

TRANSCRIPT

LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL LEGAL AND SOCIAL ISSUES COMMITTEE

Inquiry into the State Education System in Victoria

Bendigo – Tuesday 16 April 2024

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Ryan Batchelor – Deputy Chair

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David Ettershank

Wendy Lovell

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WITNESS

Cindy Growcott, Teacher, Virtual School Victoria.

The CHAIR: I declare open the Legislative Council Legal and Social Issues Committee's public hearing on the inquiry into state education in Victoria. Please ensure your mobile phones have been switched to silent and that background noise is minimised.

I would like to begin this hearing by respectfully acknowledging the Aboriginal people, the traditional custodians of the various lands we are gathered on today, and I pay my respects to their elders, ancestors and families. I particularly welcome any elders or community members who are here today to impart their knowledge of the issues to the committee. Thank you to the All Seasons hotel for hosting us today. I would like to welcome all the members of the gallery today.

Before continuing I want to introduce the panel today. My name is Trung Luu; I am the Chair of the committee and a Member for Western Metropolitan Region. To my right is the Deputy Chair Mr Ryan Batchelor, Member for Southern Metropolitan Region. To his right is Ms Rachel Payne, Member for South-Eastern Metropolitan; and to her right is Ms Melina Bath, Member for Eastern Victoria Region. To my left is Mrs Moira Deeming, Member for Western Metropolitan Region; and to her left is Mr Aiv Puglielli, Member for North-Eastern Metropolitan Region. Also joining us, on Zoom, will be Mr Joe McCracken, Member for Western Victoria, and Dr Sarah Mansfield from Western Victoria. Dr Renee Heath is joining us today here on the panel as well – Member for Eastern Victoria Region.

I would like to welcome the witness today, Ms Cindy Growcott from Virtual School Victoria.

Before continuing I would like to read this to you, Cindy: all evidence taken is protected by parliamentary privilege, as provided by the *Constitution Act 1975*, and is further subject to the provisions of the Legislative Council standing orders. Therefore the information you provide during this hearing is protected by law. You are protected against any actions for what you say during this hearing, but if you go elsewhere and repeat the same things, those comments may not be protected by this privilege. Any deliberately false evidence or misleading of the committee may be considered a contempt of Parliament.

All evidence is being recorded. You will be provided with a proof version of the transcript following the hearing. Transcripts will be ultimately made public and posted on the committee website.

Could you please say your name and introduce the organisation you are representing.

Cindy GROWCOTT: Hello, everyone. My name is Cindy Growcott, and I have been teaching at the Virtual School Victoria since 2023. Prior to that I was working at Bendigo Senior Secondary College for about 20-something years. The Virtual School Victoria's physical building is in Melbourne, and we provide education for kids statewide, countrywide and worldwide.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Before I ask you to make an opening statement I would just like to remind the committee that after Ms Growcott makes a statement we will have a few questions. Because of the number of us on the panel, we might limit it to about 4 minutes. Cindy, would you like to make an opening statement in relation to your submission? Is there anything you would like to say?

Cindy GROWCOTT: Gee, how do I sum that up in a few sentences? I feel really privileged to be able to teach young people, but, sadly, I think our education system has been in a slow decline over my experience over 20 or 30 years. I would really like to see some big improvements made, especially to get to those people who are struggling with education and finding it really difficult. My values as a teacher are to try and bring up those people who are struggling with education and with things like literacy and numeracy and to provide them with an opportunity to make the best of their lives and reach their potential, and I think education is the best way to go about doing that. I really value public education. I have worked in the system for a long time as a teacher and have just seen the difference that it can make to young people's lives.

The CHAIR: Fantastic. Thank you. Before I open it to the panel, I just want to ask one question about your submission. I am just curious in relation to section (d). You mentioned 'the impact of school leadership on student wellbeing, learning outcomes and school culture' and that you left the school because of that reason.

You said that many are so removed from reality and that building relationships is not the answer to everything. Do you want to expand on that?

Cindy GROWCOTT: I think leadership is a critical aspect of a school's culture. In my experience some people in leadership have not spent much time in the classroom, and I think having an experienced and strong leadership team that are all working together can really build a strong culture amongst the staff. By that I mean you can work in a school with fantastic staff, but if leadership is poor, then the experience of teachers would not be as good as it could be.

The opposite works as well. If you are working in a school that has a number of challenges, if you have got a strong leadership team that is really supportive and understands the challenges that teachers face, I think the staff would be more likely to be happier at that school.

The CHAIR: Thank you. I have a few more questions, but I will open it to the panel. Deputy Chair, Ryan.

Ryan BATCHELOR: Thanks, Chair. Thanks, Ms Growcott, for coming. I will also follow up on the leadership question. What does it look like on a day-to-day level for a teacher to have good, supportive school leadership and what does it look like when you do not?

Cindy GROWCOTT: I will start with the good.

Ryan BATCHELOR: Yes, always.

Cindy GROWCOTT: I think from a teacher's perspective a good leader is aware of the issues that teachers face and does not just brush them off. Sometimes you can talk to some people in leadership and their eyes glaze over if you are talking about things like workload or burnout. But a strong leader makes you feel like they understand your difficulties and the issues that you face and are supportive of you as a teacher. They make a decision, and that decision is almost predictable. It is when they are a bit like a loose cannon and you are not able to predict what the decision is going to be that it sort of creates stress amongst the staff. So it is about having a leader whose decisions are predictable and supportive of the staff. They get to the truth of what is going on rather than what they think is the truth. They talk to their staff and are concerned about their wellbeing. My current principal says, 'Don't have your email open all the time because it's a distraction.' She says, 'Take a break over the holidays. Don't be on your laptop all the time.' I am still kind of grappling with that because it is so different to what I have been used to. So yes, it is someone that understands that you need to have that work-life balance, or life-work balance, and is supportive of that.

I think a good leader also encourages people to participate in things like professional development and furthering and developing their skills in particular areas, especially if there is a need to do that. On the flip side of that, some people in leadership can be not very visible. They close the door to their office and you just do not feel welcome. You feel like every time that you speak to them it is a negative interaction. I think also if they are treating people differently, if there are different rules for different people, that can have a bit of a negative effect amongst staff as well – it is clear that they have, shall we say, favourites. It is really hard to work with that.

But yes, I think it is when their decision-making is predictable and supportive of staff. Look, I do not envy the position of a principal at all. I think they are in a really tough position with staff shortages and so many issues they have to deal with in a school that I am unaware of. But yes, to me that is the difference between a good leader and a not-so-good leader.

Ryan BATCHELOR: Sure. The other area I just want to touch on is – you mentioned at the start of your submission concerns about an overcrowded VCE curriculum. Maybe if you could expand a little bit more on why you think the curriculum is overcrowded and how that impacts on your teaching and the learning of the students.

Cindy GROWCOTT: I think with the difficulties that many kids face with literacy and just understanding what is written in front of them, you need to be able to have time to break down big chunks of information. They even misunderstand what questions mean because their literacy skills are not as good as they perhaps were a few years ago. Like I said in the submission – and I say this a lot – you have got unit 3 and unit 4 each semester, and there is so much in the VCE study designs that you do not have time to build on the kids' skills. They need that repetition of what things are. You find that you spend one lesson on one topic and then you

move on to the next lesson with the next topic and kids really quickly get left behind. Especially in year 12 it is really hard for them to catch up, because there is just so much that you have to get through. I find where students are at now, the level that you are expected to get them to in year 12 is just beyond them.

Ryan BATCHELOR: Do you think that is because their foundational literacy skills are not up to it coming into VCE? So it is not a content question; it is a foundational literacy question.

Cindy GROWCOTT: It goes back further than that.

Ryan BATCHELOR: Right. It is about a school-length approach to literacy right from the start.

Cindy GROWCOTT: I think with teacher training you do not spend any time on how to teach literacy. You either can or you cannot. I think there is a lot –

Ryan BATCHELOR: Sorry, that was just a revelatory statement. You do not get taught how to teach literacy in teacher training – is that right?

Cindy GROWCOTT: No.

Ryan BATCHELOR: Interesting use of a teaching degree.

Cindy GROWCOTT: Yes. A lot of what you do is not relevant.

Ryan BATCHELOR: In the teaching degree.

Cindy GROWCOTT: Yes. You learn more in your first term in a school than your four years.

Ryan BATCHELOR: Right – than in your teaching degree. Very interesting evidence. Thank you, Chair. That is all from me for the moment.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Mrs Deeming, do you want to ask a question?

Moira DEEMING: Thank you so much for coming. I can attest to that, also being a teacher. Yes, we do not get taught basic things like how to actually teach. I was interested in your comments in section (c) on the VIT. Could you expand a bit on that?

Cindy GROWCOTT: The VIT have been around for a few years now, and I think their role is to kind of improve the standing of teachers in the community. I am not really sure what they do. I have tried to call them a few times and just cannot get through. My only experience is that I pay the hundred-or-so dollars in September and then get a cardboard card and that is it. Yes, I am not sure what they really do, to be honest.

Moira DEEMING: That is great. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Ms Payne.

Rachel PAYNE: Hi, Cindy. Thank you for your submission. There was a lot to unpack in there, so I might actually focus just on looking at disengaged students. You sort of make reference to it being an emerging issue prior to COVID. I think that it seems as though there is this emphasis that COVID has sort of ruined either that relationship between teacher and student or student capacity. Do you want to talk me through your experience in that space a little bit?

Cindy GROWCOTT: I think some students are attending school because there is no other viable option for them. I was at Bendigo Senior, which is just VCE, so it has been a long time since I have taught the junior levels. But I found over the time at senior, and it is continuing now at VSV, that the number of students who are just not keen on school, not enthusiastic about it – they are quite disengaged. VSV have a lot of kids who are school refusers for various reasons. I think there are a lot of other pressures on students that mean that education takes a back seat sometimes.

Poverty is a huge issue. Some kids have to work. I would have kids that were working until midnight at Macca's the night before and then rocking up to school the next day. You are expecting them to concentrate, and they have not had breakfast and they are exhausted. That does not help with the levels of engagement as

well. Some parents, I think, do not value education, and so then that continues on through the next generation. It is just somewhere to go when they feel like it, but they are not really getting the best or the most out of the opportunities that are provided for them.

Look, there are so many reasons why kids are disengaged. It could be struggling with the work, it could be social or it could be for financial reasons. They could have a really difficult upbringing and home life. They might be couch surfing because they are homeless for various reasons. So to expect them to sit in a classroom and take in what you are trying to teach them when their head is elsewhere I think causes a lot of disengagement as well. Then when they do go to school they are so far behind. They might attend for one day and then think, 'I'm too far behind. What is the point?' And so it is very difficult to get them back again.

Rachel PAYNE: Yes, it is hard to re-engage. Thank you. That makes a lot of sense. You have touched on rushing through the curriculum, but you also mention in your submission administrative burdens. Do you want to walk us through what your day-to-day or month-to-month looks like when it comes to your administration?

Cindy GROWCOTT: Look, honestly it is not so bad at VSV. It has been such a refreshing change at that school because the workload feels like a lot less. Prior to that, though, I would get to school at maybe 7 or 7:30 just to get ready for the day, and then the printer probably does not work because someone has jammed it and left it. It is not just about teaching anymore. A lot of my friends are talking about burnout and stress and workload issues. It is not the classroom; the classroom is not the issue. It is all that extra stuff that you have to deal with that takes away from your teacher planning time. You are spending time in a meeting that is pointless sometimes when you could be planning with your team, like coming up with engaging activities.

Yes, I would get to school at about 7 or 7:30. I would just get my lesson plans ready for the day, because you are probably teaching all day, and then after teaching all day and having a couple of yard duties you go to a meeting at 3:50 until 4:50, and then you go home and you are thinking about the kid that did not turn up, and you worry about them because – where have they been for the last three weeks? There is all that stress. You do not sleep well at night because you wake up and you are thinking about the kids that you are worried about.

There is a lot of admin that you need to chase up. When you are teaching a hundred and something students, it is really hard, especially in the beginning of the year, when you do not know them, to keep on top of, you know, 'Such-and-such has got anxiety, so don't ask them to speak in class'. You get all these messages from coordinators and wellbeing people that you have got to remember when you are still trying to learn their names. It is stressful if you make a mistake. But, yes, it is just a lot of the admin.

We were talking about excursions before. I stopped taking kids on excursions because the paperwork is just too onerous. You just think it is not really worth it. It is hours and hours to prepare an excursion that you know would be really beneficial, but you do not do it because of the administration part of it. If it was just marking rolls and moving on, it would be easy, but it is a lot more than that.

Rachel PAYNE: Thank you for your response.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Ms Bath.

Melina BATH: Thanks, Chair. Thank you so much for being here, Cindy. We really appreciate your depth of knowledge too from 20-plus years in teaching VCE. Your submission speaks to teacher training being severely lacking, and we have touched on it so far. I would like you to expand. You have been teaching in a niche space really for that period of time, that upper-year level. When a principal would hire a year 11 and 12 teacher, you would expect them to be very good at the basics – very good at literacy and numeracy, particularly if they are teaching maths – but can you speak to your experience in that school? Have you seen examples where teacher training is so lacking that new teachers are illiterate or the like? I am not trying to lead you, I just want to understand that further.

Cindy GROWCOTT: Even now a lot of teachers do not bother correcting things like spelling mistakes, so how is a student going to learn? It comes back to not having the time to reinforce those basic skills. But, yes, I have had some preservice teachers that are not familiar with the content, so they really struggle. You know, if you do not understand something yourself, it is really hard to teach it to somebody else. They are not picking up on 'Okay, this is how you write a paragraph' even, or 'This is what the question means' – like breaking it down.

Melina BATH: Is this the teacher not understanding that or the teacher not being able to explain it to the student?

Cindy GROWCOTT: Probably both. Because if they do not understand it, then they are not going to be able to explain it to them as well.

Melina BATH: Certainly. Could you explain – if that new teacher is coming in, or preservice teacher, do they stay? Are they employed? How long would they stay? Can you paint a picture of that scenario?

Cindy GROWCOTT: Often when you have a preservice teacher, you will have them for maybe a three- or four-week block and then they go. They go back to uni, and then in a couple of months they do another teaching round at a different school. So, yes, there is not a lot of opportunity.

Melina BATH: So they are in the training phase. For the new teachers coming in to that Bendigo senior school, how long do they stay? Do you have the thought, ‘That one’s not going to last long’? I am just trying to understand. Part of this is about finding solutions to recruit and retain teachers in our schools. What are some of the things that you need to tell us about that?

Cindy GROWCOTT: I think at Bendigo Senior it was a great place to teach, and so you do not have those same difficulties that you might have in a junior school.

Melina BATH: In junior school, yes.

Cindy GROWCOTT: But you are exactly right; I would expect people who are teaching the subject to have a really comprehensive understanding of it. I have taught subjects that I am not trained to teach, and that then creates problems, because I just do not have the understanding.

Melina BATH: Is that common, do you think, now?

Cindy GROWCOTT: Very.

Melina BATH: Okay. To what extent, do you think? It is called teaching out of modality – something like that – isn’t it? Teaching out of speciality. Teaching in an area you do not know.

Cindy GROWCOTT: I would say in certain subjects it is more common than others. In the maths/sciences, not so common. In the languages, not common at all. In the humanities, maybe English. Not so much PE; I do not know of any examples there. But there are certain subjects that people have the perception that, ‘Oh, anyone can teach that.’ I taught business management. I hated the subject – it was boring – and I am not qualified to teach it.

Melina BATH: But they were short of teachers in that space?

Cindy GROWCOTT: Not necessarily short, but they are like, ‘Well, you’ve taught legal for too long now; you need to mix it up.’ It is like, ‘You’re mad if you put me in front of a business class,’ because I am just not comfortable.

Melina BATH: So there needs to be in leadership recognition of individual teachers’ expertise and retainment of that for a positive outcome rather than mandating that they cross over to a new subject. That is an internal thing. In terms of teacher training, what would you like us to say in recommendation to the government if we back up into the university space? What do we need more teachers to be like?

Cindy GROWCOTT: It has been a long time since I was at uni, and, Moira, you might be able to comment better than this, but I think it is having experienced and expert teachers in the universities teaching potential teachers how to teach, rather than academics who maybe have done a masters or something. I think it is someone who has that depth of experience –

Melina BATH: Classroom experience.

Cindy GROWCOTT: because otherwise they do not understand what they have got to do. So yes, they might be able to teach them about ancient China or whatever it is, but –

Melina BATH: Classroom management is a whole different ball game.

Cindy GROWCOTT: I did not do anything on classroom management when I was at uni, but that was a long time ago. Hopefully that has changed, but it does not seem to have with the PSTs that I have had. So yes, I think is really important to have university lecturers and tutors who are teachers rather than academics.

Melina BATH: And to look at the curriculum that they are teaching. Thanks, Chair.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Ms Bath. Mr Puglielli.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Thank you, Chair. Hi. Thank you for coming in today. I would perhaps like to start in reflection on your experiences of the lack of support for teachers within the school environment and the sort of overwork that is being experienced by many and then that consequent impact that flows onto the students and the broader school community. What do you think is the best solution here? Is it more pay? Is it less contact hours, more admin support staff or a combination? What do you think?

Cindy GROWCOTT: I do not think pay is the issue. I am quite happy with my salary. I do not do it for the money. It is not that. You know, having 27 kids in a year 12 classroom with such a range of abilities makes it really difficult to drill down on what each individual student needs – so having a couple less kids. You know, the stresses of teaching at the upper end of secondary are different to lower. It is the workload and the marking and the prep that are the difficult things for VCE teachers.

I do not think more admin staff are necessarily that helpful. I think using the ones that you have got more effectively could be beneficial, and that is a school thing. In the last agreement I think we got an hour less of face-to-face teaching. That is not really making a big difference. Having a meeting for the sake of having a meeting is frustrating because, like I said, that is taking away time you could be meeting with your colleagues – so a bit less of the admin.

Look, I do not think less face-to-face hours is the answer; I think having smaller classes – you know, you need to increase the funding to be able to do that. I think that is the issue. Also, in my experience at Bendigo Senior I had a brilliant head of department who looked after his staff so well. He was brilliant. He did whatever he could to reduce your workload. So instead of teaching three different year 12 subjects like business, industry and legal, he would say, ‘Well, what if we give you some double-ups?’ Again, that is a school decision. They can reduce people’s workload by making those decisions, but it is frustrating when they do not. I think it is really a school-based thing rather than across the board. At Bendigo Senior we had plenty of admin support staff. That was not necessarily the issue.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Okay. Thank you. You just touched on the pressures regarding assessment and that part of the workload in terms of assessing students. On the way we are currently assessing students, particularly towards that exam end of the high school experience, do you think there is a better way that we could be doing that? Are there better kinds of assessments? What would the ideal circumstance look like to you?

Cindy GROWCOTT: Gee, that is a tough question.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: It is pretty tough. You can take it on notice if that helps. It is all good.

Cindy GROWCOTT: I think teachers do get criticised for over-assessing, and I think that is sort of the nature of the beast as well. We do have to prepare them for the exam, but then by the same token we are seeing a lot more students go non-scored. So they do not sit the exam but they will still get their VCE. A lot more students are taking up that, especially over the last 10 years or so, as an option. I think to cram in a year’s worth of knowledge into a 2-hour exam, sight unseen, is really quite unrealistic, and I am not sure in what other jobs you are ever required to do something like that. When a kid is 17 it is an awful lot of pressure for them. You see them around exam time, and they are so stressed out. It just breaks your heart, because it is like ‘Even if you don’t get the scores that you need, there are other ways to get where you want to go.’ Year 12 is not the be-all and end-all, but for some people they do feel like it is. I have heard teachers say to kids, ‘This is not a holiday. You can’t stop working over this two-week break.’ They need a break as much as we do. I think if you understand where a young person is at, you would be a lot more sympathetic and empathetic to what they need. That build-up to the exam is really, really stressful, and they feel a lot of pressure to perform – perhaps better than they are capable of.

I would like to see them do first semester and a midyear exam based on first semester and then the second semester and an end-of-year exam based on the second semester. So it would be a midyear exam and an end-of-year exam, but they would not have to remember what they learned in Feb in November. You know, if we could afford it, then I would love to see that. It is four or five months worth of content rather than 10.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Thank you. Thank you, Chair.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Dr Heath.

Renee HEATH: Thank you. I really enjoyed your presentation and your submission. I am sorry that I was late for class – very embarrassing in front of a teacher.

Cindy GROWCOTT: Well, it is great to see you anyway.

Renee HEATH: Thank you. I have a couple of questions, just picking up on what Mr Batchelor was talking about, which was a school-length approach when it comes to literacy. Teachers are not taught to teach, and it is my understanding that they are not taught to manage classrooms either. Is that correct?

Cindy GROWCOTT: Like I said, it has been a long time since I was at uni, but the preservice teachers that I have had in the past few years are getting nothing that is really beneficial.

Renee HEATH: So where do they learn those skills then?

Cindy GROWCOTT: When you close the door and you are in your classroom.

Renee HEATH: Yes, and they have got to figure it out themselves. There is no coach in the school?

Cindy GROWCOTT: You will often have a mentor when you go to a new school. If you have got a good mentor, that is brilliant. But it is a teacher who has an extra job given to them, and so they might not have the time to be able to help as much. It is not that they do not want to, it is just that you might not have any free time together, so it is impossible to meet. But yes, in your first term and your first year you never really stop learning because different things are cropping up all of the time, so you have to think on your feet. That for a graduate – or for an experienced teacher – causes a lot of stress, and they worry about being seen as not being able to manage the classroom.

Renee HEATH: Yes. That is very interesting. I read an article recently that said that over the last two decades we have had a record increase in funding yet it is being met with a decline in standards. Do you think that the problem is necessarily that there is not enough funding to schools, or is it that these teachers are not equipped with the methods that they need – for instance, for phonics classroom education, all those things – when they come in?

Cindy GROWCOTT: I think everything is very cyclical. The way you teach reading is different to how you taught it five or 10 years ago, and you have got to stay on top of all of those current initiatives, which adds to your stress. I do not think funding is the issue. We had the tutor program, and that was designed to help kids who were falling behind after COVID. So there is money there, but I think what it really comes down to is the teacher practice in the classroom is what makes the biggest difference for the kids in that classroom, and if you have got time to prepare your lessons well and come up with different ideas and share ideas with your colleagues, then that benefits everybody. So I think it is what goes on in the classroom. If the teacher does not understand how you teach kids to write an essay – if they do not know how to do that – it is sort of like the blind leading the blind.

Renee HEATH: That is very good. Thank you. You mentioned something in the conversation there about memory in terms of exams. I was just trying to put this together. It seems that kids are not taught to read well so then when it flips and they have to learn to read, it is very hard to do that and it is hard to catch up. Do you think that potentially kids have a lack of understanding when they are learning, because they are so behind, and then everything is reliant on memory for an exam?

Cindy GROWCOTT: I think a lot of kids do not know how to revise and study as well. I would say that in the last maybe 10 years kids have thought, 'Okay, if I turn up to class and do the work, then that work is done and I don't need to revisit it.'

Renee HEATH: Yes, 'I don't need to understand it and really internalise it.'

Cindy GROWCOTT: Yes. It is so exciting when you read what a kid has written. It is like they are joining the dots and they are making these connections, and it is like: 'Yes!' Then you read what other kids write, and it is like: 'Oh. They just haven't got it.' So I do not think they have the capacity to be able to – they have not revised continually through the year and so when they get to the end it is so overwhelming because there is so much that they know they need to know but they do not. It is like, 'If I can't pick up now all of that year's work, then I'm just not going to try.'

Renee HEATH: Yes, then you are just too behind. In your submission you mentioned that rural and regional children are at a distinct disadvantage. Why is that? Would you mind expanding on that a little bit more? What do you see?

Cindy GROWCOTT: Lack of access to resources like revision lectures. I teach legal, so if you do not live near a courthouse, it is very difficult for you to go and watch a court case happening, whereas people in the city can catch a tram into the city and go and watch and understand what I have taught them and see it in real life. I think that is the biggest issue. In Bendigo it does not feel that bad, but when I was in Ouyen, which is 500 k's from Melbourne, it is really difficult for kids to be able to go to Melbourne and access those revision lectures. We have lecturers come up from Melbourne and attend the school, so that is really helpful. I think it is since COVID there has been some funding where the school actually paid for kids to attend the revision lectures, so that was really helpful.

Renee HEATH: Wow. That would have made a big difference.

Cindy GROWCOTT: But yes, if they are living in a regional area, they go to a small school and it is quite insular – this is a terrible stereotype, but with not a lot of worldly knowledge – they are a bit naive sometimes, and that is where a lot of kids that I teach at VSV are from. It is because the school cannot staff the teacher for that subject, so they enrol through VSV so they can do the subject. So, yes, it is really hard to get teachers to go to those rural and remote areas. I know there is the TFI or something, some extra salary, if you go to those hard-to-staff places, and that is a really good initiative. But also, if I take Ouyen as an example, someone might get paid an extra \$50,000 to go and teach at Ouyen. What about the teachers who have been there for 20 years? Someone comes in and they are earning like \$150,000, when these people who have been there and stood the test of time and been loyal to the school do not get that. It is really difficult sometimes to retain the experienced teachers when they see things like that happening.

I think it is the lack of access to resources. The internet has helped a lot with that; I do not doubt that. But just from a legal perspective they could go and watch Parliament on an afternoon off. They could go and sit in on a Supreme Court case. They could watch a jury being empanelled and things like that. You cannot do that when you live in the country. It is too hard.

Some kids have to travel over an hour to get to school as well. I know they might do that in the city as well, but you might take two country buses to get to school. That adds to your day, and then you go home and you are exhausted, you know.

Renee HEATH: Yes. I think that is my time. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Ms Heath. We also have Mr McCracken on Zoom. Joe, have you got a question?

Joe McCracken: Yes. Hello. Cindy, I could not agree more with basically everything you said. That has been my experience as well. I used to be head of humanities in a school. My question is more about – given humanities is in four distinct areas, the crowded curriculum is an issue, I think, if you want to really teach humanities properly. What do you think could be some sort of solution around that?

Cindy GROWCOTT: Hello. I would really like to see the VCE study designs have less content in them. There is just far too much – and far too much assumed knowledge as well. I am finding in recent years they just assume that kids know things, and it is like, well, I need time in class to actually teach that before I can go on with what is in the actual study designs. Look, I would really like to see the VCAA cut back on the number of dot points that we are expected to teach in years 11 and 12 and do less but do it better – like, teach less but teach it properly so the kids actually understand it, not just have a superficial understanding.

Joe McCracken: That is a pretty fair comment. Do you have anything to say about, say, middle school, junior school, you know, years 7 to 10?

Cindy Growcott: It has been a long time since I have taught 7 to 10 – back in the 90s – so I am not familiar with that, sorry.

Joe McCracken: That is fair enough. No stress. I guess you have probably seen the impact when kids get to VCE and have not got the skills, knowledge et cetera. I guess you are seeing the tail end of it. The other question I had, and it has been talked about a bit, is on teacher training. I am a big fan of an apprenticeship-style model. It is sort of like preservice teaching, but nearly all the time – maybe two or three days a week and one or two days at university or whatever. Do you think that has merit?

Cindy Growcott: Yes, absolutely, and what I would really like to see is that people actually get paid for doing teaching rounds, because they are university students and a lot of them have to work. So if they have got a four-week placement in Swan Hill and they live in Melbourne, they cannot work for that time. They have to pay for accommodation to go and do their teaching rounds, so I think that is absolutely fantastic. And then instead of a short block of time, the preservice teacher can see really how a school runs and develop their skills over a period of time rather than a four-week block that you plan intensively for. I think that is a really great solution.

Joe McCracken: Yes. Okay. I think so too. I think there could be a lot of benefit in it. The other thing I was going to talk about is that I see a lot of teachers coming into the system – and this is not meant to be horrible – but they cannot read very well, they cannot write very well, their spelling is atrocious and the ability to communicate a concept or a message to students is lacking. I guess because the market is so tight at the moment with the lack of teachers in the system a lot of grad teachers are being picked up even though in normal circumstances they may not necessarily get the first position they apply for. What impact do you think that is having on outcomes?

Cindy Growcott: I think the danger is offering them ongoing positions as well straight out of university. I think that may create problems in the future. Look, you could still be a brilliant teacher as a graduate, or you might have 30 years experience and be a fairly ordinary teacher. I think this idea of offering scholarships and free university degrees to do teaching – if your heart is not in it, you are going to struggle, mate. You do not do it for the money. You do not do it because there is no HECS or whatever. It is not a job that you can do –

Joe McCracken: It is a vocation, really.

Cindy Growcott: It is a lifestyle, I think. People think, ‘Oh, the great holidays. They only work 9 till 3.’ If you have been in the classroom, you know how wrong that is. Yes, I think it is problematic putting young graduates into positions where they may not be suited and with a lack of support as well. That can create issues. You want them to stay. You do not want them to be there for the short term. You have to change things up to make it not so horrible for them in their first and second years. You talk to a lot of grads and they are struggling; they did not realise what the job was like. So I think that apprenticeship style – they would have far more of a realistic idea of what the job actually entails and how much goes into it. You do not just walk into a classroom and things magically happen. You have to plan and prepare for it.

Joe McCracken: Yes. I think my time is up. But I was just going to quickly say that perhaps an apprenticeship model might actually lead some of the people out that think, ‘Oh, teaching is holidays’ and all this sort of stuff. You are in there and you get your hands dirty. You see what it is actually like, and people who might be starting out doing a course might think, ‘Oh, maybe this isn’t for me.’ Because you are right: it is not a job, it is a vocation, and you have got to really have your heart and soul in it.

Cindy Growcott: Yes. You do it for the kids. If someone says that they are not in it for the kids, it is like, ‘Oh, that’s alarm bells.’

Joe McCracken: Classic.

Cindy Growcott: Yes.

Joe McCracken: Yes, thank you. Appreciate it.

Cindy GROWCOTT: Thanks.

The CHAIR: Thanks, Joe. Time is almost up. Since you are here, Sarah is also on Zoom. Have you got any questions, Dr Mansfield?

A member: She is not.

The CHAIR: She is not. Okay. Well, in that case I have got just one quick question for you. You mentioned a lot about retaining teachers and you mentioned about curriculums and how to get good teachers. We actually have not touched on the pay. How much does that affect keeping good teachers and attracting good teachers, and are we getting the right pay at the moment for teachers?

Cindy GROWCOTT: Like I said before, I do not have an issue with my salary at all. Of course we would all like more, but I do not need it. I do not do it for that. It is not a big part of why I am a teacher. Look, I think people complained with the last agreement and things like that, and it is like people voted and they accepted it, so we just have to wear it. I think we get paid adequately for the job that we do. That is not the issue. It is more the workload and just having the time to do the best job that you can. That is the hard part.

The CHAIR: Thank you so much for that. Time has caught up with us. Again, I would like to say thank you so much for coming in today. Is there any last statement you want to make before we wrap this up?

Cindy GROWCOTT: Good luck. Putting the funding where it is needed is important, I think, and trying to bring those struggling, disengaged kids up to where they should be to stop that cycle of poverty, generational poverty, I think is really, really important. Stop trying to teach to the top end. Like you were saying before, it is building up kids' skills to be able to have them find employment when they leave school, because I think the employers are going to be frustrated if they are getting applicants who cannot write a résumé or a cover letter. That is a way of culling them. They put them in the no pile. So yes, I think those literacy skills are critical.

The CHAIR: Fantastic. Thank you so much, Cindy, for coming in. Your experience and your submission will enable us to make considerations down the track with our recommendations. Again, thanks for your time.

Cindy GROWCOTT: Yes, I will look forward to you guys fixing the problem next year.

The CHAIR: We will do our best. Thank you.

Witness withdrew.