

TRANSCRIPT

ECONOMIC, EDUCATION, JOBS AND SKILLS COMMITTEE

Inquiry into career advice activities in Victorian schools

Melbourne — 19 February 2018

Members

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Witnesses

Ms Jerri Nelson, Executive Officer, North Central Local Learning and Employment Network; and

Mr Trent McCarthy, Executive Officer, Central Ranges Local Learning and Employment Network, Victorian Local Learning and Employment Networks.

The CHAIR — Good afternoon and welcome. 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. You can make a statement of 5 minutes and allow us some time to ask questions, but, please, before you start, state your name, even though I know you.

Ms NELSON — I am Jerri Nelson from the North Central LLEN.

Mr McCARTHY — And I am Trent McCarthy from the Central Ranges LLEN.

Ms NELSON — Thanks for the opportunity to meet with you today. It should be noted that while Trent and I will endeavour in this session to represent the statewide LLEN network, LLENs by their very nature are quite unique in where they operate and how they operate, as are schools and school communities, so we will do the best we can to represent the ‘statewide’, but obviously based on our own experiences.

Over the last few days I have taken the opportunity and reviewed each of the submissions that you are actually hearing from today. Each of these submissions contains evidence on research, academic, experiential and good-practice examples of the challenges and opportunities that face us with career education. Each provides some key recommendations or aspirations for what needs to happen next to move from where are right now to where we hope to be in the future. There is very little in the submissions that we do not agree with. For example, we absolutely endorse the research linked to early aspirations and school completion and the research that indicates that parents and families are the most influential, followed by careers advisers.

We agree that wherever possible careers advisers do need to have minimum qualifications and that much more needs to be done to enable advisers and pathway support professionals to remain current in relation to skills, employment, training and higher ed. There is absolutely no disputing that a critical element in careers and pathways is work experience and structured workplace learning. There are many challenges at every level for the young person, the school, the family and sometimes industry that impede participation in these activities. Our key message today in relation to all of these recommendations is that place matters. Recently *The State of Victoria’s Children Report* on education attainment and outcomes argued exactly that. It was very important for us, and we think it is equally relevant to careers advice in schools.

We believe that the enabler to achieving the required improvements to career activities lies in the need to have a complete and informed understanding of place. For example, what would it really take for every rural school to have access to a fully trained careers adviser full-time, which has been suggested in at least one submission? How would we fund this under current funding guidelines, and how would it ever become sustainable in small rural communities? Given the teaching constraints for a person you might train up, they might leave six months later, and we will be left with a significant hole yet again in rural, which I think you heard just before around the challenges of getting those people in place. The current group that will miss out are the group that already face significant disadvantage, particularly in rural and some regional centres.

With the changing nature of work, the gig economy and the brilliant research by many institutions in Victoria, which I must say are greatly appreciated by the LLEN, one wonders just how teachers, who are content experts in their field, will take on the industry liaison role in a comprehensive manner. What is available in employment pathways and opportunities in one area or region is very different to that of another. The liaison role for pathways into larger institutions and employment outcomes—say, in manufacturing and professional services—might be very different in a metro setting than it would be in my setting, which is small business, sole operators and agriculture.

The pathways to higher education and further training for rural young people are very different ones to those in metropolitan and regional settings. Both need to be supported. All of these elements that impact on the aspirations and families also impact on the schools and career advice. A policy could and should be developed that undertakes and embraces the many evidence-based elements in the submissions you have before you right now, but we have also had these in the past in the form of blueprints and frameworks. Even though these were highly endorsed by many people in many settings, many of them remained theory because they were not practical to be implemented.

Based on the LLENs' knowledge of our local school and diverse obligations, commitments and capacities they have in achieving everything from FISO to teaching young people how to swim, it is unlikely that a compliance-based process for career activities in schools would result in the desired outcome. They themselves have a passion for their students and ensuring future employment, education and training aspirations.

Industry, education and careers expertise takes resources and investment, which includes understanding the local context, the coordination and the implementation. All of this will be required at a local level with an overlay of FISO. We hope that the examples provided in our submission that you already have will provide you with a very small snapshot of what is being done at a local level.

The CHAIR — Thank you. My question to you is about school engagement. How do LLENs engage with schools to provide programs and develop partnerships with other stakeholders?

Mr McCARTHY — One example of how we do that—and I might provide you with an example of exactly this—is a program we have been rolling out in the LLEN region in the central part of Victoria, which is to find in this particular area, being Mitchell, Murrindindi and the Macedon Ranges, how to create work experience opportunities and real industry opportunities for young people who may have no direct pathway into the jobs that are on their doorstep. The role of the LLEN in that sense is in fact to be the outreach of the schools—to understand what students are studying, to understand the needs of local industries and to try to find a connection between these things.

One program that evolved from this particular campaign, which is a crowdsourcing campaign, was a week-long placement at the Puckapunyal military base. For the young people in Seymour, their best chance of finding an entry-level position in that region is not in that case small business but is in fact with one of the larger employers, at the military base. Without a direct pathway, though, it is very difficult for them to get that opportunity.

The LLEN works as a broker to understand the needs of local industries, regional industries and regional economies, to work with careers advisers, vocational education teachers and other practitioners and to try to create an alignment and a pathway for young people to get that industry placement and to get that experience but also to work with schools to help them reform what they offer in their local region.

In the case of some of our regional communities where there might be a new and emerging agricultural sector, we need to be in front of that information so that we can make sure that we are saying to schools, 'Right; these are the skills and qualities that young people need in this particular region. How do we work with you to ensure that that is on offer as well in terms of your curriculum?'

The CHAIR — Would you like to add anything, or are you happy with that?

Ms NELSON — No. I think that pretty well covers it.

The CHAIR — The skills mismatch: your submission identifies a mismatch between the skills taught in the tertiary sector and labour market projections. How can the Victorian Government address this mismatch?

Ms NELSON — I think some of the recent examples, for example, would be—as Peter would be well aware—the skills demand profile that took place in the Mallee through the Skills Commissioner. That work clearly identified that there will be a number of jobs coming on board, but our schools—I will say 'our' when I am thinking about mine—in general are very busy doing their work, which is educating, and they are teaching to curriculum that is determined by a preset set of circumstances that they have with the Department of Education and Training. Then in and amongst that comes on a whole new opportunity which is being developed around water infrastructure and intensive farming that did not exist when the curriculum was being rolled out for those schools.

I think the Victorian Government in general—the Department of Education—possibly have the opportunity to enable a bit more flexibility in what is being delivered. We set up our vocational education through, in our case, trade training centres. We have a collective network of schools that use one trade training centre. I would probably say it is one of the stronger partnerships in this state, because we have no competition amongst the schools. They are too far away from each other; they are not competing to take the students from each other, so they jointly use that vocational setting.

But what happens is we often pitch subjects directly at student interests, which is important, but we do not inform parents and families that many of the subjects that might be offered will not lead to an employment pathway within reach of that student if they are not leaving the area. So there is a mismatch, and we do definitely need to work on parent engagement—school engagement with parents linked to the available job opportunities for that region. Schools have a very hard time finding the time to get out and do industry liaison work. How many schools came to that launch? I do not think any schools came to the launch of the skills industry profile because they were doing what they need to do inside the school gate. Somewhere we need to actually make sure that we maintain that partnering facilitation that brings that information into schools and, more importantly, into parents.

Mr CRISP — Let us build on what you were talking about, Jerri. How do we engage with industry to get this information flow, and how do schools become flexible enough to react to the opportunities that are out there and thus get those better outcomes for those students?

Ms NELSON — I think it is not as difficult to engage with industry if you like, if the carrot is right. Industry has identified what its own skill shortages will be in the future. I can only use our patch again. In the Mallee they had identified the 3400 jobs that will come online in the next couple of years. Those jobs have been identified by industry itself. They are really keen often to work with schools. We are probably missing a common language and a common platform by which schools see that as a priority area to engage in education.

I did not mean to use it too lightly, but I have really grown to highly respect the principals in my area and what they actually have to do to get across the line. They are the ladder licence holder in their school; they are the curriculum coordinators. These are small schools and their obligations are the same as in large schools when it comes to compliance. So for them to actually get outside that environment and learn the language of industry is very difficult. I think on the whole industries in my experience have been more keen to get into the schools than the schools have prioritised the link with industry. That is not because they do not have the goodwill; it is because they do not have the legs to do it.

Mr MELHEM — From your perspective what sort of improvement or aspect of career education most need reform? I understand your role is to liaise with industry and the industry need to communicate that back to schools. By the way, when you communicate that to a school, do you communicate it to the principal or to a dedicated teacher?

Mr McCARTHY — That is a great question. It is different in every school, to be frank. In some schools the assistant principal has a lead role in the career space and in that connection to the broader community. In some cases it is the principal. Sometimes it sits with the person that leads vocational education and training, who may in fact also hold the careers portfolio. They might also be teaching physical education and doing yard duty. So these are multifaceted people, and in fact their engagement with students can be multifold.

The thing that is really striking, certainly in the region where I work, is that it is actually rare for someone in one of those roles to have a lot of spare time to get outside of the school environment, as Jerri mentioned before. So we try to find those people that are in a position in a school setting to lead good practice. It might sometimes be a subject teacher who has a particular interest. So, for instance, in Woodend, which is one of my towns, in the primary school setting we have done some early careers work with later primary school students. We happen to have a teacher there that is passionate about STEM education and STEAM. So he is really going out of his way to talk about careers in that area with students in Years 4, 5 and 6, because he wants them to start making good choices as they go into high school.

Finding the right people is really important, but having some consistency from school to school is also critical. Sometimes in a local setting you get lucky, because you have teachers who have enough time and some interest or some expertise in that area.

Ms NELSON — Can I follow that one up? We did mention this in the submission, but this is a more detailed description of one of the models. In our particular LLEN we have a very strong relationship with the schools cluster, so all nine schools that provide secondary college have invited me for the last 12 years to sit on the principal's cluster network. I have direct input into that. They use their managed individual pathways money that is provided to the school. They pool that through the LLEN, and we provide two fully qualified non-teaching staff—even though they happen to be trained teachers, they are not teaching in any of the schools.

Those nine schools have maintained that model of collaborative delivery because of the challenges of the physical education teacher who might be on yard duty and who might also be disciplining that young person and then sitting down and saying, 'Now tell me about your passions and your career pathways'. They might also play tennis with their mother on the weekend in a small community.

So there are some real challenges around models for rural schools. To be fair to our schools they have to provide more funding than they receive from the government, and this is going to get harder as our school populations drop. They receive a minimum baseline amount through their MIPs because they do not all have the pro rata minimum numbers—I do not know if you have heard about the MIPs. In larger schools it is per person funded; in small rural schools it is a baseline amount of funding. That funding is about \$6000 for most of my schools; I have not checked on it lately. They give at least double that, because every person we have operating across those 22 000 square kilometres to get to those nine schools require transport. We have to provide a car and the infrastructure to do that, but we also provide ongoing professional development. They are outside the school, they are dealing with industry and they are liaising with the Structured Workplace Learning program, so they are sourcing quality placements, which can be very difficult to find in rural communities. They are linking with all the other available infrastructure, chambers of commerce and local government. They are sitting there as the collaborative place by which careers can be provided to communities.

Mr MELHEM — So they are the challenges. Where do you see improvement to make it happen in a practical way, particularly in the regional areas you touched on?

Mr McCARTHY — Can I give an example? In Mansfield, which is renowned for having the highest number of school-based apprenticeships in Victoria, a lot of students are actually having real workplace experiences over an extended period of time. That has now taken place over a 10-year period. What they have done in that setting is that because it is quite a contained town, the school and the LLEN and all the providers have come together and approached every single business in town and said, 'Part of your commitment to doing business in this community is actually creating a pathway for young people. They may never work in the industry that you are in beyond their school time, but they are going to have a taste of the workplace, understand what it takes to have entry-level employment and what it can take to move through a particular career'.

What has happened in Mansfield is that the culture of the town is such that if a business does not take on a school-based apprentice, they are not considered part of the community. In fact business owners actually put that sort of pressure on each other. So that is where the community commitment is very strong. But that only happens when you have organisations like LLENs and others coming together and working with schools to build that culture around young people, and that is really about saying, we are not going to have the entry-level employees in these businesses or the retention of people in these regional towns if we do not create these opportunities where they get to taste real worlds of work. For some young people though, they are desperate to leave those towns and get into another environment, so it is really important in those settings to give those students chances to taste those worlds of work.

So one of the things we often do is have regional industry days, where we will bring students together to experience a workplace and to experience an industry. That can often be the starting point for a conversation about their pathway and what they need to do.

Mr MELHEM — That is a good LLEN. How do you evaluate the work of the various LLENs? Some do good work, some do very good work, some do maybe average work. So is there a system to evaluate that, and how can we improve their service? Let us face it, a LLEN is a very integral part of what we are inquiring into — that is, career advisers. I am sure you were pleased when you got your \$32 million bag a couple of years ago.

Mr McCARTHY — Thank you.

Mr MELHEM — That is great, and it is important. How do you evaluate that and look for improvement?

Ms NELSON — I think the education department has been asking itself that for quite a while. I think our most recent common funding agreement has probably been the closest ever to provide a framework of evaluating LLENs. One of the things they are looking to evaluate is whether the investment that we are making at a local level can be measured. So we have to now prove how we are measuring it. Is it scalable? Can people

actually use that investment in another part of Victoria? That is one of the questions we are asked. Is it replicable? Can other people take this on?

That is probably why for example we have gone ahead and glossed up a model that we have had for 12 years, but all of a sudden we went, 'Okay, other people might want to look at this model. It is working for rural outcomes and post-school transitions'. We have got a fairly strong presence in the north-central—we have around 40 per cent of our young people who transition to university, compared to Swan Hill just north of us, which is 30-something. Stawell is 30-something.

So we are saying, 'Okay, what is our contribution to that? Is one of the elements, and our schools would argue it thankfully, that for 12 years we have had a collective model in the way in which we have addressed rural disadvantage in the career space?' That is one. Every LLEN is different. Also the level of cooperation or engagement that they get from their stakeholders is different. Our schools have completely embraced the LLEN, and so we have a very robust and useful relationship that we are able to provide them with something that they feel that they are not able to get for themselves. Not all schools will take the time and effort to build that relationship. Not all LLENs may have the capacity to do it either. I am not blaming any one side—I think it is a challenging situation—but it is about place.

Mr McCARTHY — I would just add to that. The example of the Geelong project, which was profiled on the ABC on Friday, is a really great example of where a model of collaboration amongst a whole range of players—schools and industry—in response to the employment and industry needs of that community can be replicated not in every place but in other places that are going through a similar transition. So we are learning from each other all the time.

The one thing that we are able to do, because we are very nimble, is to actually say, 'Right, this worked well here. What would we need to change to take all that intellectual capital and place it somewhere else?'. We are becoming stronger and stronger every year in that approach, but we are also using a lot more technology than we ever used before, and that is really project-sharing approaches using some of the new technology to actually engage industry. So for instance with this partnership around Puckapunyal, we are doing the same thing at other defence bases around the state, because for some young people that is their best opportunity for a pathway. But not every area has that sort of large employer in their region.

Mr MELHEM — Just a last question from me: from your experience sitting on the outside would you make good quality career advice—curriculum modules or service, whatever you want to call it—mandatory in schools?

Ms NELSON — It is really interesting, I think, the whole thing about career advice. First of all, there is a dilemma in the name 'career' because we are not heading to one destination any longer.

Mr MELHEM — There is an 's' at the end.

Ms NELSON — Pathways, whatever. Yes, that is right: 's' at the end. I think one of our LLENs gave an example this morning in chatting with me: it is an ecosystem. I do not think that just by doing that you will improve the outcomes. I think that there is a range or a suite of things that must happen at exactly the same time to provide the outcome. You could put fully qualified careers advisers in every school and make it mandatory. That does not actually put a quality overlay over it and it does not make it relevant in the community in which those young people, if they do not transition onto university, will actually be living and working. It may or may not set them up for the best outcomes. It is a pretty tricky answer because I would like to see careers advice available to every young person in every school in Victoria, but I do not know about the mandatory part. It does not necessarily in and of itself solve the problem.

Mr McCARTHY — I would just add to that, that experience in a workplace setting should be much more highly encouraged than it currently is. Our submission makes the point that there are three things that the International Labour Office sees young people need in order to participate in a changing economy. One of them is actual real work experience, the second one is networks and the third one is actually career navigation skills, job-finding skills. In school settings it is actually about supporting and encouraging schools to create space in their very busy curriculum for students to have that time in workplaces.

That is really what the LLENs do at our best: actually build those skills with industry and get students into those placements. If students do not have those experiences, what they do is they present to their first job interview with very little other than potentially a lot of education, and that puts them at a disadvantage when they are competing against people that are slightly older and with some work experience. We do not want them to be disadvantaged in that way, and we think that there are some really practical things we can currently do using existing resources as well.

The CHAIR — The Committee received submissions stating that career advice should begin in Year 7 or even in primary school. What kinds of career advice activities could primary schools implement for their students and what could be the benefit of these activities?

Ms NELSON — I think there are obviously some terrific models. Most people are referring to the models out of parts of Europe. Denmark, Norway—they are doing that, they have actually got their curriculum set up in primary school to begin, I suppose, an introduction towards pathways towards employment, and they have got very low unemployment in those countries as well. But basically I think it is particularly important for cohorts of children and young people that have no working model in their homes. So the passions and pathways that are taking place, supported by the LLEN in Bendigo in the goldfields area, targets grades 5 and 6 of highly vulnerable schools in that community. That particular project is giving those young people a positive experience, where they may not ever have seen a person working in their family. So they are learning their STEM skills. It could even be their literacy and their numeracy in a work environment. So they have a positive experience, and that takes a lot of dedicated industry investment. But those industries are realising that this is their potential workforce of the future, by giving them that positive introduction. I feel very strongly that the earlier we can at least have exposure to positive work environments, particularly for those who may not have it, would be very important, and that can start very early in primary school.

The CHAIR — On behalf of the Committee, I would like to thank you for your time and your contribution. Thank you very much.

Witnesses withdrew.