

CORRECTED VERSION

EDUCATION AND TRAINING COMMITTEE

Inquiry into dress codes and school uniforms in Victorian schools

Melbourne — 14 May 2007

Members

Mr M. Dixon (from 18 September 2007)	Dr A. Harkness
Mr N. Elasmarr	Mr S. Herbert
Mr B. Finn (1 March – 18 September 2007)	Mr G. Howard
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Mr A. Leschen, regional programs manager, The Smith Family.

The CHAIR — Anton, I understand you are to speak on behalf of The Smith Family. I welcome you to the Education and Training Committee. As you would be aware, upper and lower house MPs are meeting to look at, as our first inquiry, issues associated with dress codes and school uniforms in Victoria. I should advise you, as you are aware, that this hearing is being taped for our purposes but it still accords with parliamentary privilege as to anything that is said inside this room, so that means there is protection in regard to things you say in here but which would not accord with things that might be said outside. Other than that, we are all interested to hear The Smith Family's viewpoint in regard to dress codes and issues associated with school uniforms, especially for the students from poorer families that I understand you would be dealing with.

Mr LESCHEN — Thanks very much. If I can start by giving some context of where our interviews and information came from. The Smith Family is a national social enterprise. We are looking to unlock opportunities for financially disadvantaged families and children through education, and accordingly we run a Learning for Life program which brokers scholarship funds between individual and corporate sponsors and pays those funds and provides a suite of programs to a range of people across the Australian community.

Increasingly The Smith Family is moving away from an individual service provision model towards an asset-based approach or asset-based community development. We have over 85 sites in operation in Australia, and 12 of those sites are across metropolitan and regional Victoria. The Learning for Life workers are where our strategies hit the road, and it is the Learning for Life workers that interact with families on the scholarship program and also deliver the sub-programs.

The Learning for Life scholarship program is not just a financial payment paid to financially disadvantaged households. It is a suite of programs that address personal support — that is, cognitive skills, personal development, extracurricular activities, reading and comprehension literacy, digital literacy, financial literacy and indigenous issues. It is the Learning for Life workers who are co-located in the 12 sites across Victoria that interact with our families and increasingly with schools and community agencies to provide these community development approaches. The scholarships paid to The Smith Family by individuals go through to families to overcome financial barriers. We are focused on financial barriers but appreciate that there are other issues associated with their disadvantage that impact on their capacity to learn and engage in the education opportunities in Australia.

The Smith Family is an evidence-based organisation, and it is our research and evidence that directs the strategy of our organisation. It has been in existence for over 84 years with very minimal government funding. We maintain an independent strategy, identifying the needs and opportunities and applying our resources best to unlock opportunities for financially disadvantaged people. In order to provide you with information from our families and schools, our Learning for Life workers interviewed and talked to some families and school staff.

That ends up as four interviews and some supplementary information. At the risk of being a little dry, I intend just to read that to you because in that way I will get the information across clearly. The first interview occurred in Geelong at a primary school with a welfare teacher, who said:

It is a condition of enrolment that students wear the school uniform. The school council is adamant that the compulsory uniform policy remain, as it believes it to be, 'the great equaliser', a particularly important factor in a highly disadvantaged school.

It is assumed that financially disadvantaged families will be recipients of the educational maintenance allowance and will use these funds for the purchase of compulsory uniforms. If the family has used the EMA for other educational expenses then the school will confidentially provide the students with uniforms at no cost. The funds for this practice come from the school's welfare budget. The majority of uniforms are purchased by families at a uniform shop which will allow a lay-by arrangement; however, families have reported that a uniform item is, more often than not, required immediately.

This welfare teacher cited a range of benefits with regard to school uniforms:

Students are easily identified as being students of that school community (particularly important on school excursions);

Opportunity for meaningful mottos and logos to be acknowledged and displayed by the student.

The theme throughout these interviews is that it:

reduces competition for expensive designer clothing; therefore the student's social standing is based more on personal character than financial status;

- assists some disadvantaged students to blend in with their peer group;
- assists students and parents in resisting peer pressure;
- helpful in recognising students who do not attend the school;
- provides the student with a sense of belonging and allegiance to that school;
- reduces the possibility of inappropriate and potentially unsafe clothing being worn;
- reduces the risk of bullying relating to the wearing of the latest fashion;
- more affordable and durable compared to casual wear;
- signals to the student that it is work time not play time and that their schoolwork is serious business.

The second interview was with a primary school principal, also in Geelong, who said:

... that his school had a compulsory school uniform that had a practical emphasis, consisting of a polo shirt and shorts or pants. Most types of pants were considered to be acceptable and the school was 'fairly lax' on enforcing what types of shoes students wore. The school was happy as long as students wore the shirt and were not concerned if it was a shirt without a school logo.

Seven families out of a total of 115 families cannot afford a school uniform and receive assistance from the State School Relief Fund. Families having difficulty affording uniforms can also pay for uniforms from the uniform shop for \$5 per week. Most families in the school community follow the uniform code.

... school uniforms have become another cost that has become harder to bear for families. The school presents the idea to families that in terms of expense it is better to have students in uniform than under pressure to buy the latest fashionable clothing.

The school also has access to the Geelong Community Foundation, which offers \$50 clothing vouchers. The school uses this fund to supply Target vouchers for shoes rather than put pressure on the State School Relief Fund, which is under great stress. The school assists with fundraising for the State School Relief Fund. Families who are eligible for the education maintenance allowance, which is to be used for school-related expenses, may use the half of the allowance that they have access to for school uniforms if they wish.

Families buy uniforms from the school shop, which is operated by parent volunteers. Families of new students receive a uniform price list before commencing school and order uniforms from the list.

...

In enforcing dress and uniform code the school is primarily concerned with safety issues, especially with regard to jewellery.

And he goes on that it is really about safety and the students are encouraged not to wear dangerous jewellery because they are playing on equipment in the schoolyard. He said:

In terms of hair colour, the school 'gave up' on imposing requirements, especially as the teachers have varying hair colours themselves.

... did not think that as the majority of the school population of 150 students consisted of 99 per cent 'white Anglo' English-speaking students, with two Koori students, that there were concerns regarding cultural or religious issues in terms of uniform.

... consistently works with parents and families to ensure student compliance with school uniform policy to uphold a standard. A rule has been imposed that if a student is not wearing a uniform they are unable to attend an excursion or sporting activity outside of the school. However, sometimes individual teachers do not enforce the rule when they believe students have extenuating circumstances for not wearing their uniform.

He concludes by saying:

He does not believe educational authorities could improve any aspect of school uniform or dress code policies; that is handled at a local level. He also thinks that alternatives need to be offered to families to assist them to provide uniforms for their children. Some families, he stated, 'are really struggling' and are sometimes given items from lost property to take home, wash and wear.

I also refer to two interviews with level 5 parents. The first reads:

During the transition from primary to secondary school new and increased stresses impact on a family. Debbie, a mother of six on The Smith Family's Learning for Life Scholarship Program, acknowledges the reasons for compulsory uniforms in schools. She reports however that there is a marked and unrealistic increase from the expense of primary school uniforms to that of secondary school uniforms, even in the government system, where she believed education for her children would be affordable. Debbie reports, for example, that a \$23 windcheater and \$27 bomber jacket at primary school are replaced by a \$55 jumper and \$120 blazer at secondary school.

The government high school where her older children attend appears haphazard in its policing of its uniform policy. It seems to tolerate deviation from the rule for a while and then attempts a 'clean-up', much to the students' disappointment. The rush is then on for

students to return to their full uniform in an attempt to avoid detention or humiliating schoolyard rubbish duty. Debbie believes that an unwavering school uniform policy is vital in ensuring that a huge expense of secondary school uniforms is validated.

The final interview is with a lady called Patty:

Patty has one daughter 25 years old, and three sons 22, 21 and 18 years old, the youngest ... completed VCE in 2006.

Patty believes the benefits of a school uniform are that all students are 'the same' with students not competing with various fashions. She believes uniforms are expensive but it would cost more if children were trying to compete with fashions, and thinks schools like students to look neat as they are representing their school.

Patty thinks different schools have different standards with regard to school uniforms but generally schools are not as strict as they used to be, where 'kids are now given more leeway'. She is not sure why this is the case although it could be perhaps a trend in society generally, where teenagers have more say than previously. She believes uniform policy is not 'pushed enough', for example she observes students in public wearing shoes undone and kilts 'dragging on the ground'. She said some students appear to get away with not wearing a complete uniform and having untidy hair.

The selling of second-hand uniforms at school at the uniform shop is regarded by Patty as the most cost-efficient and practical uniform procurement arrangement ...

Shoes are the hardest items to deal with as they are the most expensive items and you cannot pass them down to the next child:

In reference to health promotion policy, Patty observes hats are not being worn by secondary school students, as they were a number of years ago. When her daughter began secondary school she had a cap but because no-one else had one, she did not wear it.

In primary school it is part of the uniform to wear a hat, either of legionnaire or wide-brim style. Patty does not know how they could have enforced this rule at secondary school as the students are easier to cope with at primary schools and teachers have more control.

Patty's children had to bring a note from home to explain uniform irregularities, and she believes school should be strict with uniform because there is less discrimination against students if they are all wearing a uniform and students look the same.

She believes this is especially important on school excursions and that when students are in public places it may deter them from activities such as smoking. She believes sanctions are difficult to impose as there may be valid reasons why students are not wearing an item of school uniform and it can be costly to quickly replace lost items. Patty found it difficult to do so but always did it as a matter of urgency, sometimes going without food, because she did not want her children not to fit in or to get detentions. These types of sanctions put pressure on parents as they do not want to see their children suffer. She thinks shoes are the hardest items to replace:

Boys were not allowed to have facial hair and one of her son's friends stated he was unable to shave due to a skin condition. She feels it was difficult to 'draw the line' in regard to rules on hair. One of her older sons had many different hairstyles and colours and he was sanctioned for this. He and his friends believed it was unfair that at that time boys were reprimanded for unusual hairstyles but girls were not.

In regard to girls who wear make-up to school, Patty believes this separates them from those who are either not allowed to, or cannot afford it. She also believes girls' uniforms are more expensive with the kilt being a ridiculous expense. She had to buy a second kilt for her daughter when she outgrew one and that was very expensive. For her it was a big saving not to have to purchase blazers that were not necessary at the school. Patty believes secondary school students should wear hats for sun protection.

In regard to improving the rules on school uniforms, Patty thinks it seems to be left to the individual schools. She was not sure if the rules in regard to school uniforms are emanating from the Department of Education or whether individual schools or principals are responsible for changing uniform rules. She is also not sure whether there is a person at each school responsible for leadership in regard to school uniforms. Patty has noticed inconsistencies with how uniform is enforced in individual school classes, even to the point of whether shirts should be tucked in or not.

She notes that we have varying climates and that it could be preferable to introduce sandals without socks for very hot weather for both primary and secondary students.

Patty has noticed changes in attitudes to school uniform over the years her children have attended school, especially with her 22-year-old son who found he and other students could get away with a lot more over time, an example being the wearing of coloured T-shirts under school shirts.

Patty believes paying for school uniforms is hard for those who do not have much money, along with affording other educational-related expenses. Education, she says, is 'not quite free', although the government has ways of saying it is.

These are just a few points from other Learning for Life workers across the state. From Ballarat in response to any concerns about current approaches to school uniform dress code policies the concerns listed were:

- when schools change uniforms suddenly without a phased period for change;
- primary schools changing uniforms so that they cannot be purchased from retail stores;
- year 12 jumpers and year 6 jumpers (specialist jumpers) — only six months wear and cost prohibitive;
- pieces of uniforms such as pants that are monogrammed and have to be worn in preference to plain versions;
- no consistent enforcement of policies by schools.

From Collingwood, Broadmeadows and Epping it was noted:

Most parents are not complaining about the children requiring school uniforms; rather this had become a requirement by most government schools this year so they were having to pay out for a number of children. Perhaps it should have been phased in for those with three or more children.

Most felt that they wanted strong clothing that would last a reasonable time and understood this would mean increased costs, at least initially. Many would have been prepared to find second-hand uniforms, but this opportunity was not available to them.

In Gippsland the team noted:

More schools are enforcing school uniforms and a number of our Learning for Life families are telling us that this is making it financially difficult.

For example, Bairnsdale Secondary College has tightened their dress code. It now includes a skirt for winter, hat for summer and the regulation short or jean. Some families are struggling to manage these requirements.

These uniforms can only be purchased from specialty stores in the area.

There is mixed reaction from the schools around uniforms — some teachers say that they are there to teach, not to discipline students around their lack of uniform. Other teachers, especially at senior level, say that uniform assists students to have better sense of belonging and more pride in their school as well as giving them a sense of discipline.

It further said:

It is very much a mixed bag for students on the LFL program. It does put additional pressure on the family to buy full uniforms, and as many of them do not or cannot comply with this request it does mark them as a non-compliant student/family.

Conversely it has been noted that the students are responding to the new dress code with a certain degree of pride and ownership.

In Gippsland it concludes that:

... schools are saying that uniforms are preferred and are here to stay, but for many families on low income it is just an additional burden.

In conclusion the points I précis from that are:

- Uniforms are seen as a means to level fashion pursuits;
- uniforms reduce peer group pressure and potential victimisation;
- uniforms can reduce clothing costs for families;
- schools should set an expectation of their uniform rules and apply them consistently;
- greater school-community support for running second-hand uniform shops and after hours opening is encouraged.

The CHAIR — Thank you. Any questions from committee members?

Mr HALL — You deal with some pretty sensible sort of people. I think their views are pretty much spot on. Good.

Mr HERBERT — Just in terms of your programs, to provide funding to the Learning for Life program, have you got an annual figure on how much you spend on that? Is there a breakdown by state at all? Do you know how much is spent on uniforms?

Mr LESCHEN — No, but I will tell you some other things. I omitted to say there are 26 000 students in the Learning for Life program across Australia. There are 6000 of those in Victoria. We are growing that to 70 000 across Australia because that is tied in with 10 per cent of the 700 000 children living below the poverty line. Our evidence indicates statistically if you impact on 10 per cent of the population there is a net gain for the entire population. Hence our pursuit of sponsors and corporate assistance to roll out the scholarship program to disadvantaged communities. Because we follow an asset-based approach we assess the families for financial disadvantage and a commitment to their child's school education. When we are assured of that we then say, 'Here is a parcel of money each year for you to determine how you spend'. So the primary age families receive \$250 per student. For junior secondary, \$350, for senior secondary, \$600 and for VET or tertiary education, \$2000 per year. So it is not a welfare system where people come to us and say, 'We need a school uniform, could you please give us some money'. We say, 'You are endeavouring to pursue education. You may be locked into the intergenerational cycle of poverty. Here is some money for you to make your own determinations with'.

Mr FINN — I am a little confused, probably not for the first time in my life. In the beginning of one of the quotes you described uniforms as a great equaliser. Toward the end somebody else described it as a great burden. Where do we actually sit on this? Is it a great equaliser? Is this what we need to prevent the discrimination and bragging in the classroom and all that, or is this a burden on parents who are struggling?

Mr LESCHEN — I have quoted four interviews, and we could have done 27 000 and they would have been very contradictory. My interpretation of that is there is a preference and an understanding of the benefits of school uniforms, but the increased fanciness and rapid change in fashion and styles is an additional burden that families would like to avoid. I certainly see from personal experience you can go to the specialist shop and pay \$35 for a polo top with a monogram, and you might get the same thing from Target for \$10. I think that the theme there is school uniforms are good, they are cheap if they generic, but this notion of style and look describing a good education as opposed to the content of the curriculum is maybe a frustration for some of our families.

Mr FINN — Another thing that you mentioned was the increase in costs between primary and secondary uniforms. Do you find that is the case? And if so, why? Is it just a situation of clothing companies, uniform companies, seeking to make an extra dollar, or is there some great advance in a secondary school uniform that is not there in a primary?

Mr LESCHEN — It is not borne out by those case studies, but I sat on a school council some years ago and it pushed towards blazers. There are elements of that in that information. It seems to me that there is a shift towards private school education. Sometimes people assess those by the uniforms and grounds, and to a degree I think some high schools are saying, 'We will compete in that market, and we will move from the more casual windcheaters and bomber jackets to the more expensive blazers'. Some schools have kilts, as I think Patty referred to; and it has those specialised, non-generic items that are costlier. So in answer to your question it seems that blazers and other such uniform items are costlier in secondary school than in primary school.

The CHAIR — You did not say it, but are you aware of any families who have come to The Smith Family and advised that they just do not see how they cannot afford the uniforms that they are required to pay for?

Mr LESCHEN — Some of the preliminary information was that people in our Collingwood location at the beginning of the year were inundated with calls with regard to fees, books and uniforms. They were saying two calls per day for four weeks. So families are scrabbling to come to terms with the cost of Christmas and then the return-to-school costs.

Mr HALL — Anton, do you do any tracking as to where your scholarship money actually ends up? What purpose it is put to?

Mr LESCHEN — We ask that all families keep receipts. That is a safety net mechanism. We do not track their expenditure as such. We interview them and assess their commitment to their child's education. They need to show us a health care card to show their financial disadvantage. If they are able to do that and we also receive their school reports either twice or once a year, we review those reports. If we see that the child regularly attends school and we know the family has a health care card, that is enough for us to say that they are living hard, and the small parcels of money and the support and information provided for a Learning for Life worker is making an impact. We call in the receipts when there is a question mark over the compliance of the family. It may be that the school reports are indicating that the child is not going to school, or it may be that we are aware that there may be habits

within the household or inappropriate expenditure. As custodians of the sponsors' money, we will have a conversation with the family and part of that will be: could we have a look at the receipts? That leads to either better compliance and appreciation of what the scholarship is for, or, unfortunately, removing that scholarship from that family and applying it to another household.

Mr HALL — I just ask one last question. Have you detected any significant difference between need in regional areas of Australia compared with major capital cities? I just ask the question: you might, anecdotally, be aware if there are higher uniform costs in country towns or something like that.

Mr LESCHEN — We use the SNET data — I need to check on that acronym — to indicate disadvantage. Our research department can answer that more accurately and in greater detail. In very simple terms, for the amount of scholarships we have for the disadvantaged in communities in the 12 locations in Victoria, we are oversubscribed. Using the asset-based approach, there are some communities that are so disadvantaged, with so few assets, that we do not necessarily engage in those areas because our limited resources and time would not achieve a great deal, so there are other communities that we attach to, to contribute to that community's response to disadvantage.

The CHAIR — I have one last one too, Anton. In terms of any families that you have been dealing with, are you aware of any of them falling foul of school administrations because they either are slow in buying a uniform for their children or have taken a more direct action and saying, 'No, we cannot afford it at this time; we are not going to,' and whether there is the fallout?

Mr LESCHEN — I have no evidence of that. I would expect Learning for Life workers would describe that scenario on a few occasions. I think what comes through is that there are some resources through the EMA relief fund, which is heavily subscribed, but there are some safety nets there.

The CHAIR — Okay, good. If there are no other questions, thank you, Anton, for your contribution.

Mr LESCHEN — I will leave a printed copy, if need be. I also note that The Smith Family received an email from an individual, Bev Johns from Whittlesea Secondary College, and she submitted 26 pages for you. This is an independent submission. The Smith Family is not endorsing or arguing against it; she has just asked that it be forwarded on.

The CHAIR — Good; thanks, Anton.

Witness withdrew.

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Ms J. Silver, executive officer, Victorian Parents Council.

The CHAIR — Jo, I understand you represent the Victorian Parents Council.

Ms SILVER — Correct.

The CHAIR — And you are aware that we are the Education and Training Committee of the Victorian Parliament, with members from all parties in both the upper and lower house. At the moment we are conducting our first inquiry of this Parliament on the issue of dress codes and uniforms in Victorian schools. Could I also let you know, as you can pick up from these microphones, that we are recording any information that is provided to us for our purposes. Things that are said are covered under the parliamentary privilege procedures, the same as they occur in Parliament, so that you are protected against things that are said if they were deemed to be uncomplimentary in the outside world, but that does not happen if you do speak in the outside world. That is just for your information.

Ms SILVER — That was not in the covering letter.

The CHAIR — However, if you have any questions on that score, certainly ask them, but we are pleased that you have come along to speak to us today and give us the views of the Victorian Parents Council on school uniforms and dress codes.

Ms SILVER — Good afternoon. In order to preface this, what I would like to do is explain how we get information from our members, because I think that is quite important. We have monthly committee meetings. We have not, unfortunately, met to discuss this one at one of our meetings because we have had an AGM in between when the information came out and this one coming together. What I also do is I try to canvass parent thinking by sending out the issues to schools, usually via email so that we can get them done faster. I had a number of responses to my queries. Karen supplied me with some information and questions that were more detailed than the terms of reference. That is what I sent out to schools — to an overwhelmingly silent response, I should say.

So I put something together myself and then sent that back out, and I did get a response to that. I left it a little inflammatory to see if I could initiate a response, and it certainly worked. Certainly the people who have responded to me have tended to be presidents, either current or past, from parents and friends associations. Of the schools, some of them have a uniform policy, some of them do not, so it will depend; they may or may not wear one. They covered a number of the inner-city established schools as well as some of the outer-city schools, the lower SES schools and a couple of the special needs schools as well.

The CHAIR — Are these all non-government schools?

Ms SILVER — Yes. Overwhelmingly, everyone wrote back and said that they felt that it was great that the state government was looking into uniforms, but they did not understand the relevance between the non-government sector and the position of the state government in this. They felt that although it might be appropriate for state government to set guidance and policy regarding uniforms in state schools, by their very nature non-government schools should be setting their own guidelines and policies in this area. They felt that independent and Catholic schools that they represented should be making their decisions in consultation and discussion with their school communities. And that was a response from everybody; there was an intrigue as to why the state government was investigating.

Having said that, people wrote back about why they wear a uniform and what they felt a uniform should represent. What came back was that wearing a uniform demonstrates the pride you have in your school. And if your school is advocating that you wear uniform and you do not feel that that is appropriate, then you are at wrong school; you should be leaving. It is very much for each school community to decide what is the appropriate school culture and the monetary demographic as well, so that they can set a uniform according to the types of needs that parents have. Some schools wrote back and said that they have a uniform committee which approves all uniform additions and which tries to ensure uniformity, particularly if they have multiple campuses. Another school has a set of rules and regulations about uniforms and they even have a school marshal.

This is a school that has just developed a new uniform, actually. But this school marshal ensures the appearance of students; he dispenses warnings, demerits and detentions. Her interviews with the marshal said that the vast majority of students and parents concur that they agree with the school's discipline, and that the students were quite happy to accept a disciplinary action if they felt it was a fair cop — if they had gone against the known rules. Then others spoke about the role of the uniform, that it is an opportunity to be proud, it encourages self-esteem, and it

eliminates any sense of competition in dress standards which might otherwise exist. There was another comment on that, that it is an egalitarian way of dealing with differences in SES, so it is seen as quite positive. Most places do not seem to have any form of uniform assistance other than the second-hand shop. I do know in my dealings with parents that some of them do lay aside bursaries, though, because some schools will extend scholarships to refugee groups, to children from refugee backgrounds or if financial hardship has come upon parents. Schools will keep their communities on, and they do have bursaries and funds allocated for these children. Culturally it was seen that the uniform is a symbolic representation of who we are and how we want the community to see us, so schools need to decide what it is that they are trying to replicate, and they also need to ensure that the students are replicating that. In some schools their students wear their uniforms very scruffily, so although there might be a nice theory behind what a uniform should represent, the children themselves are not representing it. From that came a discussion about how with a uniform it is not actually so important to get buy-in from the parents, but it is quite important to get buy-in from the students so that the students are taking ownership of what their community represents and what it is that they would like to provide as an image.

Our recommendation would be that if you want more in-depth information, it might be easier to conduct a forum with parents. Or even if we conduct a forum with parents, which we would need time for, to organise parents and/or students from different schools to represent the group where some of the questions that Karen put forward could be discussed in more detail, because otherwise what I have tended to get back is a little bit superficial and does not necessarily provide a lot of depth in terms of feedback for you. That was really it.

The CHAIR — Okay, good. Thank you, Jo.

Mr KOTSIRAS — You said the students are happy to accept the punishment for not wearing uniform or for having different coloured hair if they believed that it was, and I quote, ‘a fair cop’. Have you seen the situation where the child believes that they were unfairly treated, and have you seen the situation where the parents have taken the side of the student and not the school? If that is the case, then how can you enforce school uniform if parents support the student and not the school? Have you seen any examples of where that has happened?

Ms SILVER — I can think back to my own schooldays, absolutely. You do hear comments made by parents just in the course of events about what their child can and cannot wear, how their hair can be worn, what sort of earrings they can wear. They do not tend to be terribly radical. Certainly you might be talking about colour through their hair, but not green or pink; it might just be a little bit less obvious. But there does seem to be a strong feeling amongst parents that we have chosen this school, we have chosen the policies and therefore we will adhere by them.

Mr KOTSIRAS — So you are saying that in most of the cases the parents would support the school?

Ms SILVER — Yes, and it depends on the school culture. If a parent body is happy for the school to set the guidelines, then they would be more willing to accept. If it is a parent body which is very involved in making policy decisions, it might not be so willing to accept, in which case I might review the policy and adapt it as necessary.

Mr KOTSIRAS — Can I ask, with uniforms, has that been an issue with the parents council? Has it ever been brought up over the years you have been there?

Ms SILVER — No.

Mr KOTSIRAS — So it has never been an issue?

Ms SILVER — In the 18 months that I have been there?

Mr KOTSIRAS — Yes.

Ms SILVER — No.

Mr FINN — Jo, thank you very much for filling us in on that; it was very informative indeed. I was particularly interested in your comments early on where you expressed to us perhaps some surprise from members of your organisation that the state government would be taking an interest in what happens in non-government schools with regard to school uniforms. Can we take it that if the government were to try to legislate or make

recommendations in some way to non-government schools that that would be met with, let us say, a certain degree of hostility?

Ms SILVER — In a nutshell?

Mr FINN — Yes, that will do.

Ms SILVER — Yes.

Mr FINN — Are you basically, in those few words, telling the state government to, ‘Leave us alone’?

Ms SILVER — That is the response I got from parents.

The CHAIR — Do I judge from what you said before that when you put out something to try to elicit a response from the schools, after not having a response that you sort of couched things perhaps with that challenge in front of them in order to get a response out of them? You said you were sort of a little bit inflammatory, and what you said was sort of along those lines.

Ms SILVER — Yes. It is one of the difficulties I face, because I do not want to pre-empt people’s comments, I would like their honest, unassuming comments first. That does not always happen. So yes, I wrote a very inflammatory line about, ‘Have I heard no response because you do not feel this is any of the government’s business, or would you strongly disagree with this?’. Unfortunately, unless you are getting in front of the parents, when I am relying on feedback the way I am, you tend to get the ones who are either very negative about a situation. But they all came back. We perhaps would not say it that way. I was given one comment that the state government has more severe education issues to ferment over than uniforms.

Mr FINN — Fair point.

The CHAIR — Are there any schools that you would be aware of in the non-government sector that do not have uniforms?

Ms SILVER — Yes. Plenty Valley Montessori does not have uniforms. Fitzroy Community School does not have uniforms. These are primary schools. Preshil does not have uniforms; that is a secondary school. I am sure there are more.

Mr HALL — Jo, the indifference might be due to the observation that school uniform is not a problem?

Ms SILVER — I am not sure that they are not a problem. If you take some schools, they have a school uniform for every type of sporting activity, and I know there has been concern expressed there — not in the gathering of this information, but in the past — that if your child wants to try a number of different sports it can get quite expensive having to buy a uniform in a number of different areas. But the feeling would be that the school community needs to speak up and decide that with us — the school board or council. There was one point made, and I am sorry I did not mention it. It would be that school uniforms and schools really need to make a link between what their values are, the quality of education they feel they are providing and the identity of the school, and look at how a uniform enhances that rhetoric. If that was what the state government was going to put through, I am sure that would be welcomed. But in terms of how a school goes about it, there are a number of such different schools that, in effect, have very different policies and feelings. I do not know how you would legislate to allow for all of that.

Mr HALL — Do any of your members ever use the school dress code guidelines published by the department as a baseline for framing a uniform policy?

Ms SILVER — I could not answer that. I do not know.

Mr HALL — I would have thought that, and I am not defending the government here, in terms of an interest factor the non-government sector may be interested in the school dress code guidelines that the government published for government schools. It might provide a basis for a non-government school to determine its policy. Also I would have thought there might be a bit of peer pressure within a town if the kids going to the local high school or secondary college or a government secondary college seem to be pretty carefree in terms of their uniform, or less strict. Would that not pose some pressures from the kids at non-government schools to also wear jeans as

part of their school uniform when the dress code might describe otherwise? So there could be a bit of peer pressure from within schools, I suppose. I would have thought that for many non-government schools it might be preferable that the local government school also has a good strong dress code for students at that school as well.

Ms SILVER — I have no doubt. I think, to answer the first part of the question, that the Association for Independent Schools would be best able to answer whether schools are using the guidelines or not. We are not representing parents on boards. It is more the parents that are involved with fundraising and just want to have a say in how their school does things. I would say that a lot of them just are not that familiar with what the codes are and what they are supposed to do; they just see their school as the entity. But as for the latter, I have no doubt that they would prefer to have groups respecting that school, because obviously if you are in a small community or in a medium-sized community that would be reflected throughout the schools. It would be easier to encourage your own students to do the right thing when others around them are.

Mr HALL — When others are also doing the right thing, yes. Do you reckon this is just a subjective question or one seeking a subjective answer: do you think students have the same views as parents in respect of school uniforms?

Ms SILVER — No. Primary school, probably; but secondary school — and it was certainly a comment from Xavier that students are not embellishing their school code through how they wear their uniform — no, students do not have the same respect, but then it depends on the school and the school culture. The first school my children were at, there was no strong uniform ethic amongst the children and it was not respected by the parents either, whereas the second school, people were to the letter — —

Mr HALL — What about the female students? One would think that they do not have to dress up and compete in casual clothes and therefore a school uniform is, 'Just something I will just pull out of the wardrobe and put on each morning'; would that be viewed by girls as a best option?

Ms SILVER — Yes, and by boys too, now. I think there is a lot of peer pressure amongst boys for even wearing the right runners. Yes, school uniform definitely helps break down those barriers.

Mr KOTSIRAS — Should staff adhere to a dress code to set the example?

The CHAIR — Or do they? I suppose there are two parts to the question.

Ms SILVER — My opinion?

The CHAIR — Yes.

Ms SILVER — Staff should adhere to a dress code. Yes, they do in some schools. Again, I think that is about leadership and good practice and guidelines. You do not want children distracted or being given the wrong impression by their teachers.

The CHAIR — So it is not the standard in non-government schools, that the administration would set a general dress code for staff?

Ms SILVER — I do not know. I would say in some schools it must be because — I do not know.

The CHAIR — Okay. The other one I was going to ask relates to the SunSmart program and the concern about, or especially the encouragement to wear, hats, which seems to work pretty well in primary schools but there is clearly a challenge in secondary schools to get secondary school students to wear the broader brimmed hats which are of course recommended by the anti-cancer council. Have you got any advice or any observations in regard to private schools, or the non-government schools, as to how they are dealing with those sorts of issues?

Ms SILVER — That is such a good question, I wish I had a really good answer for it. No. Unfortunately I had not seen my role in those areas. I know that they have been discussed. We go to an interschool liaison group, which is a group of presidents that meet once a term from the different schools, and they have discussed how they can get their children to wear hats more effectively. For now, no, but I could certainly enquire into that. I know that there were some schools that had some good practices that they were implementing. Should I send that to Karen?

The CHAIR — Yes. Any of that information would be welcomed because that is clearly an issue that we are challenged by in terms of looking at uniforms and how we try to encourage students to be protected from sun issues.

Ms SILVER — Okay.

The CHAIR — If there are no other questions, thank you very much, Jo, for coming in.

Ms SILVER — Sorry I have not been more helpful.

The CHAIR — No, you have been very helpful.

Witness withdrew.

CORRECTED VERSION

EDUCATION AND TRAINING COMMITTEE

Inquiry into dress codes and school uniforms in Victorian schools

Melbourne — 14 May 2007

Members

Mr M. Dixon (from 18 September 2007)	Dr A. Harkness
Mr N. Elasmarr	Mr S. Herbert
Mr B. Finn (1 March – 18 September 2007)	Mr G. Howard
Mr P. Hall	Mr N. Kotsiras

Chair: Mr G. Howard

Deputy Chair: Mr N. Kotsiras

Staff

Executive Officer: Ms K. Ellingford

Research Officer: Ms J. Hope

Committee Administrative Officer: Ms N. Tyler

Witnesses

Ms K. Strong, SunSmart program manager,

Ms J. Makin, SunSmart research and evaluation manager,

Ms E. Clarkson, SunSmart secondary schools program coordinator, and

Ms J. Osborne, SunSmart primary schools and early childhood program coordinator, Cancer Council Victoria.

The CHAIR — Welcome to this Education and Training Committee hearing. You are aware we are a group of MPs from both the upper and lower houses and from three different political parties. Our first inquiry in this term of the Parliament is on uniforms and dress codes in Victorian schools, and obviously we are very interested to get the views of the council and are pleased that you are pleased to offer your views to us. We are recording everything you say and may later want to refer back to some of the issues you shared with us. Parliamentary privilege does apply to anything that is said in our committee meetings — I do not know whether that is relevant or not — but of course does not apply to things said outside. I think that is the key part of the formal advice I need to offer. You are welcome to ask any other questions in regard to the committee. We would be pleased if you would introduce yourselves to us as you speak, and we certainly welcome you to the committee.

Ms STRONG — The SunSmart program, which is the skin cancer prevention program at the Cancer Council Victoria, would like to thank the Education and Training Committee for the opportunity to submit both a written presentation and to make comment as part of this inquiry. There will be three of us representing the Cancer Council Victoria today. I am Kylie Strong, and I am the manager of the SunSmart program in Victoria.

Ms CLARKSON — My name is Emma Clarkson. I am the SunSmart secondary schools program coordinator.

Ms MAKIN — I am Jen Makin, and I am the SunSmart research and evaluation manager.

Ms STRONG — To start with we felt it was important to highlight the impact of skin cancer. Australia has the highest rate of skin cancer in the world. There are over 380 000 Australians who are diagnosed with skin cancer each year, and skin cancer is the most expensive burden on the health system of all our cancers, costing around \$300 million a year to diagnose and treat. There are about 1500 Australians and over 300 Victorians who lose their lives each year to skin cancer, which is surprising considering it is an almost entirely preventable cancer.

Sun exposure has been identified as the cause of at least 95 per cent of all skin cancers in Australia, and although melanoma risk increases as you get older, it can also develop early in life. In those aged 10 to 24, it is the most common cancer, the next most common to leukaemia, but melanoma is double that. In those aged 15 to 44, melanoma and breast cancer are the most common cancers. Adolescence and childhood are critical periods during which sun exposure is likely to contribute to skin cancer later in life.

It is estimated that more than 75 per cent of all skin cancers could be prevented by practising sun protection in childhood and adolescence. Research on children's UV radiation exposure has shown that that exposure is generally higher on weekdays than during the weekend. Physical education, athletics and lunchbreaks at schools are particularly associated with high UV radiation exposure when UV radiation levels are at their highest. This confirms the importance of sun protection in the school setting.

The Cancer Council Victoria recommends that to protect Victorian students from the harmful effects of UV radiation, school uniform and dress code policies need to include the following two minimum standards. The first is clothing, (this includes sports uniforms) that cover as much of the students' skin as is practical and a sun protective hat. The features of sun protective clothing and sun protective hats have been detailed in our written submission, but just in brief, in relation to clothing, it is an effective and a reliable source of sun protection and protection against UV radiation, provided the garment exhibits good coverage of the skin and is made of a fabric that prevents UV radiation from reaching the skin.

A recent study in a scientific journal which you may be aware of called the *Lancet* concluded that sun protective clothing is the best form of sun protection and is better than sunscreen. Sunscreens do not block out all of the UV radiation. Most people apply too little sunscreen, so when they use sunscreen it has a lower protection factor than is actually stated on the product, and sunscreen can be wiped or and perspired off very easily. Clothing, on the other hand, does not suffer from the uncertainties of sunscreen. In relation to a sun protective hat, these include a broad-brimmed, a bucket or a legionnaire style hat with a decent brim to provide the best protection to the face, back of the neck, eyes and ears — all very common areas for skin cancer. Baseball or peaked caps and sun visors are not recommended as they leave the ears and the back of the neck exposed, unless they are being used for sport.

The SunSmart schools program has been a fantastic success since the Cancer Council Victoria introduced it into schools more than 15 years ago. Currently in the primary, secondary and early childhood sector, there is already strong commitment to sun protection and sun protective uniforms and clothing.

In relation to primary schools, the most recent Cancer Council Australia national primary school survey showed that 94 per cent of Victorian primary schools have a written sun protection policy, 96 per cent have a dress code or specific uniform for schools, 94 per cent have sun protective hats and 76 per cent have a uniform with a shirt with a collar. Most Victorian schools have a uniform or a dress code that is protecting the students quite well.

In relation to secondary schools, the most recent Australian schools alcohol and drug survey, the ASAD survey, showed that 69 per cent of Victorian secondary schools have a written sun protection policy, 93 per cent have a dress code or a specific uniform for school, 51 per cent have some kind of hat, 26 per cent have a sun protective hat and 94 per cent of the uniforms have a shirt with a collar. Although secondary schools are not protecting their students quite as well as primary schools, there has been a vast improvement since the SunSmart program began in schools 15 years ago.

The CHAIR — What percentage in secondary schools were wearing a sun protective hat?

Ms STRONG — Twenty-six per cent in secondary schools were wearing a sun protective hat, and 51 per cent were wearing some kind of hat. The point that I was going to make there was that when the survey began in 1993 it showed that only 9 per cent had a policy, where now we have 69 per cent with a policy; and only 13 per cent included a hat, and now we have 51 per cent.

To summarise what those statistics mean in relation to our recommendations, Cancer Council Victoria's recommendation for all Victorian schools to have sun protection considered in their school uniform or dress code policies in many ways will just formalise what many of the schools in Victoria are already doing. But making sun protection a minimum requirement for all schools would improve consistency and ensure all students throughout Victoria are protected from UV radiation and skin cancer, not just the committed schools. Encouragingly, there is evidence that written sun protection policies in schools are associated with better sun protection practices. So if schools have a written school uniform or dress code policy, then there is a better chance that students will be wearing the appropriate clothing and be protected.

In order for us to go forward we know that there is already commitment from schools to the issue, and any relaxation or regression of this commitment will undo 20 years of outstanding public health education. Schools have a duty of care to ensure that their students are protected against foreseeable harm. Sunburn is a foreseeable harm caused from overexposure to the sun but can also cause other skin damage which may not always be immediately evident. We know that sun exposure prior to 20 years of age is more closely associated with melanoma risk than the sun exposure after 30 years of age. Ensuring that school uniforms and dress code policies include sun protective clothing is one of the best ways that schools can protect their students from the foreseeable harm caused by overexposure to the sun. Well-designed sun protective clothing offers students effective and reliable protection from UV radiation. If we reduce UV radiation exposure in childhood and in adolescence, we will reduce the skin cancer rates in Australia.

Finally, to conclude we would just like to provide a summary again of our recommendations. To protect Victorian students from the harmful effects of UV radiation and to help prevent skin cancer, school uniform and dress code policies need to include the following two minimum standards: clothing, including sports uniforms, that covers as much of the student's skin as is practical; and a sun protective hat. Thanks again for the opportunity to be part of this inquiry. If you have any further questions of the three of us, we will be happy to answer them.

Mr KOTSIRAS — Can I just ask whether you send out information or pamphlets to schools? Do you send it regardless of whether the school requests it, or is it just to the schools that have requested some information?

Ms STRONG — A lot of the schools obviously come to our program and want information, so we provide it on demand, but we also communicate to all schools in the community. It is important for them to be aware of the risks of skin cancer as well.

Mr KOTSIRAS — How do you overcome the cost involved? You made some recommendations which would increase the cost to the uniform. How are you finding that going down in schools in terms of increases?

Ms CLARKSON — Schools manage this in different ways. Sometimes the cost does fall on the parent, and it is added on the book list — for example, the cost of a hat. But in other situations the school might pay, for example, for all the year 7s who are in their first year of high school to have a hat. Other schools seek sponsorship from local organisations to cover the cost of a hat. They can be really quite creative in fundraising efforts and that sort of thing. I guess mostly I would say that the parent would pay for the hat, but also there are really good discounts. When schools buy a lot of hats, usually you can get a really good deal. Usually we are probably looking at no more than \$10 a hat. So generally it either falls on the parents or the school does pay too. Often the school will cover the cost of a hat for the staff too as an occupational health and safety issue.

The CHAIR — We are getting from secondary schools, both from your figures and the feedback we have already received, that young people at secondary school want to be more trendy in their dress and that sort of thing, so the broad-brimmed hats that the primary school students are happy to wear are seen as being a bit ‘dorky’ or whatever term the secondary school students would use. Have you seen some strategies used effectively or different designs that have helped to overcome — —

Ms CLARKSON — Definitely. The bucket hat, which is like a surfie style hat is very popular in secondary schools.

Mr KOTSIRAS — Surfie style?

Ms CLARKSON — Yes.

The CHAIR — Have you brought an example with you so we can understand this?

Mr FINN — Is that sort of like one you would wear to the cricket?

Ms CLARKSON — Yes. They have a deep crown, and sit low on the head. There is a picture of these hats in the written submission.

Mr KOTSIRAS — A Gilligan’s Island hat!

Ms CLARKSON — Yes, Gilligan’s hat. And sometimes, unlike Gilligan’s, it might have ‘Rip Curl’ or something on it that makes it look a bit trendier. One other strategy, some schools ask the secondary students to design the hat and students actually vote on their favourite design, and that is a really good way to get ownership with the school community of a hat. So that has been quite an effective strategy. They are voting on something that they actually like in the first instance. But yes, we definitely would not recommend in a secondary school that you try to introduce a legionnaire’s hat. We know that is not going to work. That is why luckily we have these three options, and we would say in a secondary school that the bucket or surfie-style hat — the Gilligan hat — would be the best most trendy option for them.

The CHAIR — I do not know whether in your submission you provided any examples of some secondary schools that you think are doing very well.

Ms CLARKSON — Yes, Kyabram Secondary College. I have a secondary schools advisory group. The assistant principal is on it, Mick Walsh, and he has all the students wearing hats. It is their choice what sort of hat. There is no set school hat. They bring in whatever hat they like, but it has to be a bucket hat with a brim of a least 6 centimetres. So there are certain requirements but the actual choice of hat is up to them. And he has done very well actually at changing the whole culture of the school. That is just one example, but there are many cases where I think it is usually the senior management, the principal, is particularly passionate about the issue, and if that is the case you can get a great result for the school. So that is what we have found anyway. When there is strong commitment from senior management it works really well.

Mr FINN — For the purposes of this committee am I right in saying that as far as you are concerned the best chance there is of getting sun protection is with a uniform?

Ms STRONG — Absolutely. Considering that most of the UV radiation exposure that young people receive is during school time and we know that sunscreen is not necessarily as effective as clothing and less likely to be used, ensuring that all school children in Victoria — whether that is primary or secondary — have a commitment to sun protection in their school uniform or dress code is one of the most effective ways that we will prevent skin cancer.

The CHAIR — But just in following up on that, if a school chose not to have a uniform, they could still have a dress code that did require the SunSmart requirements?

Ms STRONG — Absolutely. There are a lot of schools that do not have a uniform but have sun protection as part of their dress code. Even in our early childhood services there is obviously no uniform in many early childhood services yet they have a dress code policy that requires children to meet certain requirements.

Mr FINN — Could I just revisit that one for a moment? You said a moment ago that you believe the best way of achieving sun protection is with a uniform. Is that something you would like to see in every school?

Ms STRONG — Not necessarily a school uniform; a school uniform and/or a dress code policy. For us I guess it is not an issue about school uniforms being mandatory or not. For us it is obviously the importance of sun protective clothing and a hat. Obviously if school uniforms were mandatory, it may make it easier, but it is still essential to have sun protective clothing within an environment that does not have a school uniform.

Mr HALL — Could I ask, and I apologise if I missed this at the start of your presentation, but the school dress code guidelines published by the government which are used by school councils in determining school dress codes, do they address the issue of sun protection?

Ms STRONG — Yes, they do have a line about including sun protection in their school uniform.

Ms CLARKSON — Did you say school council?

Mr HALL — No. The dress code guidelines published by the government.

Ms CLARKSON — The Department of Education?

Mr HALL — Yes.

Ms STRONG — Yes, they do. I just cannot remember it. I will call on Justine Osborne, who is also part of the team. Justine Osborne is the primary schools program coordinator.

Ms OSBORNE — As a primary school person we always have to have at least one word. The school guidelines actually do mention sun protection as part of the skin health and safety section, and within that they talk about clothing. They recommend that school councils and committees consider school uniforms and clothing with health and safety as a consideration, but they do not distinctly mention sun protection in the clothing. In the skin health section of the school's reference guide that is used by Victorian government schools, sun protective clothing is included under skin health, but it is not included if you go straight to the clothing guidelines — if that makes sense.

Mr HALL — If we are going to impose a minimum standard within the dress code of schools, then we are talking about a mandatory provision are we not?

Ms STRONG — A minimum requirement? That part of it is mandatory.

Mr HALL — I do not see any other way around that. At the moment it is voluntary, and it is determined by school councils. So you are suggesting that a mandatory component of school dress be imposed in Victoria?

Ms STRONG — Yes, and I think from the research that has been done it showed that there is already great commitment from a large number of schools, but there is obviously inconsistency across the state by enforcing, I guess, a minimum requirement. The consistency in schools is what we need.

Mr HALL — When you impose something on a mandatory basis it always invites opposition to it, and in some cases you are better off to get the cooperation and the goodwill of introducing change. Do you not think that you have been successful enough, as you mentioned already, in 95 per cent of schools?

Ms STRONG — I think we have been very successful in the primary school sector. I think that in the secondary schools sector we are still obviously working very hard to get that commitment. Both Jen and Em have been involved in some focus group discussions with the secondary school sector recently. Jen, you might want to share some of the information we have been finding out.

Ms MAKIN — Talking with students and teachers in secondary schools, that is one thing that has come up quite often; talking about uniforms. Interestingly, quite a lot of the students have said, 'It would be better if we had stricter rules. If you force us to do it then we will do it; but we cannot choose of our own accord because it is too daggy to wear a hat, but if the department said that everyone had to do it then we would all do it'.

Mr HALL — Is there a provision for providing sun-blocking creams in schools? Is that part of the cancer council's recommendations?

Ms MAKIN — Some schools.

Ms CLARKSON — Yes, it is part of the SunSmart policy that sunscreen be provided for student and staff use, and other schools that are not in the SunSmart program may still have sunscreen available for staff and student use too. It is definitely a recommendation. But as we mentioned, clothing is generally better than sunscreen.

Mr HALL — Sure.

Ms CLARKSON — A lot of students, we are finding, are just using sunscreen, not putting much on and are getting burnt.

Mr KOTSIRAS — How important are sunglasses?

Ms STRONG — Sunglasses in relation to the SunSmart schools program are optional. There are definite benefits to wearing sunglasses, but at this stage it is obviously quite a difficult thing to include sunglasses as part of the SunSmart program or schools uniform or dress codes. We always say that it is recommended and it is optional, so schools that felt it was important to include sunglasses — —

Mr KOTSIRAS — Why is it difficult? The cost?

Ms CLARKSON — Cost and just the practicalities of introducing it. For example, there might be issues with losing them and that sort of thing. Schools have got around that. For example, Vermont South primary school introduced sunglasses very successfully, and I think they engraved students names on them. But we do not want to, I guess, impose an unnecessary cost, and we are mindful of practicalities as well.

Ms STRONG — We also know that wearing a hat — actually a broad-brimmed hat — cuts out 50 per cent of UV radiation to the eye, so we suggest a hat. Obviously if you wear sunglasses it reduces that by 97 per cent. But 50 per cent reduction in UV radiation to the eye is pretty good, so that is why we have been focusing on hats.

The CHAIR — Some of the issues that are being raised with us by secondary schools is that often their students in their break times are doing more sedate sort of things and sitting in the shade and talking rather than running around school grounds. I am wondering with secondary students what the practical arrangement is for saying when hats should or should not be worn and how you would follow that through, because obviously if they are playing sport, like football or something, it is pretty hard to keep a hat on for any length of time. I am not quite sure how it works, whether we start it with the AFL and try to encourage them to wear hats while playing and see how we go.

Mr KOTSIRAS — Unless you play for Richmond.

Ms CLARKSON — We say with SunSmart secondary schools that from the start of September until the end of April is when students and staff should be wearing hats because that is when the UV levels are 3 and above generally, which is enough to sustain damage. Particularly, I think, all-day sporting carnivals are real risk times. We do often get parental complaints with students being burnt during all-day carnivals. They are particular times when they need to enforce their policy with hat wearing.

Ms STRONG — I think with sport it needs to be practical. We have said in our submission that there are certain sports where a broad-brimmed hat or even a surfie-style hat is not practical, but to use a hat maybe like a baseball cap for those particular sports. With the AFL, we would be encouraging them to wear sunscreen because a hat may not be practical because there are other considerations with sport.

Ms CLARKSON — Definitely some sort of cap, even a baseball cap, is probably more practical for sport. We acknowledge that. We do not want to introduce something that is not going to work on the ground.

Mr KOTSIRAS — Can I ask, do you know of any schools that are facing legal action because of kids getting sunburnt?

Ms CLARKSON — Yes, at the moment. Legal action has occurred in Victoria and I think in other states as a result of children being sunburnt during sporting carnivals and school events. I have researched a couple recently — sorry, they are not recent — one was Eltham college that was sued and Corio — —

Mr KOTSIRAS — Bad local member.

Ms CLARKSON — Sorry?

Mr KOTSIRAS — No, it is all right.

Ms CLARKSON — But the cases were not successful. Am I allowed to mention names like that?

The CHAIR — The point was about one of our committee members — the member for Eltham, of course.

Ms CLARKSON — In the Eltham college one, the student was sunburnt during a pool party at a parent's place but organised by the school, so that was unsuccessful. I think it was maybe a bit removed. In the Corio West one — the Geelong one — —

Ms STRONG — Corio.

Ms CLARKSON — She was a five-year-old girl and that was during a swimming carnival, but because it was around 17 degrees on the day they felt that it was not reasonable for the teachers to be able to foresee that she might get sunburnt during those conditions. I guess it has not been successful yet, but we know — —

The CHAIR — There is a risk.

Ms STRONG — You could possibly settle out of court and privately. The important thing is, and we have raised it throughout our submission, that it is not just about sunburn, that most of the damage is in those first 15 and 20 years of life, so that is where we need to be focusing most of our attention and our protection strategies. With Victorian children and adolescents spending the majority of time at school, that is where the interventions need to be taking place, and I think that adopting school uniform codes and dress codes that is the most important thing we can be doing.

Ms OSBORNE — You mentioned the passive activities of secondary students where they may go and gather together to talk and sit under shade. But we would argue that even under shade some protective clothing is still necessary because you can get reflected UV, scattered UV; so shade is not always 100 per cent protective either. It is certainly a great sun protection measure, but using that in combination with the hats and the clothing, and if possible sunscreen and sunglasses, you are getting better overall protection.

Mr HALL — Do you find there is any significant difference between the acceptance of SunSmart programs in regional areas of Victoria compared to the city?

Ms CLARKSON — Yes, we do find generally that the regional areas, particularly in secondary I would say?

Ms OSBORNE — Secondary, yes.

Ms CLARKSON — Secondary rather than primary, seem to find it easier to implement their policy. And I think, for example, at Kyabram Secondary College there are many reasons for that. Perhaps a farming community where the parents are wearing hats, or more of a sense of community, but yes, we do find that generally. Sometimes we talk about, 'Isn't it difficult sometimes with secondary school students', and sometimes the regional people say, 'Well, no, we have not really found that'. So again it is a cultural thing within the school.

Ms OSBORNE — A lot of times that has come because there has been a champion for the cause. So there has been a connection with skin cancer: it has been someone on staff or a family within that school community that has had a brush with skin cancer and that is where everyone has got on board. But unless the actual event has occurred in a secondary school setting, complacency can set in because there is not an immediate result that we can see. It is a cumulative result of the skin damage over time, sunburn occasions over time, that kind of thing. It is not like an asthma-friendly school where someone has an episode that can result in immediate death. This is over time as with many health promotion messages. We need to make sure that people understand that what we do now is going to have an effect in years to come.

Ms STRONG — I think on the question before about whether we should be trying to get more buy-in, there already is a lot of buy-in to sun protection practices, and there is a lot happening in the external environment too, media campaigns and things like that. I think if it was made a minimum requirement that people would understand the reason why and would be quite accepting of that, like they have been accepting of other changes. I mean the changes we have seen in the last 15 years have just been phenomenal from an environment where most of my generation growing up where we never wore a hat or considered the kind of clothing we were wearing. I guess we are the ones that in the future are at greater risk of getting skin cancer, and I think it is the younger children that we need to be trying to protect from that.

Ms OSBORNE — As Kylie mentioned, in the early childhood setting there is not a uniform but there is a dress code that is encouraged and so if children come along with their singlet tops or shoestring-strap dresses, that is fine. They can wear that inside, but when they go outside they put a T-shirt or a shirt on top of that. So there is still that way to have your creative spirit and your freedom and your independence, but it is just about being practical with the dress code that if you are going to be going outdoors there is another style of clothing that needs to be worn.

Mr HALL — The culture of wearing hats in country Victoria is well established and it is not just people who work on the land but also people who go to the cricket. You know we do not have grandstands like the MCG to sit in, so that you are always wearing hats, and broad-brimmed hats, in that regard. So yes, I am not surprised at the regional difference in terms of the acceptance of programs because of the culture and perhaps if we all wore broad-brimmed hats like who was it? Peter Cook, was it in Labor — —

Mr FINN — Brian Burke, perhaps?

Mr HALL — I think it was a Labor minister in the federal government who wore a broad-brimmed hat wherever he went. Tim Fischer, a Leader of The Nationals, is a classic example of wearing hats. It is the culture that caught on.

Ms STRONG — This is really a cultural change that we are trying to encourage and I guess sometimes we need some assistance from things being a minimum requirement to actually help that cultural change occur.

The CHAIR — Can I also ask too, in looking at the urban schools that have been success stories or otherwise, one of the key factors that we perhaps have guessed anyway relate to people in administration having a strong feel about it and being able to develop a culture, but are there some other factors that you have noticed, whether they are higher socioeconomic schools, or any other common factors there that have influenced the success?

Ms OSBORNE — I would say definitely parent committees have had that success. Where a SunSmart schools program is actually a membership program and we ask schools to sign and say they will do these minimum requirements, and then it is really an honour system and we find that the people that help police that program are the parents. And so it is parents that keep a watch on shade, keep a watch on school hats, and keep a watch on uniforms; so they are great supporters of ensuring that their children are kept safe at a school.

Ms STRONG — We get a lot of parents who say to us, 'My kids have started in year 7 and they do not have to wear a hat, and their uniform has got a tank-top sleeve for sport, and I do not understand why there is such good coverage in primary schools and that flow-on effect does not happen in secondary schools'. I guess a lot of the SunSmart program attention has been on primary schools in the past. We are trying very hard to look at strategies to encourage secondary schools, and we are improving. Our data shows that. Each time we do a survey there are improvements; they just are slightly slower.

Ms CLARKSON — I have found no difference in socioeconomic backgrounds; that really has not come up.

Mr KOTSIRAS — Have you got a list of schools which are SunSmart schools?

Ms CLARKSON — Yes.

Mr KOTSIRAS — Can you make those available? The names or the list?

Ms STRONG — We probably cannot make the list available. We could tell you the percentages and the commitment that is involved around the state, but schools join up to the program and we have a database that is confidential for the schools that are involved.

Mr FINN — Is there any way that you could give us an indication of what areas of the state, you know, west versus east versus rural versus whatever?

Ms STRONG — Yes, absolutely.

Ms OSBORNE — You will find pretty much across the board it is a similar percentage.

Ms STRONG — Skin cancer as a disease or as a cancer is one of the only cancers that is not necessarily linked with socioeconomic status. Everyone is prone to skin cancer, and it does not have those influences that we see in the cancers caused by obesity or the cancers caused by other bad or ill health practices. It is quite unique in that way. Our strategies really do need to be whole population and it is not rural versus metro, it is not low versus higher socioeconomic, it is not male versus female, it is a condition for us all.

The CHAIR — In terms of that confidentiality issue that was raised before, this committee is covered by confidentiality issues which if information came to us as confidential we can maintain it as confidential for our deliberations. It might give committee members a chance of just getting a sense of sort of the picture across the state in a little more detail.

Ms STRONG — Yes, we would be happy to provide information to paint that picture and we will talk to our legal department about whether we can provide the actual database. I guess that is something.

Mr FINN — Chair, I would be very interested to know, given that it is really only over the last 15 years that this has occurred, as to what effect it has had in the areas where the SunSmart schools are, what effect it has had to date, and perhaps what effect it will have in the next 15 years.

Ms STRONG — Yes, sure, we can pull that information together.

The CHAIR — That would be useful too. Obviously advertising programs have worked effectively, but again, as you say, the success is with the primary-age students. Have you looked at advertising campaigns using TV and how to get at the older age group?

Ms STRONG — Absolutely. Unfortunately the Cancer Council Victoria's SunSmart program is run out of a not-for-profit organisation with no government funding so our ability to do the mass media campaigns, which we know are very successful, is limited. Since the SunSmart program began we have only been able to run five mass media campaigns. We have one that we are currently planning for this summer 07-08, so hopefully that will also contribute to the environment. The federal government has just announced a further commitment of \$11 million to a mass media campaign across Australia. It is fantastic there is that federal commitment, but I guess with the SunSmart program it is only sort of every three or four years that we actually can obtain enough funds.

The CHAIR — I guess my question relates to the fact that obviously when you do a campaign you target perhaps a group that you think are most at risk, and we are agreeing that the secondary-age group students, all through their teens and into their 20s, are a key group to try to get that message to. Is there something that you have looked at in terms of designing a campaign?

Ms CLARKSON — Our last campaign was 'Skin cancer is killer body art' and it was based on sort of a tattoo image that got media coverage, and that was yes, probably upper secondary to young adult, targeted at that age group. In my role as secondary school coordinator I developed a comprehensive curriculum resource based on

that ad that has been sold to over 100 secondary schools throughout Victoria. That was across curriculum, so there was a VCE media section where they looked at, behind the scenes, the making of the ad, and there was English, PE and health and a personal development section and that sold very well. Whenever we release a resource we find that there is a huge market for it and people are very interested in that.

Ms STRONG — The federal government's campaign is, again, aimed at that 12-19 age group, and our campaign that we are researching and developing for this summer is, again, between that 12 and 19 age group, because we know that that is the hardest age group to reach. So other than just what we do in our schools program there are a lot of broader elements to what we are doing, and a lot of the focus is on that age group.

Mr FINN — A little bit off topic, Mr Chairman, but I am interested to hear about the support from the federal government. Is there any particular that the state government is not coming to the party?

Mr KOTSIRAS — Good question.

Ms STRONG — It is a good question. It is probably difficult for us to comment, but the state government provides money to VicHealth, the Victorian Health Promotion Foundation, who in turn provide grants for sustainable health promotion programs, and Cancer Council Victoria has been receiving funding from VicHealth for our program since 1988 in the form of a grant. Disappointingly that grant has been reducing over time, and Cancer Council Victoria has been obviously contributing additional funds to make sure that our program maintains itself and continues to extend. So there definitely is commitment by the state government but we would always welcome more and would always welcome more from the federal government, which we did just last week, so that has been great.

The CHAIR — An alternative federal government might offer substantial funds, too.

Mr FINN — If any of us live that long.

Ms STRONG — That would be welcomed also.

The CHAIR — Any other questions?

Thank you very much for coming along. That has been very interesting and very helpful.

Ms STRONG — Good luck.

Witnesses withdrew.

CORRECTED VERSION

EDUCATION AND TRAINING COMMITTEE

Inquiry into dress codes and school uniforms in Victorian schools

Melbourne — 14 May 2007

Members

Mr M. Dixon (from 18 September 2007)	Dr A. Harkness
Mr N. Elasmarr	Mr S. Herbert
Mr B. Finn (1 March – 18 September 2007)	Mr G. Howard
Mr P. Hall	Mr N. Kotsiras

Chair: Mr G. Howard

Deputy Chair: Mr N. Kotsiras

Staff

Executive Officer: Ms K. Ellingford

Research Officer: Ms J. Hope

Committee Administrative Officer: Ms N. Tyler

Witnesses

Dr M. Rose, committee of management, and

Ms L. Moore, program manager, Victorian Aboriginal Education Association Inc.

The CHAIR — Welcome to the Victorian Education and Training Committee. As you might be aware, and as you can see from the microphones, we are using the opportunity to take the advice that you provide to us so we can refer back to it as need be. The things you say in here are covered by parliamentary privilege, if that is relevant to you, but comments made outside are not. You can say anything you like pretty much, within reason. We certainly welcome the contribution that the Victorian Aboriginal Education Association, via you, would like to make. You understand that we are members of Parliament from the upper and lower houses and different political parties. This inquiry is into dress codes and uniforms in schools, so we are interested in any observations or advice you would like to provide.

Dr ROSE — We have got a position paper which we can tender, if you like. I guess there are a number of issues that pertain to indigenous students in this state, notwithstanding that many of our students come from a situation of economic disadvantage. On the issue of school uniforms, at one end of the scale you have the cost of school uniforms involved. There is also a cost of not having school uniforms too. When my daughter, for instance, goes to school I would imagine there would be no school uniform but her clothes will cost more because of latest fashions than a uniform would. We have a number of responses, but one of the areas that we are particularly concerned about is the underpinning of school uniforms, firstly, the cost. There is validity in having school uniforms if the alternative, or the de facto school uniform, is designer clothes in particular suburbs. There has been a shift in government federal funding to indigenous programs such as ASPA, whereby the cost could be met in some arrangements.

They have shifted, therefore our parents are disadvantaged in the provision of school uniforms. The thing about which I have a personal concern, from my position in co-chairing the deaths in custody review, is that school uniform was used as a means of sanction and kids were excluded from school for not having correct school uniform. That is my personal view. But we might move through our recommendations. We would request, as our organisation has over 30 local area Aboriginal consultative groups, schools to use those and consult with the local community, because as you move across the width and breadth of the state there are different circumstances.

There are some places here in Victoria where the unemployment rate for indigenous people would reflect a Third World country so we would ask you to plug into LAECGs through VAEAI, on aspects it is called uniform policy. A consultation should establish what Koori parents can afford to pay for a uniform and should also examine what constitutes an appropriate dress code and appropriate enforcement measures. Being an ex chalkie myself, I think that every minute the kid is in the core business, the core learning is really important for all kids and exclusion practices because of the wrong colour pants or the wrong jumper is totally inappropriate. Being a former principal I know what it is like to enforce uniform, however exclusion from school work and from the core business of schools is inappropriate.

The education department and your committee must evaluate forms of assistance available for low income families and expand and improve on these where necessary. This should involve lobbying the Australian federal government to ensure that changes to the ABSTUDY scheme will not disadvantage already struggling Koori families.

Our third point: the department should require all schools to establish a support system to assist needy families. Each school should have a uniform closet or store for selling and recycling second-hand uniforms in a good condition. The government should also advise schools not to suspend students for non-compliance with uniform policy. Any disciplinary action taken against students should be determined on a case-by-case basis and should be taken in full consultation with the parents, and the government and the department should develop an issue of procurement guidelines for schools to encourage the selection of uniforms which are already available from large inexpensive retail outlets. Schools should be asked to sell uniforms on a not-for-profit and a not-for-loss basis too, with the provision that payments can be made over a period of time for low income.

So in a nutshell we are concerned about the low income aspect of our community and all communities across the state. They should be strategically designed that it should not create monopolies, that they should be readily available through general mainstream retail facilities, and by no means should it be used as a disciplinary method to exclude kids from the learning process. That is it in a nutshell. We have got other aspects which we could talk about that give a snapshot of our organisation, but we can provide that to you in writing, if you like.

The CHAIR — Okay, we might go to questions then because it is useful if we do have that sort of dialogue.

Mr FINN — I am very interested to hear you say that you regard exclusion as being totally inappropriate. What alternatives are there to enforce a uniform in a school if exclusion is not one of them?

Dr ROSE — I think, being a former principal, exclusion is one that is a quick-draw, ready, one-up in your holster that you can pull at any time. However, I know that for Aboriginal kids in this state and for other kids in this state, that they themselves at times have very little say on the economic position of the family. They are at the receiving end rather than the procurement end and to exclude them from schools is blaming the victim. On the other hand I have been a principal in a number of schools, private and government, and kids will — how can I put it? — challenge the prima facie rule to wear a uniform and they will come up with creative and ingenious methods to do that. While I valued their resourcefulness and their creativity, rules are rules; I am sure a smart principal and a smart school system can channel those sanctions into positive learning rather than excluding school. Even though you have the right-coloured socks, you do not have the right-coloured runners. The deaths in custody review for this state surfaced cases where there was a direct correlation of kids entering the criminal justice system, having been suspended over runners breaches. That, for our people, is tragic.

Mr FINN — But what alternatives are there?

Dr ROSE — There can be alternatives. Again, you have got to look at the cause. Is it a defiance of the rule? In that case a sanction is necessary, without any question, but a sanction can be community service within a school, it can be personal learning, developing, writing a paper — if it is defiance. If it is because of economic needs, no sanction is warranted. It is tough. They both look the same, but that is where the principal needs to know the kid. If it is rebellion — I know that can be a bit healthy, too — a sanction which is in-house and of value to the school community is far more smarter and strategic than, say, one that takes a kid out of learning. No-one wins then.

Mr HALL — Are there any cultural barriers for Aboriginal students who have to wear school uniforms?

Dr ROSE — Again, if I was the kid, if I had to come up with an excuse, I would probably throw that one on the table. We cannot see one that would be a cultural barrier. An economic barrier, yes; because of cultural aperitifs, maybe, but no.

Mr HALL — Mark, am I correct in assuming from your comment that the issue of wearing of school uniform by Aboriginal students is really one of compliance and implementation rather than the concept itself of a school uniform? In 'implementation' I mean by the cost of it and also the enforcement issues that you spoke about too.

Dr ROSE — Cost and, speaking from being a principal of the VKODE school in Glenroy, and this has happened when I was a principal of a Catholic school in Norlane in Geelong — no, I am sorry, I was not a principal there, I was a teacher, I will just correct that — some kids went home and had responsibilities far in excess of their age. The tumble dryer, the overnight job, is sometimes not possible. Some of the compliance there is not because of a rebellion, some of it is because of practical — —

Mr HALL — Practical issues.

Dr ROSE — Practical imperatives in the home, in the community. If there is a funeral on — say, the Glenroy experience — sometimes parents would take off to practise sorry business in their local community, they would leave their kids in trust with relatives or friends. Whether those relatives and friends had fully automatic washing machines and tumble dryers or duplicated numbers of uniforms, that is the criteria and that is the economic imperative. If the kid is just being defiant — they want to wear their Reeboks rather than their school shoes — then there is dissension and I would not doubt that. But you have really got to know the kids, and you really do not stereotype. You have got to make sure that you know the circumstances.

Mr HALL — Victorian KODE schools, do they generally adopt the uniform policy?

Dr ROSE — They have at the moment. In the last year they have consolidated into one school. There is a form of a uniform. I guess in some ways my daughter's uniform at a middle-class Catholic secondary school is

probably a lot different than a uniform that is a common windcheater or whatever. It is a practicality of the uniform too. If it is an expensive suit, as I had when I went to secondary school — —

Mr HALL — So again, those practical implementations?

Dr ROSE — Yes. You have to be smart. Look at how the police force have modified their uniforms over the last couple of years. A practical composition that is economically reasonable and easily accessible is what I would promote. Just a windcheater — you might offer a female version — but cargo pants, if that is a uniform, that would be fine.

Mr HALL — Do school councils tend to consult the local area consultative committees? Or is there a distinct lack of that occurring?

Dr ROSE — There is a very good working relationship between the department and VAEAI, which is great, but in some areas that relationship is very sophisticated, long-standing and well structured. In other places it may not be so good. So it depends on where you are and, I guess, the quality of the relationship. But as we said, we exist for them, we have existed there for over 30 years, as local advisory mechanisms. Our policy, Yalca, puts us in partnership with the government. We are happy to consult with all school councils. I guess if you look at the number of indigenous people on school councils it probably is poorly represented, so that might be something for us to take on board so we can have a say in the school uniform.

The CHAIR — Mark, in circumstances you would be aware of where students have not worn a uniform because the parents could not afford it, how has that situation been able to be resolved? What are the resources that have been able to be provided — I presume it has been resolved — how has the resolution normally followed through?

Dr ROSE — A smart school has a supply of uniforms which it can give under the table to people — indigenous and non-indigenous — who are in real need. After someone leaves the school that uniform is superfluous, so often they are re-donated back. Sometimes they are ill-fitting, and the last thing that any school would want to do is hear, 'You're wearing the dodgy uniform — you know, the one that was given to you'. Again, confidentiality is supreme, and this is for indigenous kids and for non-indigenous kids. It is the economic imperative, yes. But it can be done.

Ms MOORE — And generally where there are large enrolments of Koori students there are generally pre-educator or Koori education development officers that are in those schools, or Koori educators any way, and they generally try to work through some sort of an outcome and resolution to get those kids some school uniforms.

The CHAIR — The resolution normally happens with the school providing the solution in those cases? Because you were indicating you were disappointed that government was not providing funding in that area I was wondering does that mean that you or your organisation sometimes then finds the finances to assist the family of the student?

Dr ROSE — Not so much our organisation, but up until recently the federal government had an ASSPA program. I forget for the life of me what ASSPA stands for, but it meant that a certain amount of money was dedicated towards either community groups or parents in which they could purchase uniforms, and that would have been one use. That has now translated into WoSIS — whole-of-school intervention strategy — so the federal government wants to target that. While it is there, indigenous parents are probably relying on it. Whether it is good use of federal dollars, well that is up to Canberra to decide. You know, the attrition rates of our kids are immense in schools. We have got some really good signs on the board about the number of our kids are making their way into higher education. A comparison from Tom Carter would say that the first Mali to graduate with a PhD happened in 1890; the first Aboriginal to get a PAC was 1990.

So on the catch-up scale in education we want everything working, and VAEAI has worked with governments at a state level to make sure that happens, and something as trivial as not having the right runners or the right socks or the right jumper or the right tie even is not an excuse to turn our kids out of the gate. So on the big scheme of things, there are other pressing issues, but a kid who is turned out of a schoolyard for the slightest reason — when I did deaths in custody I saw too much of that negative downstream effect. We want kids to be fully engaged and fully involved in the rich curriculum that this state offers, and anything that turns kids away, we do not want to see particularly something like a school uniform.

Mr HALL — Does a school uniform sometimes give Aboriginal kids a better sense of belonging?

Dr ROSE — I believe it does. I have been hanging out with adolescents all my life. You know what adolescents are like. I have got a 16-year-old at the moment who is going on 32. I believe access to be like every other kid is important. There are enough signposts around Aboriginal kids to make them different. A uniform that gives them camouflage to be like every other kid is really important to us, but it is the scaffolding things — the costs, the sanctions, the availability, the style.

Mr HERBERT — Just one question, Mark. I am an old Glenroy boy.

Dr ROSE — Really?

Mr HERBERT — Glenroy Tech, and I taught there. Just on your comments, I wonder whether there is not an opposite effect about Aboriginal kids wanting to wear uniforms and be like everyone else. Do you find that there is any different attitude at the senior 11 and 12 level? Just on your comments about attrition rates, are there groups of young people that actually do not go to school because they do not want to wear the uniform, or is that just a myth?

Dr ROSE — From my experience as an educator for so long that I do not want to have it recorded, I have seen education as a bit of a pop industry from time to time. You will remember Geoghegan College. There was a terrific experiment there in the 70s where kids wore casual clothes to school, and in fact they were allowed to smoke. We would really see that as being politically incorrect, and incorrect on a number of bases. Kids determine their own culture and I struggled through the 80s to get my daughter to understand a lot of kids' culture at the time. Uniforms can be a thing that make kids feel inclusive, and sometimes rebellion and the way they are sanctioned makes the kids hate it. Who of us can really understand the adolescent mind? But I know that they struggle for identity and understanding themselves and I do not think that has changed over the three decades that I have been an educator, and that identity can come in the form of rebellion to the uniform. That is why I rebelled against it and grew my hair long in the 70s. School for any kid is a challenge. We want them to remove some of the personal impediments they may have, and their mum and dad not being able to provide a uniform is definitely one, I think, where we are a bit more sophisticated than that nowadays. A smart educator will exploit that rebellion to bring about cohesiveness in the school culture and school curriculum, but sanctions need to apply if it is a rebellious thing. But if it is a thing of economic imperative, we would be foolish to punish and chastise students. I am glad I am not an adolescent any more. They have enough on their plate.

Mr HERBERT — You have maybe a few years up on them.

Dr ROSE — There is an argument I heard the other day that indigenous people because we were recognised in 1967 our birth dates start from 1967, not before that, so that made me 10 years younger, and I appreciate that.

The CHAIR — Any other questions? Thanks, Mark and Lowana. That has been helpful and we will look forward to reading your submission in more detail later on.

Dr ROSE — We will make sure we get a copy of that to you. Can we just fix the typos so we do not get kept in after class? Can we submit that later? Is that all right? We will get that to you because there is one typo in there that as a teacher from the northern suburbs — —

Mr HERBERT — Especially!

Dr ROSE — We really do appreciate the inclusiveness of listening to an Aboriginal voice. We welcome that and thank you for your time.

Witnesses withdrew.

CORRECTED VERSION

EDUCATION AND TRAINING COMMITTEE

Inquiry into dress codes and school uniforms in Victorian schools

Melbourne — 14 May 2007

Members

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Witnesses

Mrs E. Sayers, board member, and

Mr A. Smith, deputy chief executive, Association of Independent Schools of Victoria.

The CHAIR — Welcome to the Education and Training Committee’s public hearings. Thank you for agreeing to come and speak to us. As I expect you are aware, we are a parliamentary committee across both houses and three different parties, reviewing as our first inquiry in this Parliament school uniforms and dress codes, and we certainly appreciate your observations and any advice you have for our committee. You would be aware that the comments you make will be recorded so we can review the evidence you provide if we wish to check some of the details later on. Things you say are covered by parliamentary privilege, whether this makes any difference to you or not, and, of course, that would not accord if you were saying things outside this room. With that brief explanation, if you have any other questions ahead of starting, by all means ask them, but other than that we welcome the contribution you make in regard to uniforms and dress codes for Victorian schools.

Mrs SAYERS — As we have a time limit, I thought it was probably best for me to read rather than just waffle on and have you here all night. Thank you for this opportunity to speak to your committee. I am Evelyn Sayers, principal of Casey Grammar School and also Balcombe Grammar School. I am here today in my capacity as a board member of the Association of Independent Schools of Victoria, a position I have held for the past eight years. During my 40-plus years as an educator, I have spent 15 of those in government schools throughout Victoria in both disadvantaged and higher socioeconomic areas. The majority of my time has been with the independent sector. My own education was in a government school; however, I sent my own children to an independent school. My background has allowed me to experience how a variety of schools and communities address the issue of school uniforms. I will be generalising today, but it is important to remember that one size does not fit all.

From an extremely early age children long for a sense of belonging — that is, belonging to a family, belonging to a particular group. It seems to be a crucial part of forming their identity; they think, ‘Where do I fit?’. School is a place where they spend approximately 13 years of their life, and we can enhance their understanding of belonging in many ways. Wearing a uniform is one way we can be identified as belonging to a particular group — cubs, scouts, brownies, sporting teams, Commonwealth Games volunteers or members of a school community. Inclusion in a group can be a statement about attitude, commitment and pride — important qualities which schools try to cultivate. We have an existing continuum, which is democratic choice, from anti-uniform to pro-uniform. With different lenses we look at where schools sit, where families sit, and where policymakers and government sit? And why do we sit in such different places along the continuum? Can we justify our positions or choices in relation to context, values of community and so on.

We begin with an agreement between family and school or the school board as to the dress code and the uniform policy. This needs negotiation and development of a shared intent. It seems to operate better when students are included in this process too. We weigh up the perceived benefits: it creates a sense of community and belonging; inclusion in a group; it is a cost saving compared with the alternative; it removes peer pressure to wear fashionable labels; it supports the teaching of discipline; and it can take into account safe SunSmart recommendations. On the other hand it can create difficulties. Enforcement can be an ongoing problem, opening up many dilemmas — time, energy, poverty, compliance, changing rules, fashions, resentments, and rights and responsibility debates. In data that we get from our biennial parent–student survey at my particular school, we note that, generally, the percentages for parents supporting the dress and appearance codes of the students are continually in the high 90s. As a school we feel that this is a clear indication from our stakeholders that the benefits and costs of wearing a uniform far outweigh the challenges.

It is interesting to note that there can be many different positions on the continuum, from the very specific — for example, dictating dress lengths — to a school down on the peninsula which allows various choices of pieces and colours of uniform, so whilst it is a uniform, the students do not look uniform. At a school out in the northern suburbs there is no official uniform, but, interestingly enough, a big sense of belonging as the parents have knitted students beanies as their identity symbol. One size definitely does not fit all. Communities and individual schools will influence decisions, and that is how a civil society exists. That was just to put in context where my beliefs and ideas probably come from. As a board member of the Association of Independent Schools of Victoria, I want to tell you a little about what it does. This association is a peak body for independent schools in Victoria. It has 213 member schools, representing 98 per cent of independent schools in Victoria. The independent school sector comprises a diverse range of schools, representing a variety of parental and community aspirations and expectations. The members reflect a significant cross-section of the state’s community.

There are denominational schools that include Anglican, Catholic, Christian, Islamic, Jewish, Presbyterian and Uniting, and non-denominational schools include Montessori, Steiner, international, community and special schools. Despite some people's perception our member schools are quite different from each other — there are metropolitan and regional schools; there are large and small schools; there are coeducational and single-sex schools; there are primary schools, secondary, and P-12 schools; there are single-campus and multi-campus schools — but the association supports all schools by providing management and educational services to members that assist them in responding to the changing educational environment.

Independent schools are characterised by their individual governance structures. An independent school is an individual organisational entity managed by a board of governors or management committee. Within existing legislation requirements independent schools are autonomous with their operations, determining their own curriculum and co-curricula programs, discipline policies, employment of staff, and policies relating to uniform or dress codes. Independent schools must be not-for-profit entities that meet minimum standards established under legislation for all government, Catholic and independent schools. Our key principles are: choice, diversity and autonomy.

Choice: the association endorses principles underlying the enactment of the Education and Training Reform Act 2006, which acknowledge that parents have the right to choose appropriate education for their child. Further, the association supports the Australian government's priorities and objectives for schooling, which recognise the Australian government's role in school education as being to support the right of parents to choose the educational environment which best suits the needs of their child.

Diversity: choice in education can only be exercised where there is diversity. The independent sector is characterised by a diversity of curriculum and learning approaches. Diversity is evident in the educational ethos of the school, the school's curriculum, the social values promoted by the school, the cultural values of the school, or any one of a range of other differences relating to teaching and learning that exist in independent schools.

Autonomy: independent schools are integral to Victoria's education system. The association is committed to the independence of its member schools and particularly to the right of a school community to decide its constitution and form of governance, and to determine through its governing body school policy on enrolment, staffing, curriculum, co-curricula activities, student welfare and uniform and dress code.

The independent sector believes the establishment and maintenance of dress codes and school uniform policies must be lawful under existing legislation and be at the discretion of the school's governing body and its school community — and I think that sums it up, where one size does not fit all. Our school members actually have a variety of things that they follow with school dress codes and school uniforms. Did I take more than the 10 minutes?

The CHAIR — No.

Mr FINN — You did very well.

The CHAIR — Are there questions from any members of the committee?

Mr HALL — Perhaps I can start. Thanks for that, Evelyn. Can I ask first of all, as a board member does the issue of school uniforms or dress codes ever come before the board?

Mrs SAYERS — The association would never discuss that because the schools make up their own governance on that. It may be that a particular school rings the secretariat at AISV to get some advice on something, but that has never been discussed at board level.

Mr HALL — Does the association provide any guidelines or assistance for individual schools in the development of dress codes in schools?

Mr SMITH — We certainly do. Quite often schools will ask us questions relating to what is appropriate policy under equal opportunity legislation and so on, and we will provide advice to them about what legislation says and ways in which they might be able to ensure that their policy meets the needs of the school community while remaining within the bounds of the legislation.

Mr HALL — Perhaps in another area, do you also provide advice to schools on personal appearance? It seems to me that with personal appearance and dress codes the personal appearance side of it seems to be more controversial — that is, hair colour, wearing of make-up for girls, body piercings, tattoos et cetera. Is that an issue for independent schools?

Mr SMITH — The extent of advice that we would provide would be what was appropriate within the legislation. So the schools would have views about how their students should appear, but we will help them to ensure that whatever codes they put in place do not breach any laws that exist. But other than that it is then for the school communities to determine what standards they choose to set. The other thing that we do provide too is information about various guidelines that might exist with regard to, as Evelyn mentioned, SunSmart policies and so on. Schools will ask us about where they can get good advice about those sorts of things, and we will channel them to appropriate bodies to provide that advice.

Mr KOTSIRAS — Do you know of any schools that make a profit on uniforms? Do schools set out to make a profit on the uniforms, or are uniforms there for other reasons?

Mrs SAYERS — I certainly know of some independent schools that I have worked at where they choose to have the uniform shop set up at the school. I have never looked at the figures. It was certainly not a school I was a principal of, so I have never looked at the figures as to whether they just want to cover their costs or whether they in fact use that as some way to supplement some of the things in the school that they put in as resources. Schools do a different variety of things. I mean, some just have a local shop and all the parents go there; some provide just their second-hand uniforms through the school. Our school does that, and whatever money is raised the parents and friends association then transfers that into some resource for the school. Perhaps Andrew can be clearer on that.

Mr SMITH — That is quite right, because all schools in order to operate in Victoria have to be not-for-profit entities and therefore any surplus, if you like, that comes through from the uniform shop would be by law directed back into the operations of the school in one way or another. It certainly cannot be distributed to any other entity.

Mr KOTSIRAS — Can you give some examples of what actions schools have taken when the child refuses to adhere to the school policy on uniform?

Mr SMITH — Sure. I might start and then pass it on. You have got more specific experience than me, Evelyn.

Mrs SAYERS — Yes.

Mr SMITH — But generally it will be either within the dress code and uniform policy or within the student welfare policy what sorts of sanctions might be in place if sanctions are appropriate. I think that it probably is a basic principle that the school's first and foremost concern is to the wellbeing of the student. Whether it be uniform or other policies that are expected in terms of the student's attendance at school, schools will look at all of the reasons why a student may not be willing or able to follow those policies and look to address whatever the root cause of that might be. If it is simply unwillingness, it may be that they have within their welfare policy a range of sanctions; and it may not be sanctions, it may simply be opportunities for the student to explore their own sense of identity in other ways.

Mr KOTSIRAS — I will give you an example. My son goes to a private school, and the option is you either wear the uniform or you find yourself another school. Now that is not possible in state government schools.

Mrs SAYERS — It would have to be more creative than that.

Mr SMITH — I think it is fair to say though that one of the differences between independent schools and other schools is that the independent schools do establish a set of standards and policies irrespective of where they are on the continuum that Evelyn referred to. In attending those schools parents and students agree to abide by the policies of those schools, and schools will have appropriate responses to that, but it is a commitment that you make as a parent, I think, and as a student if you are attending an independent school. Independent schools by their very nature have that opportunity to perhaps be a little different in the way they respond to government schools, but I think the basic principle applies irrespective of the sector.

Mrs SAYERS — It would be less than honest to say, too, that there will not be some students, you know, who will try to flout that or buck the system. We have always looked at it as what is our reason behind having this, is this something we want the students to be proud of being part of this community — this school. If that is something that is important to us, we would try to go down the path with that student by saying, ‘By turning your blazer upside down or wearing your pants down around your hips — when they should be up or whatever — are you actually looking as if you are proud to wear this uniform?’. So we probably try and appeal to their sense of logic and their sense of understanding, and that would depend on the age the student is and what we felt they could take it. But we would always use it as an opportunity to help establish what an attitude is or what the values were that the school stood for. But certainly I have been associated with independent schools for many years, and I have never known any principal to say, ‘Expel a child’, or tell them to leave the school simply because they did not wear the uniform. I think there are lots of avenues that you can explore before you would ever be getting to that point.

Mr ELASMAR — If families cannot afford the school uniform, do you assist in this case?

Mrs SAYERS — My school is in the city of Casey, so we are a low socioeconomic group out there, and my parents are the ones, about 97 per cent who say, ‘We are pleased that you have got a school uniform’. They believe in the end that it is cheaper for them than providing the casual clothes that they would otherwise wear. I have never done the statistics on exactly what it would cost over a number of years, but they tell me that they feel it is cheaper in the long run to provide a school uniform.

Mr SMITH — And those schools that report to us where they have had issues with families who perhaps cannot afford the uniform, there is a range of responses. They certainly have second-hand uniform shops available where there can be swaps or purchases at a discount rate. In many cases schools will provide the school uniform either at a reduced cost or actually just provide it because the family is obviously in need and that is a way that they can support that family.

Mr ELASMAR — I know there is a difference between primary and high schools. Would you believe that in primary schools it is easier to implement school uniforms than in the high schools?

Mrs SAYERS — Much easier.

Mr ELASMAR — Much easier, because the parents will have influence.

Mrs SAYERS — It is much easier to do a lot of things with primary children. They have not become adolescents who want to explore pushing the boundaries. But that is part of understanding their stages of development, and you just appeal to them in a different way. We have got primary children, when they begin prep — we are sending out our offers at the moment for next year — where we sometimes have the parents rushing out and buying their uniform long before Christmas because they want to dress up in it and things like that. Clearly younger children see it as something very important that they love to do, but adolescents are a little different.

Mr HERBERT — My question is not really specific to independent schools, but I remember years and years ago when I was teaching there was an issue that was relatively prevalent with young women — 17 and 18 year-olds doing VCE — who felt uncomfortable in a school uniform and particularly felt uncomfortable in some of the sporting uniforms simply because of their development stage. How do you handle that issue?

Mrs SAYERS — I think probably every year we have a number of girls who, when they are starting to mature, want to wear their jumpers even when it is 110 degrees. You say, ‘You must be hot today?’ and they reply, ‘No, I’m not hot’. Then we decide how we can help them and work with them to have a better feeling about their self-image and to try to come to an understanding that we come in different shapes and sizes and we can still be proud of who we are. But I think that does happen, and it needs sensitivity to be handled in that way. The same as students who sometimes have an eating disorder, who just want to keep layers and layers and layers on so that they hope nobody will notice what their size is. It alerts you to what else might be going on in their life or their head, and it gives us that opportunity to help work with them.

Mr HERBERT — Particularly with sport, that is what I found. Young girls were dropping out of sport because they felt really uncomfortable in their uniforms.

Mrs SAYERS — Yes.

Mr HERBERT — How do you get around that?

Mrs SAYERS — At our school — we are a co-ed school — we run single-sex classes in year 9 and year 10 for certain subjects for certain reasons. The phys. ed. class is one of them, and that was because the girls were telling us they were uncomfortable in how they felt they looked in their sports uniform when the boys were watching them. So now they just go out as a group of girls, the boys go out as a group of boys, it does not seem to be a problem. We looked for a solution to that. We were originally doing the single-sex classes in some other subject areas, but when that became an issue we thought we will try this and see how it works. The girls are much happier about it. The boys have not commented one way or the other; I do not think they have taken that much notice about it, because they know it happens in other subject areas it has not made much difference. But they are things that are genuine and real for people, and I do not think we should ignore those.

Mr SMITH — I think other schools have looked at other ways as well. I know that, just from talking to the heads of a couple of our schools recently, a couple of girls schools very recently changed the uniform over time because the girls were uncomfortable in the uniform as it was. They have moved to a uniform the design of which the girls had some input into so that they feel more comfortable, and that includes the sports uniform. I think schools are in various ways responsive to the needs of their students.

The CHAIR — We have had the cancer council in today talking about the challenge of uniforms, addressing SunSmart policy and particularly the challenges that relate to secondary schools and getting secondary school students to wear hats that have a brim. They have educated us about a bucket hat which they seem to have more success with than the broader-rimmed hats that primary school kids often wear. They wanted us to make it compulsory or a minimum dress code in regard to perhaps the wearing of bucket hats. I am interested in your response and what you have seen as being successful programs in secondary schools in having some of those SunSmart issues and hats addressed.

Ms SAYERS — At my school we are a SunSmart school, so we do have the dorky hats, as the students call them. But because everybody is wearing the dorky hat, it does not become an issue. We have talked about things: ‘Well, you’re not here to be a fashion statement. We really care about your health and what’s going to happen to you later on in life’. So once you really sort of get over that part, they understand it is not a choice of just taking it off and not wearing it. At ours, in fact, if they cannot find them or if they have lost them, they have to go and stand under the veranda, and that is not really much fun; they want to be out playing. So in the end they seem to just accept it. We tried to get them to look at the styles, and it is pretty much most of them that they find objectionable because they do not look fashionable; they are not the sort of peak hat thing that they like to wear. But if we are trying to save their skin and save their health — and we know what an issue it is in Australia — then it is talking them around, I suppose, by saying ‘Well, we all look pretty much the same. We’ve all got the same dorky hat on’, as they call it.

Mr SMITH — And I guess from the association’s point of view they are the decisions that schools make and that individual schools should continue to be able to make. Schools will always act in the best interests of their students, and if it be a SunSmart policy formally or a variation on that, it should be for the schools to determine what the most appropriate way of addressing those issues are. Many schools we know have taken up the SunSmart guidelines that are provided; others have gone with various variations on that. But again it is in response to what their school community demands, I think, and it should continue to be within the purview of the school to make that decision.

The CHAIR — Are there any other questions?

Mr HALL — I was going to ask one, just in closing. From the association’s perspective, do you think there would be any advantage or benefit if the government of the day decided to introduce any mandatory components of school dress in Victoria?

Ms SAYERS — I was just going to say that all the reasons that our schools want to have school uniforms for the children — a sense of belonging, their pride and the other things that it does for them — I would think would apply to government schools too. I imagine that students are students everywhere and that once that came to be they would feel, ‘I belong to this school’, you know, ‘I’ve got this red jumper on’ — or something — ‘and that makes me identify with them’. I imagine that they would have the same sorts of feelings and aspirations that all students do.

Mr SMITH — I would just add to that, Peter, that from the independent schools' point of view, as Evelyn said earlier about the principle of choice and autonomy, we would stand by the independent schools' right to choose what the nature of the uniform was, if in fact they were to have one. But certainly — if I could just go back to my experience working in government schools and having particularly worked in a senior school in the inner west where the students were not enamoured with the idea of a uniform at all — the nature of the school population would need to be considered in determining any mandatory requirements for school uniform in government schools. Whether it be as simple as an appropriate school top as opposed to a full uniform, I think that would be something that would need to be taken into consideration.

Mrs SAYERS — The context and the community are so important. That school that I was talking to you about, its students really have not coped in a mainstream school, so it is slightly different. But they love that identity because they are the only ones wearing these beanies that the parents have knitted. To them that becomes their uniform, because they can be seen as belonging to that school. So clearly you do need to look at the community and the context and what it is. It might only be one element of what we call a school uniform that appeals to that group, but another group further up the line or down the line might be happy to embrace the whole school uniform.

Mr SMITH — I just add to that that nobody knows the nature of a school community better than that school community and the governing body and the leadership of that school to make that determination.

Mr HALL — Yes, I would agree with that; no arguments at all. But when you have some organisations, like, for example, the cancer council, which are quite open that they believe there should be a mandatory component of sun protection embedded into school uniform policy and that that should be mandatory, that would impose a position on all government schools, and if the government wanted to I suspect it could impose that on non-government schools as well. My question was based on the fact that if there were components of school dress that were to become mandatory, would there be any benefit to the non-independent school sector in regard to that? What is the independent school sector response to that?

Mrs SAYERS — Is there any benefit to the independent schools?

Mr HALL — Is there any benefit, or what would be your response to any mandatory component of school dress being imposed upon independent schools?

Mr SMITH — I think we would come back to those principles that Evelyn articulated initially, that the school community should be the one who determines what is most appropriate.

Mr HALL — Yes.

Mrs SAYERS — Years ago we did not wear seatbelts either. You would have thought that people would have objected to that. But then when the health benefits are pointed out, so I can understand where the SunSmart part is coming in, eventually everybody — I mean you would not dream of getting in your car now and starting it without having your seatbelt on. It just becomes something like cleaning your teeth every day. You just do it without thinking about it.

The CHAIR — Thank you very much for coming along today. We appreciate that. We will, of course, be following this up in more detail.

Mr SMITH — Thank you for the opportunity.

Mrs SAYERS — Thank you.

Committee adjourned.