

TRANSCRIPT

ECONOMIC, EDUCATION, JOBS AND SKILLS COMMITTEE

Inquiry into career advice activities in Victorian schools

Melbourne — 26 March 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 Gail McHardy, Executive Officer, and

Ms Leanne McCurdy, Administration and Executive Support, Parents Victoria.

The CHAIR — Good morning 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. The evidence is being recorded by Hansard. The hearings are also being filmed and broadcast live via the Parliament’s website. We will provide a proof version of the Hansard transcript so you can correct any typographical errors.

I would like to invite you to make an opening statement, but please, before you do so, state your name for the Hansard record, and allow us some time to ask questions. Welcome.

Ms McHARDY — Gail McHardy, Executive Officer, Parents Victoria, representing parents in Victorian Government schools.

Ms McCURDY — Leanne McCurdy, Parents Victoria.

Ms McHARDY — I would like to open this session with just a very brief introduction. We are an organisation that has been around since 1925. You have our submission, but I think the most important thing is that we understand the value of schools and families working together for better educational and individual and community outcomes. We are a resource centre, a support network and a facilitator for positive outcomes. We support parents, families and the educators where and when it is needed. We always strive for a solution, not a confrontation, because we believe that a healthy school and parent relationship benefits everyone. Obviously this goes right to the heart of career education and making sure families and schools are working to the same objective.

We have had a policy in place for quite some time. We just answered the questions as per the terms of reference in the submission in particular, and as cited in our submission, we also brought to your attention that there had been another review that was done through a consultation through Dandolo Partners for the department, so we thought that resonated—certainly the same sort of questions and responses. We just believe, in particular in our organisation for many years—and it certainly has come out in other research papers and commentary from other submissions—that the role of schools is to assist all students in reaching their full potential and to function as competent and productive members of a democratic society and that this will necessarily encompass effective career preparation. I will hand it to you for questions.

The CHAIR — According to parents, what aspects of school career advice are working well and what areas need improvement?

Ms McHARDY — In particular you would have seen from our submission that effective communication is the utmost priority. Victorian Government schools, as per the current legislation, have a high level of autonomy so it is a local decision about how that is facilitated. Of course where you live and what context that school is situated in, and again the cohort of children, will influence how that information is exchanged with families and then also what access they have to resources in the local community or wider with business, industry and expertise in to facilitate those things that may be identified to support those young people in that cohort.

The CHAIR — What aspects of career advice do parents want greater input into?

Ms McHARDY — There will be things like that the curriculum is matching to their desired interest, that the school is equipped to facilitate that. In particular where there have been career advisers they are pretty much done on a basis of what the school can afford. There could be only one or two opportunities to have those conversations, and that is not to be negative against the school. It is just about what money and resources they have to facilitate that. So families probably have a level of frustration of how we can engage in those conversations to identify areas that can be pursued. There are numerous examples where, for example, as they transition from, say, Year 9 through to the upper end of schooling when they need to know about course selection—they may be selecting subjects but it may not necessarily be on the curriculum matching to what young people have desired interests in for a particular reason because of the nature of where that school is situated. Comparing rural and remote communities would be an example of that because a lot of that is heavily reliant on doing things through technology and other support services.

Mr CRISP — Engaging parents is very important. We have heard quite a bit about that. How can career advisers better engage parents in the children’s career development?

Ms McHARDY — I think that we cited in our submission in particular the LLENs—the 31 LLENs. We have been very, very creative, and we have been great ambassadors of those services because particularly they have the opportunity to link with external parties and with schools. In the beginning of their journey, from our experience—this is from our commentary—it was difficult to get inside schools to be able to share that knowledge and that learning. But in more recent times that has been terrific. They certainly have been going streets ahead.

And that is why we cited the example about ‘Any more questions’, the little video series, because having things explained and broken down in simple, plain language for people—not to assume that parents do not understand—translating educational speak, and understanding of frameworks and how things are done in the schools and how we progress to the next tertiary levels of training and learning, those things need to be explained.

VET, VCAL—we all talk in acronyms in education. It is difficult for families to get their head around that, and we have to recognise our community is so diverse. We had some community conversations at the end of 2017, and even having community conversations around just understanding school frameworks is difficult—understanding the Australian Government learning systems and who reports to who, why we have a federal minister of education and why we have a state minister of education. Some of the families from different cultures said that coming from another country they find they do not have an understanding of what that all means and how that impacts on funding and school support for children and the families directly.

Mrs FYFFE — Gail, several submissions have claimed that schools place too much emphasis on ATAR scores and university, but conversely we have parents who also put the emphasis on that. How can a government encourage parents to view vocational education and training as valuable pathways as well as encouraging the teachers, the schools, to do the same?

Ms McHARDY — I think the ATAR, Christine, is very topical and it is a huge debate, as you would see play out in the media and numerous platforms of conversation around that. From a parent perspective, a lot of that is because of what people read and how that messaging is conveyed to them and the level of the points that lean towards that. As an organisation, we have parents that come to us with some challenges around that and we have some conversations to understand why their school may be streaming students. It is like the STEM debate—why is there this emphasis et cetera? We have to explain to schools: you need to unpack that.

We have recently had an international author and researcher out from the University of Saskatchewan, in Canada, who talks about how we need to tap into the parents’ funds of knowledge and that we pretty much need to walk the parents through a parent university so they can have an understanding about what that may mean for their child going forward, because their experience would have been very different through their childhood, or the potential of what the world is offering now in a global sense.

In answer to your question on ATAR, rather than getting bogged down in that debate, we would say it is about how things are communicated and what information is communicated and how people unpack that.

Mrs FYFFE — How do we get them to value the alternatives to going to university?

Ms McHARDY — When you actually sit down and have the conversation and explain what the offerings are, families are much more on board because they did not understand that was in the offering. The school may be driving a particular mantra—because schools are under pressure too from our government, with school funding et cetera, to perform and make sure students work to that direction.

Mrs FYFFE — It is seen as a measure of their success.

Ms McHARDY — Correct. So we would argue that a score does not define you, and it is one moment in time—even having former students return to tell other students about how they have succeeded going forward and the turns in their life and different careers. The Foundation of Young Australians report was evidence of that—that in the future there will be 17 potential careers in your life. I have been through five myself personally, but it has been being open to learning and having the confidence and building that resilience. This is why capability and adaptive cultures are essential. How do we educate our children and families? For us it is the missing piece about bringing parents on the journey. That is why family engagement, parental engagement, is so topical, because that is the missing piece.

Mr MELHEM — The Committee received various submissions stating that career advice should begin in Year 7, even primary school. Is career planning occurring early enough at school, and if not, when do you reckon is a good time for career planning to start?

Ms McHARDY — Thanks, Cesar. It is really quite interesting because on our journey—and the organisation, as you know, has been around a long time—when the VCAA introduced the *Where to now* booklet it was more for the Year 10 onwards cohort of students in secondary schools. We argued that that needed to be introduced way earlier because we were seeing disengagement appearing as early as Year 8, sometimes at the end of Year 7, for a range of reasons and contributing factors. We just felt that some young people have a passion or an interest even in primary school—not all—and often there is a lot of debate and discussion about the fact that a lot of Year 10s do not know what they want to do in the future.

I would argue that that has changed again in the very recent couple of years, with entrepreneurship. Young people are aspiring to do a lot more sooner, more than when we were young adults. So again it is: how do we have the conversation about when to have those conversations earlier? Some of the primary school thing is around occupation and areas of careers, but maybe it is more about looking to all the other research reports about capability and what people are aspiring to do and what people's skill sets are and making sure that they feel confident and can trust in themselves that if they do not have that skill yet, they could learn it for the next thing that they are wanting to try.

Mr MELHEM — Would you look at some sort of gradual introduction? Let us say at Year 7 you gradually introduce getting students and parents to start thinking about careers and then firm it up as you get to Year 9, 10. Also, to add to that, would you support the idea that career advice should be compulsory as far as being part of the school curriculum—as a compulsory subject?

Ms McHARDY — I will split the question in two. For the first part, I would say as a parent organisation we are coming from a perspective that we take a holistic approach in how we support our children in that space, be it primary or secondary. We have to make sure children have the joy of learning. I wanted to say to the Committee that only on Friday the Australian Learning Lecture launched a report, and I would urge you to have a look at it—it is online. There are also some videos and things. It is about joining joy and data, about learning. Again we have to be careful about the expectation. We know that in our young people there is a growing level of anxiety and that there are mental health issues. We have to strike a balance. I think we can excite young people about wanting to learn and being confident that if you are not good at a particular area of the curriculum, you could be good with particular tools and resources and supports, as required.

In reply to the second part of the question, in relation to compulsoriness, I think that, from what we have read and understood from the industry and business, there is an expectation that our children are school ready as they go from early childhood to school. We would argue that they need to be community ready, not just work ready ...

Mr MELHEM — Job ready.

Ms McHARDY — People will say 'job ready' but I would argue 'life ready', because when they leave school they have to run a budget, they have to mix in society—have the interpersonal skills to be able to communicate and be able to navigate in the community—all those things. So we may equip them academically, but socially and mentally there is probably more work to be done.

Mrs FYFFE — Children from what we term 'disadvantaged backgrounds'—have their parents expressed concerns to you about the career advice they are getting, and how can the schools improve the career outcomes for at-risk students? In that I am including perhaps where education is not valued and the child has missed a lot of schooling.

Ms McHARDY — That is a curly one.

Mrs FYFFE — I know, but it is a real issue.

Ms McHARDY — Yes. In answer to that, I think the reality is that we cannot make an assumption about what any family is at any point in time. We have to recognise and acknowledge that there are certainly students at risk, but there are also children in well-equipped and supportive families that are also on that tipping point

due to mental health—because of the pressure of expectations and heightened anxiety—so there is also that bit too. We have got to strike a balance.

In answer to the question, those families have definitely expressed quite clearly that getting their head around understanding how to function in Australia to support their children is most important. Particularly refugees—they have a high desire to make sure that their child's life is a better life than what they experienced. But in saying that, they are also very mindful that those children very much get up to speed in lots of other ways through the help of their peers, because they assimilate quite quickly. They also very quickly adopt a Western lifestyle but their families may not be transitioning at the same speed, so that then creates some internal issues as well.

The department has done a fair bit of work in this space, particularly with equity funding. They are trying to support schools to recognise this, but again because of local autonomy we rely heavily on the school, the governance body, to make sure that their annual implementation plan and strategic plan align with the community's needs and aspirations. That is where the parental engagement stuff, again, comes in about knowing your audience, knowing the children's needs and aspirations and then making sure that the school is delivering services and support accordingly with the funding that is made available, be it federal or state, to do that.

Mrs FYFFE — Refugee children and a lot of their parents are very aspirational and want them to achieve, and migrant families too—it is the justification of why they are here. We have got children with disabilities, but we also have a group of young people, as I think we are well aware, from the areas that we come from where there is no value placed on education by the families. How are we going to break through that with career advice for their young people so that they become aware of the value? There are so many who are drifting off, who have missed school because no-one said, 'You must go to school. You need to go to school'.

Ms McHARDY — I think we have got to break through the fear barrier. I think the fact is that we need to facilitate those conversations to build people's trust and confidence. Even in the current Education State—I do not like speaking in acronyms, but regarding FISO, the Framework for Improving Student Outcomes—there is a section about building community confidence. We would say that is undercooked still in that regard. We have been having more recent conversations with the department about how that can be driven more. That is the big parental engagement piece, because regardless of the situation of the family, there may be resistance. People argue it is about the hard-to-reach families; we would argue it is about the inaccessible institutions and who is going to take responsibility and facilitate those conversations to allay people's fears and make them feel supported.

We have communities that are very complex and unique where schools have, through grants and so forth, got social workers. But some of those initiatives are not sustainable; they rely on funding to continue. We would say that needs to be embedded into the life of the school to have those supports to support the school to do those things for those families when in need.

Mrs FYFFE — You mentioned costs—school fees and so on. The costs for VET courses—have you had much feedback about the extra cost? Even though to us it may not seem like a huge amount, to a lot of people it is.

Ms McHARDY — It can be quite inaccessible for a lot. I recall even from my own personal experience—I do not like to do that often—going out to Box Hill TAFE when my child was doing a Year 9 introductory program in VET and having to pay, I think it was, an up-front deposit of \$120. The information had not been communicated effectively in my view, and there were only a couple of us that were interested in possibly enrolling our children. Our children had an interest in hospitality at that time; it was quite a number of years ago. But even then you could not go to the next step unless you paid the deposit. Obviously being a parent from an active parent organisation, I fed that back to the institution and to the school and to the department to say, 'That's okay for me, but not for a lot of people'. There were people in the hallway going, 'Well, we can't do this now. We can't physically do that now or probably in the next couple of months'. That is the reality of life for some people. As someone that had the ability to do it, I found it quite sad to see others whose children probably have even more need than mine to do the program, but who did not have the financial potential.

Mrs FYFFE — Do you think, then, that perhaps we should have a system like the state relief system that helps with other things—with school camps and excursions? Should it be extended under the same parameters to help these young people to go to the VET courses when they have got no family support?

Ms McHARDY — I think that is quite a reasonable initiative to investigate, in particular with the CSEF funding for camps and excursions as it is presently set—and we will not even get into a debate about the education maintenance allowance and its removal; I will not get into that. But I would agree: yes, there needs to be some capacity to support families that are eligible in terms of need for those things, but being realistic. When people set certain courses and costs they need to be realistic so that the funding that is going to flow to that is going to benefit the child and not to feed industry about making money to the disadvantage of others.

Mr MELHEM — Just on the same subject, I want to break it up to low socio-economic areas and also to branch out to the regional areas, because we were in Mildura last week, and one of the obstacles for young kids is having to come into Melbourne to be able to do things that, for example, we take for granted, let us say, in Melbourne. From your point of view what sort of reform should the government put in place to assist people in low socio-economic areas or regional areas? Should there be a needs test? What sort of changes would you like to see to encourage students to take—or not discourage students from taking—advantage of what is available in Victoria, to educate themselves and excel in life? Should there be some government financial support for regional and low socio-economic areas?

Ms McHARDY — The state government just recently announced—I do not have all the detail, but it is available online—support for rural students' transport to Melbourne for certain things: excursions, camps et cetera. I have not looked at all the detail about what the parameters are on eligibility et cetera, but I am mindful about that type of transport support. If you talk to rural ambassadors of Victoria, the students themselves, about this stuff, they have got some amazing ideas about this. They come from those locations and they understand the strengths and weaknesses of where they come from, because it is a double-edged sword.

With some of those students, their families want them to go to big cities because they are going to have more opportunity, but the young children—I mean, not young—recognise themselves that they leave their local community, and then that creates a deficit for the people that are left behind, because student numbers drop and they do not get the same level of funding as a school in another region.

In relation to the Indigenous groups I think there needs to be far more conversation about what their needs are, to support them, because we know in terms of disengagement and students at risk how some schools even have to facilitate them getting to school because of a whole range of contributing factors. I think those sorts of things are real issues.

VAEAI and other organisations representing Indigenous community members have local advisory groups and teams of Indigenous people where those elders, I am sure, share suggestions and ideas. I would certainly recommend, to anyone in government or opposition, to pursue that.

Mr MELHEM — Just one last one, a quick one. How well are work experience programs working, do you reckon, in our schools, and what is the feedback from parents?

Ms McHARDY — It is not unknown the fact that the rules of compliance have negated, probably, some opportunities, but of course in the world we live in today we have to reduce risk. Parents Victoria has certainly submitted feedback to the department and government around that space, but we are very mindful that again it is about how people facilitate communication between business and industry to facilitate those opportunities for young people.

I would say there is a little bit of a missing link in a sense about how that explanation goes, about why we have to fill in these forms and why we have to do this. That, to me, is very off-putting to business because they do not have the time and to schools because they are left the job to facilitate it. So again I think there are other opportunities for other external parties to help to be a bridge for those people. Why should it be all the school's responsibility? Why should it be all the business's responsibility? I am sure there are other ways, a holistic approach that governments could look at—different ways—in communities and networking about how we could do that all together.

Mr MELHEM — Should parents and students perhaps be involved a bit more to do a placement?

Ms McHARDY — Definitely. Exactly. Our policy has been very clear back from day dot around a lot more community representation on a range of things. I look to the rural and regional communities because often they are the people that are really striving to survive. It is not so bad—although we still have our problems—in urban metro. If you were to talk to the families down at Orbost and the businesses down there with the milk industry and things like that where things can go belly up very quickly, communities need to be part of that conversation.

The CHAIR — If there are no further questions, would you like to finish by saying anything else or are you happy with what you have given us?

Ms McHARDY — I would just commend to the Committee—I wish you well with all your recommendations—some further reading in relation to looking at the Australian Learning Lecture website. I would also look at, obviously, the information that has come out of the Mitchell Institute. You have had submissions from us all, and I think we are all pretty much speaking from the same platform.

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

Ms McHARDY — Thank you.

Witnesses withdrew.