

TRANSCRIPT

LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY ECONOMY AND INFRASTRUCTURE COMMITTEE

Inquiry into Student Pathways to In-demand Industries

Melbourne—Wednesday 26 November 2025

MEMBERS

Alison Marchant—Chair

Kim O’Keeffe—Deputy Chair

Roma Britnell

Anthony Cianflone

John Mullahy

Nicole Werner

Dylan Wight

WITNESSES *(via videoconference)*

Gail McHardy, Chief Executive Officer, Parents Victoria; and

Jacqui Van de Velde, VPC Education Consultant, Victorian Parents Council.

The CHAIR: Welcome to the public hearings for the Legislative Assembly Economy and Infrastructure Committee's Inquiry into Student Pathways to In-demand Industries.

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I want to thank Gail and Jacqui for joining us today. I know you did not make a written submission, but throughout the Inquiry's hearings we have heard that parents are a massive influence on our students, particularly in their choices of careers, so this will be a really interesting conversation to have with you and some of the information you might have at Parents Victoria and Victorian Parents Council. Jacqui and Gail, do you want to just maybe talk about your roles and then we will jump into some questions?

Gail McHARDY: Are you happy for me to go first, Jacqui?

Jacqui Van de VELDE: Absolutely, Gail. I was going to suggest that. Away you go.

Gail McHARDY: Terrific. Well, good morning, everyone. I am Gail McHardy, the CEO of Parents Victoria. Today, 26 November 2025, we celebrate 100 years of our organisation representing families in Victorian government schools. For that century we have advocated for a public education system that is equitable, inclusive and gives every child the chance to succeed. We work closely with schools, government and community partners to make sure family voices help shape policy and practice. Parents Victoria is distinct from the Victorian Parents Council, which represents families in non-government schools. What we share today reflects the experiences and aspirations of families in the public school system. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thanks, Gail. Jacqui.

Jacqui Van de VELDE: Thanks very much. My name is Jacqui Van de Velde, and I am representing the Victorian Parents Council today. I contracted with them as an Education Consultant, so this is definitely my area. Victorian Parents Council, as Gail has pointed out, represent parents who have children in non-government schools. We are very much about informing, encouraging and empowering parents to respond to the needs of their children. We are a not-for-profit as well. We strive to give parents knowledge and resources so that they can be actively engaged in their children's schooling and education from birth to post school, so we are very much in that early childhood space as well. We have been around since 1959—I do not know whether you can see that on my banner at the back—not as long as Parents Victoria but have certainly been a significant player in this space for a long time. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Jacqui. I might kick us off with questions, because I suppose I would like to really understand—we know that parents are a big influence in decision-making in careers: how do you feel that the school career education advice coming from the school is linking with parents and families and students? Maybe if you could talk to that.

Gail McHARDY: Parents Victoria has spoken to families across the state and what is clear is that parents want to actively support their children in making career decisions but often need clear information, practical guidance and access to real-world experience. What I will do with this question, Alison and the rest of the Committee, is outline solution-focused strategies for career education, work experience and vocational pathways and industry engagement, highlighting how schools, parents and employers can work together to open doors into in-demand careers for all Victorian students.

I need to also alert you that Parents Victoria do wish to acknowledge that the Victorian government have prioritised senior secondary pathways and vocational education as among its priorities, as you know, coming off the Firth review and implementing the recommendations we have been an active member on the advisory group working with the department on the report recommendations. I want to put that out publicly, because we feed in advice from what we are hearing on the ground.

From that solution focus—and then I will hand to Jacqui—it is just basically increasing the resource and professional development for career practitioners so they can provide consistent, high quality guidance across

all year levels; embedding career education into the curriculums from years 7 to 12, not just in final-year activities; for example, understanding the various application screening methods, as we know, in seeking employment or getting into certain pathways, and how best to manage that structure, and panel and behavioural interviews or practical assessments for certain industries are really important; implementing parent-focused tools and workshops to help families actively participate in career conversations—this does not have to always fall to schools, and industry could play a role here too; and introducing digital career dashboards linking pathways, courses and in-demand jobs accessible to students and parents. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thanks, Gail.

Jacqui Van de VELDE: Thank you, Alison, and I will support everything that Gail has just said. I am going to add to that rather than repeat what she has so eloquently put together.

In our discussions with parents across the state in non-government schools, generally speaking there is an inconsistency, and career education often starts a little bit too late in the view of parents, so many programs are often lacking across the curriculum and around meaningful industry engagement. Parents do want and aspire to have access to comprehensive, early and practical career education that prepares them for the rapidly changing workforce.

We have got a couple of solutions there too, concurring with Gail's point about beginning career education really from year 7 and having it embedded as much as possible across the curriculum; adopting a whole school approach that involves all staff and that commitment from leadership to make it across the whole school; strengthening partnerships with industry, so it is not all sitting on the school's shoulders to provide those real-world insights and experiences; some investing in personal and professional development for teachers and career practitioners; and, again, using the digital tools and career action plans to support children and students as they are planning and reflecting on what their choices might be going forward.

The CHAIR: Great. Thank you so much, Gail and Jacqui. Nicole, I might head to you next.

Nicole WERNER: Thank you, Gail and Jacqui. It is great to get your perspectives because we heard last week from a number of different young people, and they reflected to us that they felt like the school career education was not adequate as to them discovering what they thought they would want to do with their lives. And I note that you mentioned in your opening remarks that there could be a greater connection to industry so it is not so reliant on the schools. We would love to hear your perspective on that from your two organisations, with the parents for the most part guiding their students or their children through career pathways and options. I think back to last week and the young people that were saying that they spent a lot of time on, for example, mindfulness. I remember one of the students said that they spent a lot of time doing mindfulness colouring, but no time on how to write a resume or apply for a tax file number—those practical skills that they would have preferred. A couple of them noted that they felt like the Morrisby test that they do was not actually reflective of what they felt they would want to do with their careers and it did not align to their interests. If you could provide some reflections on that, that would be really helpful.

Gail McHARDY: Jacqui, you go first this time.

Jacqui Van de VELDE: Oh, thanks for that. Nicole, thank you, and it is a really interesting question and it was also quite varied, the response across the sector. Certainly in terms of what parents are seeing, in terms of supporting career decisions, parents are actually saying that they lack confidence in up-to-date information to guide their children's career choices. I think that what you have just said about the students probably is symptomatic of that uncertainty as well. A lot of parents feel overwhelmed about the complexity of pathways and the pace of change in the job market. I think that certainly when we are looking at wellbeing—and I think that is where the mindfulness bit comes in—I know there has been a huge focus on that, and for good reason. For good reason we have been very concerned about the mental health and wellbeing of our students and our families. There is a balance, obviously, in terms of time: what do you allocate, how much time do you allocate? The other thing with that too is that the value of moving to meaningful work is also a wellbeing goal. We know that there are some terrific benefits, obviously, from being engaged in good work, in meaningful work, and having a secure pathway for your career is a protective factor. So it really should not be seen as something different or something outside of that holistic education piece. Where we see there can be some better support, and it should not be an add-on, it should be embedded. Whenever anything is a bolt-on, you have got to justify

the budget. Providing clear, accessible and regular updates about information on pathways, industry trends and job opportunities would be really helpful.

I agree with you around students with the Morrisby testing: useful, but not the only thing that should be used. Offer parent-focused workshops and information sessions around those key decision points. Providing user friendly online resources that are tailored to that Victorian context and foster collaboration between schools and industry so that parents are able to share real-world insights so they can better support their students.

Gail McHARDY: Nicole, I will just add a couple of quick follow-ups. Jacqui has covered a lot there. Expand the work-based learning application to make placements transparent, coordinated and aligned to student interests—that is really key. We should include structured debriefs with students and parents after work experience to reflect on learning and career aspirations—have some conversations. Schools should partner with industry and the LLENs—the Local Learning Employment Networks—to increase regional and high-demand sector placements, ensuring equity of access. And I think the most important thing too is that these things require sustainable funding, and we need to recognise some of our schools are doing terrific work in some of the things they are doing around career pathways and working with their students. That cannot go unrecognised, but it is very patchy.

Nicole WERNER: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thanks so much. John, we might head to you.

John MULLAHY: Thanks, Chair. My area of Glen Waverley is highly educated—mostly tertiary educated—and I find that the vocational education is not really something that is pushed by parents out this way. I would just like to ask you both: how well do parents understand the value of vocational education and training and vocational careers? And how can parents better be informed about the value of vocational pathways?

Jacqui Van de VELDE: I am happy to start it, Gail, thanks. I think things have certainly improved a lot. I know that the Victorian Parents Council have been working with the department and others to actually inform parents about those changes, and they have been incredibly generous with their time, I might add. We have run a number of webinars helping parents with that information. Can I just say that we were discussing this the other day, and we are recognising that it needs to be a continuous education process. It is not one and done; it needs to happen annually, as a minimum, so that that information is getting out to parents on a regular basis, because things are revised, they are updated and parents need to be aware of those changes as they get to the decision-making stage, particularly around subject selection and so on.

We are still struggling with this concept that vocational careers are often undervalued and misunderstood by parents, particularly in our non-government schools. They do often see them as second tier compared with university pathways. We need to be doing a lot more work around that—and I say ‘we’; I think that this is a collective issue, it is not just the Victorian Parents Council. The information needs evidence-based data on those vocational education outcomes, including employment rates and salary prospects, success stories and role models from those vocational education backgrounds and a clear mapping about how those vocational education pathways integrate with those senior studies certificates and lead to further study or employment. All of those things are critical. We know they are there, but it is about making sure that they are front and centre and parents have a very good understanding of them.

Gail McHARDY: John, I will just add that, as Jacqui said, both organisations have done webinars in partnership with the Department of Education and the VCAA. Those have been tremendous insights into what people will ask. I think the most important thing from our perspective is providing plain-language career guides and webinars for parents, including practical pathways advice. I want to provide an example, because back in 2012 what really struck us as an organisation was when one of the LLENs actually initiated and created a couple of terrific, animated videos for schools, parents and students. They could access and easily watch those and learn what qualification certificate options were now available, because education is evolving, so that is really important. I can send that to the Committee afterwards, what those links were, because they are still retrievable. Of course, even since then a lot has changed. Trying to unpack terminology is really critically important, particularly for the very diverse community that we have now in Victoria. Again, as Jacqui said, we would echo that it is really important, what all the various opportunities are and giving them some sort of

evidence about what that looks like and hearing testimonials. We have got, for example, students that have agreed to be vocational champions and share their experiences. It is terrific to hear the stories. Again, as I say, interactive parent shops on non-university pathways, including VET apprenticeships and SBATs, so that way people have a bit more understanding and insight into what that looks like in that regard—and also digital tools to allow parents to explore career skills and local industry opportunities, as I have said before.

John MULLAHY: Chair, can I just do a follow-up. What are your opinions with regard to the rebranding or the change from VCAL being a bit separated to the VCE vocational major, bringing vocational into the VCE so it does not seem like there are two different streams? Has that been a good thing from any of the evidence that you have seen?

Gail McHARDY: Huge success. I think the stats tell all. I think that is something that needs to be applauded, not just the initiative being taken to step out of that comfort zone, but making young people realise that you can have a number of skills to your toolkit. And that does not mean you cannot go between all sorts of things. There are people that were in other careers with tertiary qualifications that are now doing trades, for example.

Jacqui Van de VELDE: Certainly I agree with Gail, John, on that one, and that has gone a long way to elevating vocational education in equivalence and removing that stigma around it being some sort of second-tier type of pathway for study.

The CHAIR: Thank you.

John MULLAHY: Great. Thank you, both.

The CHAIR: Thanks, John. Kim, I will go to you.

Kim O'KEEFFE: Thank you, Gail and Jacqui. Please excuse my voice. I have got laryngitis. I am perfectly well, but have this weird voice going on. I hope you can understand me. Thank you so much. One thing we have heard quite a lot of is the pressures on career practitioners and the resourcing of that in schools—that a lot of the students were not getting access; it was taking weeks and weeks to get access to a career practitioner. And one of the questions that has been raised is: should students access career practitioners, or should this type of service be provided sooner, even down into primary schools? Are we leaving it too late and then kids feel under pressure once they get to the higher levels of high school? It is quite challenging. So they have been two things—definitely career practitioners being under-resourced, that they just do not have the resources to meet the demand. I am in Shepparton, so a very diverse community, a very multicultural community and a very large school—only one, as you possibly know, public school, the Greater Shepparton Secondary College, where four of our high schools merged. That has been really, really challenging, and I know career support has been one of those significant challenges. I am not sure if you have got any insight there, but yes, probably just more about making sure there are resources for our career practitioners, and that we have enough in the schools to provide that service that can help our students.

Gail McHARDY: Happy to jump in there, Kim. Look, this is a big topic. Our organisation over many years has had interactions and engagement with the relevant career practitioner associations and talking to career practitioners, and they are certainly very under-resourced and undervalued in our opinion. That is our view. They do great work, and unfortunately a lot of them in certain government schools are wearing a number of hats; they are not always a dedicated position. I mean, obviously Jacqui could talk to the non-government space there. But I think you have really touched on a really important point about the resources and support for regional areas, and we would say that this is why the local learning and employment networks need to be expanded and be able to have the appropriate people locally to support schools in this space, because often people externally have difficulty working with schools because schools are busy places. Trying to have the human resource to support schools in this space would be a welcome venture as far as reducing workforce burden. But this is again where, yes, we need to utilise the digital tools as best we can to give people some insights and exposure. I think we have already said about being region-specific about labour market data but knowing the students themselves about what their areas of interest are. Some regional schools are doing some amazing work in certain areas of interest, and they should be commended for that because they are utilising the resources available to them. But that should not discount the opportunity for them to be able to do other things that metropolitan students get the access to.

Kim O'KEEFFE: Thank you.

Jacqui Van de VELDE: Thanks, Kim. And thanks, Gail. Again, I am going to support everything that Gail said. Gail, we are in furious agreement—how wonderful. I think we are certainly seeing that it is patchy and inconsistent, as I said right from the beginning. We have got some schools that are well resourced, that have dedicated career practitioners, whether it be full-time or on a part-time basis, but they are there in the school and that is their sole gig within the school. That is terrific for those students and for those communities. Again, it is patchy. We have got teachers who are doing careers as part of their load, and they are also teaching a significant load across the school, and that makes it very tricky, obviously, when they have got what is seen as a real priority. We can see where some of the questions that you are asking and where the government sees this should be going, then there is going to be a resourcing question that is going to need to be supported across all sectors, not just one sector. We know that that can be a little bit challenging at times. And one of the things to remember too with the Victorian Parents Council is, while we are representing parents with children in non-government schools, many of our families have children across sectors. Gail, would you be experiencing that too? We have actually got families with children across state, non-government and Catholic sectors as well. It really is a holistic approach that needs to be taken.

In terms of your question about whether it should be going down into primary, certainly around years 5 and 6 would be a nice, gentle introduction to this sort of thing to start them thinking about possible career options and potentially some modelling particularly for women and for the choices that they might like to be thinking about. So our young girls, helping them to make decisions about, well, maybe not decisions in years 5 and 6, but to start thinking about options and possibilities that may not have been introduced to them at that point. And certainly for our boys too. I mean, they obviously need those opportunities.

I really want to emphasise the point that Gail made about resources in regional Victoria. Kim is from Shepparton. I totally understand, knowing the dynamics of the area. Those regional parents and families do face some unique challenges. I would not say that anywhere in Victoria is particularly geographically isolated, but they certainly do have limited access to perhaps industry placements, and there are information gaps in those regions. We are recommending tailored, accessible career resources. I do not want to say always digital—digital is certainly a good supplement—but nothing really replaces that person-to-person contact to really chase things up on site. There should be partnerships between schools and local industries to expand that work experience and mentoring. We are suggesting some sort of regional parent support network to help with this. We envisage that would be something that would be valuable if it was cross-sectoral, not something that is delivered within the sectors. There should also be regular jargon-free communication, as Gail has mentioned before, about career education activities and opportunities. Also recognising that we do have diverse families, so there should be culturally appropriate resources that are translated so that parents can access them and give good advice and support to their children.

Kim O'KEEFFE: Thank you for that, and I would like to hear more up the track about that regional parent support network, how that is going to roll out. I would be happy to offline that at some point to hear a bit more about that if we have got more time, but that is something I am very interested in. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Anthony, I think we will have time for one more question. I will head to you.

Anthony CIANFLONE: Thanks, Chair and thank you, Jacqui and Gail, for appearing. A lot of our discussion has been on the bigger picture, longer-term career side of things for young people, and parents' views on that, but I actually want to ask about what you just mentioned towards the end there around work experience. I am sure I am not the only MP on the call here that pretty regularly gets a last-minute sort of frantic call or email from a local parent rushing to try and get their son or daughter into a workplace, and I am always happy to accommodate how best I can. But it just feels to me like there is so much more opportunity there for a more coordinated approach to work experience placements for young people in years 10 or 11. Can you talk us through a bit more about that and how that is working at the moment? How can that be improved and what is the experience generally of parents trying to really help their kids into a work experience placement for those couple of weeks?

Gail McHARDY: Thanks, Anthony, for the question. It is really important that you really have to know the local community context, and you need to know the families and students particularly well in order to be able to do those supports. So often in this space schools are assigned obligations that they have to fulfil, and without

having effective family engagement and parent engagement and student agency and voice, being able to tailor and support the people effectively relies heavily on those opportunities to engage and have those conversations to plan and be strategic in that space. Some schools, depending on their size, capacity and workforce availability, can do that—I have seen little green shoots of that across the state—but it is not completely across.

So back to the families, there have been things tried in the past, like portals and things, but again, everyone is trying to do so much that it is not necessarily boutique to what those students particularly are seeking at that given year cohort or that particular school over a number of years. Just reflecting back on Kim's question about should it be in primary school, I have known students that knew what they wanted to be. I had a grade 2 young person who wanted to be a diesel mechanic. That is all he wanted to be. Sadly, due to learning issues, that did not eventuate—he went down a very different pathway, and it did not end well. But again, if that young person had been given the right wraparound supports, family support and school support, there could have been a different outcome. I suppose it is a really important question, because this, again, for our sector, is all about the funding. If we do not have the staff capacity and the people that we need to attract to those roles to support the school and students and families to do that, we will continue to do what we are doing.

Jacqui Van de VELDE: Again, I agree with Gail. And thank you for the question, Anthony. What I would add that is different here is that the current work experience is uneven in quality and access, and if we are talking about aligning to in-demand industries, our non-government school students, especially those in regional areas, are going to really struggle to secure meaningful placements. Some schools do it really, really well, and let us acknowledge that—I want to continue to acknowledge the really good practice. However, we do have that last-minute student-driven work placement happening where it is 'Oh, my goodness, it's work placement next week and I haven't got my act together' and they are probably the parents you get the phone calls from. How to overcome that, and particularly if we are looking at focusing on in-demand industries, is by building formal partnerships with local industries to ensure that relevant high-quality placements are there and that we expand that structured workplace learning with very clear objectives and feedback so that it is not a stocking-filler at the end of the year and not something that keeps the kids busy till the end of the year. It is something that is actually really built into the program, ensuring that there is equitable access for all students, including that targeted support for those in regional areas or students who do have those learning challenges, that we have got regular evaluation of those work experience programs and that everywhere else we have continuous improvement. Why wouldn't we have it in this as well and have industry also part of that consultation?

Anthony CIANFLONE: Thank you.

Gail McHARDY: I just have a follow-up comment, just something very practical. Particularly in our regional areas, it came to our attention a number of students—we assumed that everybody has access to transport. Even though there has been the recent government initiative for 2026 around the youth Myki card, we are also mindful that does not necessarily align with what is the actual infrastructure that is in place to collect students at certain places, to be able to get them to the employer or to the work placement. These things have come up in the past. Again I just want to add that these are all the things we need to be thinking of, and again it is about how industry works cooperatively and collaboratively with the school, family and student in order to enable that to be a successful experience.

The CHAIR: Yes, thank you, Gail. We have heard that from other witnesses as well. I am sorry, I am mindful of time, and we do need to end it there. Thank you so much, Jacqui and Gail, for answering our questions today. If there is anything that maybe has sparked your interest or you feel that maybe there is something else that needs to be presented to the Committee, you are more than welcome to write to us as well, even just a quick email to fill any gaps you think we might have missed today. But thank you so much for your time. It is really appreciated and a very interesting conversation.

Witnesses withdrew.