the longer term. One of the things that funding allows, because it is flexible funding, around participation and inclusion is not only the purchasing of various supports that are on a menu, but if services feel, for example, that they want to run community engagement programs—let us say really practical things like morning teas, afternoon teas, engaging with mums and dads and grandparents, bringing on a bicultural worker, and we have seen an example of that at a service in Dandenong where they brought on a bicultural worker to engage with a particular community—then they can use that money for that purpose in a flexible, local way to be able to engage.

But I might ask Mat to say something about central enrolment, because there is local action and there is systemic action, and central enrolment is a really useful example of some systemic action.

Ms COUZENS: Thank you.

Mr LUNDGREN: Yes, ideally a combination of the systemic and the local, so Kim touched on the fact we are working closely with local communities and including local government. So, yes, that point around the data—obviously getting real-time, very age-specific local data is really challenging. We know local government have a level of information and obviously have a finger on the pulse that we will not always have.

So the central enrolment project, which Kim mentioned, will be working with all local governments hopefully in time but certainly the majority at the moment, to expand—

Ms COUZENS: Sorry, can I just ask: is that metro, or is it regional and rural, or across the board?

Mr LUNDGREN: It is across the board.

Ms LITTLE: Yes.

Ms COUZENS: Okay, thank you.

Ms LITTLE: In fact regional and rural services are often some of the biggest champions of central enrolment.

Mr LUNDGREN: So it is our goal in time that it will cover everywhere. As Kim mentioned, it is certainly in metro and rural areas now, and often rural areas are where it can work most effectively sometimes. There is a lot involved in that, and every local government runs things a little bit differently, but where we are trying to get to—as well as expanding coverage—is making it much more proactive. The limitation of most central enrolment schemes at the moment is that it has relied on the parents or the carer proactively knowing that it is open and this is the due date and, ‘I need to get online or get my form in and get in the queue’, if you like. So we are working with local governments to make that a more proactive system for vulnerable cohorts of children, potentially linking in with maternal and child health data, which is something that we have spoken a lot to the Municipal Association of Victoria about, and other forms of information, which could obviously include information about refugee arrivals to get the kindergarten offer in front of them so they can say, ‘Okay, these are your choices, these are your local kindergartens. Can you please let us know what will work for you and what information you need?’ rather than the other way, where it is reliant on action. So as part of that project we are rolling out ongoing grants to local governments to support them to operate a system, and as part of that we will be working to expect that these are the sorts of features we would like to see, including moving towards that more proactive approach.

Ms COUZENS: And that is happening now?

Ms LITTLE: Yes, that is happening now. I will give one example, I beg your forbearance, in Moreland City Council, which is not a rural or regional example, but it is a good one. The council receive funding from the department, from DET, to review the needs of newly arrived migrants. So they identified the top 10 languages spoken within their community and developed one-page simple fact sheets about the central enrolment scheme, which allows a single point of entry then for being able to enrol. You do not have to go around to each kindergarten to enrol your child. It was for distribution at MCH services, medical clinics, neighbourhood houses and real estate agents, so for people newly coming in. We do find, particularly with some CALD communities, there is a high level of trust often in maternal and child health nurses, which I am sure my—

Ms COUZENS: Yes.

Ms LITTLE: And so maternal and child health nurses are a really key point of entry. Many maternal and child health nurses will sit with families and help them do the paperwork to enrol.

The review that the council did enabled them to identify the best methods to reach vulnerable families. They did outreach activities at bilingual kindergartens, at new parent groups, at immunisation sessions and at libraries. So it is a really great example of what Mat is talking about: going out to where communities are rather than expecting communities to come to you.

In addition to this the central enrolment application form, which can often be quite a long form, was condensed to a few pages to reduce what was seen as a cumbersome process, an intimidating process, by families. So that is an example of something that can happen anywhere, and that is happening right now, through this central enrolment project.

And I would like to emphasise Matt’s point about local government. The role of local government is critical. The department takes our partnership with all 79 local governments across the state extremely seriously. The

government is often at the heart of early childhood provision and planning. Whether or not they directly provide MCH, whether or not they directly provide kindergarten, they are always financially supporting MCH—and usually delivering it—and they also own much of the infrastructure that kindergarten and early learning gets delivered in. So we see them and their deep knowledge of their local communities as an absolutely key partner in all of this work.

Ms COUZENS: So is much of the information in language—that is put out into communities? Mat might know.

Mr LUNDGREN: Yes. A lot of basic information about kindergarten enrolments as well as what local councils do in terms of central enrolment—just general departmental information about kindergarten and different subsidies available—is printed in about 10 different languages. The other thing we have done in the last year is that there is a parent opinion survey that is done for kindergarten—I think we are now into our third one—which is a key means of getting feedback, both at a statewide level and at a local government level, and certainly also at an individual service level, about parents' perception of kindergarten: are they satisfied with it and what would they like to see improved? That is now also being translated into 10 different languages, just to make sure that as well as accessing the kindergarten program being able to provide feedback is also open to as many people as possible. So that is something we will no doubt continue to learn about, as well as having the translated materials—like a lot of these things—getting them in the right places and making sure the message resonates.

Ms COUZENS: I am assuming those 10 languages are the most common languages in that community. So where there is a community that is emerging, generally refugee communities, are you monitoring that? Do you have data that says there are large groups of Syrian refugees, for example, coming into Victoria—which they are, including in Geelong, in my electorate? Are you monitoring that and thinking, 'We need to be moving on these communities', even though they might not fall into that category of 10? Is that something that is there, that is happening or may be happening?

Mr LUNDGREN: Yes. One thing I will mention on that is we get the data—obviously Syrian refugees is a good example—we have the data and we know that is a significant influx into the state and then at a more local level. But coming back to the point about local government, that is where I think we really have much more direct information.

So, particularly thinking about kindergarten provision—that very specific age cohort—what we have found in the past is that there has been a significant influx of Syrians and Iraqis and families will go to some areas, but in other areas where on the face of it the data indicates there are a lot of people moving in, it has not really been reflected so much in kindergarten demand, because of the nature of that population, the families with young kids or families with older kids. So we are aware of the broader data at a state level but are reliant on local government and our regional staff—that work in areas and work very closely with local governments and services and other community organisations—that will be telling us, 'Look, these are the areas'. Sometimes very specific kindergarten services, in very specific locations within a local government, they will gravitate to and—

Ms LITTLE: Become a kindergarten of choice.

Mr LUNDGREN: Yes, looking to respond to that. Probably the statewide data that we receive more formally is limited in its application at that local level.

Ms LITTLE: If you do not mind, just one thing I might say quickly, back on that issue about the system and the local: one of the things we have tried to do with the design of the School Readiness Funding, of the equity funding, certainly children from refugee backgrounds would attract—it is not an individual package, but individual children's profiles are used to calculate the total amount of money that then goes to the service. So if you had a service, for example, that found itself catering to a new community, let us say to become the kindergarten of choice because of the location or its reputation with a particular community, then you would expect that to be then reflected in the amount of School Readiness Funding that they received. The advantage of that is that because School Readiness Funding is a funding source that has a framework around it and a menu around it of evidence-based supports but allows the service working with their local DET office to select and

design the interventions which best suit their local community—rather than having a whole series of smaller programmatic interventions that, with all due respect to myself and central colleagues, are decided in central office; there will be this intervention, there will be this program—then instead we can work at our area office with that service and with that immediate local community on helping to design something that draws on the evidence certainly but that is customised to those communities. So we are trying to design system solutions that are able to be tailored locally so that they can be responsive to changes such as the change you were talking about.

As I say, School Readiness Funding has only been rolled out in a certain part of state; it has got two more years to be rolled out fully. But I really do think it is an additional 10 per cent of funding on top of the kindergarten budget, so when it is at full rollout it will be approximately \$40 million a year extra across the state for four-year-old kinder, and when three-year-old kinders are at full rollout it is another \$40 million. That is \$80 million extra into the system to support oral language development and social and emotional wellbeing, which particularly for refugee families can be an issue obviously—children and families who have suffered trauma; they may need extra supports in order to thrive and feel comfortable in a service—as well as participation and inclusion. The trick then becomes supporting people working on the ground to help them make the best possible use of that funding and to adapt as things change.

Ms COUZENS: Great. Thank you both very much.

The CHAIR: Any further questions? No. Thank you very much for presenting here today. I appreciate it.

Ms LITTLE: Thank you. Our pleasure.

Witnesses withdrew.