

# TRANSCRIPT

## ECONOMIC, EDUCATION, JOBS AND SKILLS COMMITTEE

### Inquiry into career advice activities in Victorian schools

Melbourne — 7 May 2018

#### Members

Mr Nazih Elasmr — Chair

Ms Dee Ryall — Deputy Chair

Mr Jeff Bourman

Mr Peter Crisp

Mrs Christine Fyffe

Ms Jane Garrett

Mr Cesar Melhem

#### Witnesses

Ms Joanna Humphries, Project Manager, Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare;

Ms Aileen Lacey, Area Manager, Victoria, Mission Australia; and

Mr Dave Wells, Principal, Hester Hornbrook Academy, and General Manager, Early Years, Education and Employment, Melbourne City Mission.

**The CHAIR** — Welcome to the public hearing for the Economic, Education, Jobs and Skills Committee’s Inquiry into career advice activities in Victorian schools. All evidence taken at this hearing is protected by parliamentary privilege. Any comments you make outside the hearing are not afforded such privilege. Hansard is recording today’s proceedings. We will provide a proof version of the Hansard transcript so you can correct any typographical errors. I invite you to state your name and where you are from, and then we will go directly to questions. Welcome.

**Ms HUMPHRIES** — Thank you. Joanna Humphries. I am the Project Manager for a project called Raising Expectations, which is about improving educational outcomes for young people leaving care, and I am from the Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare.

**Ms LACEY** — Hello. My name is Aileen Lacey. I am the Area Manager for our Victorian programs at Mission Australia.

**Mr WELLS** — My name is Dave Wells. I am the Principal of the Hester Hornbrook Academy, the school of Melbourne City Mission, where we work to re-engage kids aged 15 to 25 into education, who present with multiple and complex barriers to education participation. Many of our kids are homeless or have been homeless, or have experienced family violence—all sorts of very complex things are going on for our young people.

**The CHAIR** — Thank you and welcome. My first question is: what are some examples of successful mentoring programs that have improved key outcomes for disadvantaged students?

**Ms HUMPHRIES** — Mentoring programs?

**The CHAIR** — Yes.

**Ms HUMPHRIES** — Not specifically for the work that we are doing, but what we have found is care leavers that are currently studying and are making a success of it then want to mentor other care leavers that are coming in, studying at university.

**Mr WELLS** — I sit on the advisory group for the Judith Graley panel around mentoring programs. We also used to run a program which was started by the Maribyrnong and Moonee Valley LLEN out in the west. It was a program called YMAP, Youth Mentoring Assisted Pathway. We worked with schools to identify young people who were at risk of dropping out of school, and we worked to identify long-term pathways for those young people — exactly the type of thing you are talking about. The program was defunded. We are playing around with trying to figure out what sort of mentoring programs work, but we know what works and they simply will not work unless they have funding to back them up. We know mentoring programs work; I do not think we need to muck around in that space. We actually need to get serious about it and identify the young people who are at risk and put mentoring programs in. There is a whole range of them that work.

**Ms HUMPHRIES** — We do provide some mentoring, so we have got care leaver coordinators at the two universities that we are working with: La Trobe University and Federation University. They do provide mentoring to the young care leavers, or not-so-young care leavers, actually, that come into study. Understanding their background is paramount really to engaging with the students and getting a level of trust with them.

**Mr CRISP** — We have been looking at low expectations in this group, and submissions show that there are low career aspirations and expectations among some disadvantaged students, their families and teachers. How can the aspirations for disadvantaged students be addressed?

**Ms HUMPHRIES** — The project started in 2016. At that point there was no data at all that was collected by state or federal government to indicate how many care leaver students are studying, so part of the project was actually about capturing data. In 2016 we started with 43 at the two universities. We have now got over 200. I think what that does too is it starts to send a strong message that with the right support and encouragement and higher aspirations, people in care do go on to study at university successfully.

**Ms LACEY** — I think there is a stereotype that is placed on young people who come from disadvantaged backgrounds. We run a number of programs that work with young people in out-of-home care or young people that have disengaged from education. Upon trying to re-engage them into some form of education, there can be a perception that they, obviously, have been out of education and that their literacy and numeracy levels are low. So therefore rather than maybe going into a VCE stream, it is suggested, quite frankly, that they should be

sitting in VCAL, despite what that young person wants. I think we really need to change the mindset of those in schools that have those views of young people that come from disadvantaged backgrounds.

**Mr WELLS** — Yes, it is a great question. I would agree. We certainly believe that young people do not have low aspirations for themselves, and that bears out as soon as you get into a decent long-term conversation with young people. Start to identify opportunities, options, give them positive experiences, and very quickly their aspirations for themselves escalate. Young people are, I think, the victims, if you like, of the low aspirations of others for them, and they can very quickly turn that around with a bit of support. It is not actually that hard. It can take some time, but it has got to be an ongoing relational conversation.

The students from disadvantaged backgrounds do not necessarily get the ongoing kind of career conversation that you would get in a family, so how do you take that idea and professionalise it, if you like? Every interaction our staff have with students in our classrooms—we have 20 kids, a teacher and a youth worker, and it is the same group for the year, so it becomes their home community. Every interaction that our staff have with young people is about raising the possibilities, opening up aspirations, rather than shutting them down: ‘Oh, because you’ve done a VCAL, you can’t go into that’—well, that is a nonsense. As we heard before, we know that so many young people in universities do not get there by the ATAR score anymore. So knowing those aspirations, knowing the possibilities and exposing some of the misleading narratives that shut down options for young people I think is absolutely crucial.

**Mr MELHEM** — Can I just take that further? In your submission you talked about how some young people feel some teachers and families have a very low expectations.

**Mr WELLS** — That is correct.

**Mr MELHEM** — And the careers advisers as a result find it difficult to encourage these kids and say, ‘Hey, you can do this’, when the teacher thinks they are useless pretty much. You just talked about your own ...

**Mr WELLS** — The academy, yes.

**Mr MELHEM** — What can we do to get the rest of the state, the teachers, to say, ‘Hey, no. You can actually do this’. So what things as a government or a department can we actually do to turn it around, because it is a real issue?

**Mr WELLS** — I think all teachers, all people who are approaching young people have to start to approach them from an option of possibility. This flies in the face of much of what we talk about: ‘Let’s identify the jobs that are available for young people and teach them for that’. That is not opening up possibilities; that is narrowing down opportunities and shutting down opportunities. I know that flies in the face of what a lot of other people are going to be saying to you. We have to shift that thinking. Education has to be about the young person standing in front of you, not the job that might be available in five years’ time.

Our young people are complex, they are diverse, they all come with their own narratives and stories and very complex situations going on. If you are talking about the genuinely disadvantaged young person, you cannot approach them saying, ‘In four years’ time there are going to be a lot of jobs in early years, so you should start training there’ or ‘In three years’ time, there are going to be a lot of jobs in the NDIS—you should start training there’. That is not the start of a conversation with a disadvantaged young person. The start of a conversation with our young people is, ‘Who are you? What do you want to do? Where do you want to go? What do you want to be? Because there are no limits: you can be a doctor, you can be a lawyer, you can be sitting on the other side of this table one day if that is really what you want to do’. If we start the conversation with, ‘These are the jobs that are going to be available for your type of person’—whether we say that or not—‘in five years’ time’, it is the wrong conversation.

**Mrs FYFFE** — If I could—it is not the question I was going to ask before; Cesar jumped in ...

**Mr MELHEM** — Sorry!

**Mrs FYFFE** — It’s all right. Okay, so you have got to encourage the young people, build them up so they continue with education, develop their skills and their personality, and you say you must not say, ‘Well, there’ll be jobs in this and that at the end’. But the ideal thing, of course, is that they will leave the education job ready. How are you engaging with industry to take on students from a disadvantaged background?

**Mr WELLS** — That is a good question. We do tasters: we do tests into various different industries and give young people an experience of the various different industries. We work with industry at that level, but we are also working with TAFEs and universities to try and open up that type of a pathway, because the reality is most of our kids when they finish at the Academy will not go straight into a job. Then what we are doing—and this would be my key thing that I think we need to change about the education system for disadvantaged young people, whether they are in our school or any other school—is setting up a really rigorous alumni program, so a post-school mentoring and support program that continues on to work with kids but that knows all of the support systems available in any context a young person will go into. And it would be that person’s task to work with a young person and say, ‘All right, you’ve gone into this industry of employment; here’s what you can expect. Here’s what your first week, your first month, your first six months are going to be like, and when things fall apart for you, here’s where you can go for help’. The same narrative can be held in any TAFE, in any university, and all of these places have supports and networks available, but so many young people coming from a disadvantaged background will not even know the right question to ask to get into the additional supports that they need. Does that go some way to answering your question?

**Mrs FYFFE** — So it is just opening the doors with the employers?

**Mr WELLS** — Yes, it is extremely difficult. It is very hard. For any kid coming straight out of Year 12, it is very difficult to get into a job these days. We certainly have relationships with key employers for apprenticeships and some of those kinds of pathways, but it is a relational task. Look, we are a fairly small school, so we are not doing it on a massive scale. But programs like Jobactive and that type of thing, they simply do not work because a lot of our students would just get lost in the mechanisms of something like that, so it has to be a much smaller, focused case management-style program.

**Ms HUMPHRIES** — I think one of the biggest barriers—and Aileen will probably bear me out here—as you are all probably aware, is that young people in care are required to leave formal care literally on their 18th birthday or before, and quite frankly the stress and anxiety associated with finding somewhere to live and with how they can financially support themselves means that any thoughts around education are likely to go on hold for a while. Sorry, I am pre-empting a question here, but I am not sure the extent to which careers advisers within schools would know the young people that this affects or indeed the impact it has on them. It is not unusual for young people to disengage way before they get to Year 12 because of that level of stress and anxiety. So for us that cultural shift in schools much earlier around having a much higher expectation of young people in care is really important, and we are doing a lot of school outreach to try and increase that level of aspiration.

**Mrs FYFFE** — So the school career counsellor needs to know about scholarships and what support services are available and build those into the narrative?

**Ms HUMPHRIES** — Yes, that is right. Absolutely. Learning is lifelong, so I guess what we are saying here is: ‘What you might aspire to in school might not be what you end up doing in five years or 10 years’ time’. So for a young person that leaves care, they might not be ready to re-engage in education for two, three or five years, but it is planting that seed that when you are ready, when your life is settled, you can re-engage, and giving them the confidence and self-belief that they can do that. That is a really important part of the process.

**Ms LACEY** — Yes, absolutely. I totally agree. We run a program called Springboard, which works with young people who are exiting care or have left care. For that program there was an evaluation completed by the Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute, and that showed that from when young people do exit care the length of time before they are ready to look at employment down the track—obviously trying to support them to gain some skills within the education sector first—is up to at least five years before employment is even considered. So it is a long time to be addressing the various barriers and issues that they are facing, and obviously housing is one of the biggest ones.

**Ms HUMPHRIES** — And mental health often.

**Mr CRISP** — You have touched on school services to support good career development, but how can schools provide better career development services to students at risk of disengaging from school? I know you talked a little bit about talking to them earlier, but what else can they do?

**Mr WELLS** — I will give you a little bit of narrative first. When we started the Academy we started with one teacher in the context of the community services industry, and it simply was extremely tough and it did not work because you did not have an academic education conversation going on. I believe the reverse happens in schools, where you have a whole lot of teachers having an education conversation and you might have one worker having a student support conversation on their own, and it simply does not work. They are not connected into the networks or the professional industry. They are not getting the professional development. They are not a part of the conversations that all of our organisations have at their core and are a part of.

So I would say contract it out. Get the community services agencies contracted in to do that work with disadvantaged students—and the careers work, the pathways work—and learn from Springboard, Navigator, the LOOKOUT schools. They all work really well as programs. Why don't we expand that kind of narrative? Ask a school to have a contract with the local community services agency to provide that additional support for your people who are disengaged. What you get then is youth workers or social workers or counsellors who are engaged in that wider sector. They are getting the professional development, the conversation, the mentoring, the supervision and the practice specialists.

**Mr CRISP** — Where do parents and carers fit in this picture?

**Ms HUMPHRIES** — So one of the pieces of work that we are doing as part of our project—obviously we want to get more care leaver students to university, but underpinning that is building the knowledge and the expertise of carers and people that work with young people in care. They might not be aware of all of the programs—those just mentioned actually—and that is part of what I do currently. I let them know, 'Are you aware of these things?'. They may not be aware of the supports that are there to help them to support their young people, and it is getting that communication out. That is a perennial problem, I know, but I think if there were a way through each school that they were able to communicate I guess on a different level in more detail to carers and parents, that would be hugely valuable.

**Mr CRISP** — I was going to ask the next bit, but this might work in. Is it any more difficult to get them involved in work experience as well because of the things that you have just talked about?

**Mr WELLS** — It is riskier.

**Mrs FYFFE** — It is riskier?

**Mr WELLS** — As principal of a school, it is very risky in many instances for us. A lot our kids simply are not ready to go into some of the employment contexts, and we have to wait until the senior years more, which is not ideal from a careers development perspective.

**Mr MELHEM** — Is that even Year 9 or Year 10 work experience?

**Mr WELLS** — We only do Years 10, 11 and 12, but we do it from 15 to 25, so yes. It is quite difficult for us, because reputation-wise students just not turning up to a work placement when you have done all of the work with the placement to organise it and that kind of thing is very difficult. We still do it, but we manage it very closely.

**Ms HUMPHRIES** — I was just going to say that with residential care children particularly that would be a much bigger challenge. I think it is probably variable, shall we say, depending upon where carers are located and their level of confidence and their relationship with the school.

**Mr CRISP** — Taster programs are more appropriate. Would that be a fair observation?

**Ms HUMPHRIES** — Again, I think that is variable. I think it depends on how it is run. Also it depends upon the level of confidence the student has, and again that gets back to aspiration. Students in care do not want to be identified, so for them to be able to participate but not be identified that they are in a different arrangement—they do not live with their birth parents—I think is really important.

**Mr MELHEM** — My question is to you, Joanna. In your submission you had a number of suggestions in relation to improving career advice for young people in care—and I think there are about 10 000 of them or thereabouts. Do you mind taking us through some of the dot points and any improvements? We have got 5 minutes to go.

**Ms HUMPHRIES** — Certainly one of the things is that my understanding is that most careers teachers do that in addition to another role in the school. I think it is really hard to know everything and for them to be aware of everything that exists. So at a minimum I would be looking at all the state-wide programs that they could be aware of and should be aware of being in some education portal that they can access. I think that is a minimum—certainly that understanding of the situation for young people in out-of-home care.

There is training in trauma-informed practice so that they are aware of the impact and the level of anxiety it has on young people leaving care. And I think—and perhaps this builds on something that Dave was saying—there is an opportunity with some of the local CSOs to link in with some of the services that might be available. For example, in the Bendigo area the main provider up there is Anglicare, so if all the young people and the careers teachers were aware of all the key services that they could link that young person into, I think that would make a significant difference, and for the young person also to know that that is the case.

**The CHAIR** — If there are no further questions, on behalf of the Committee I thank you for your time.

**Ms LACEY** — Thank you very much.

**Witnesses withdrew.**