

# CORRECTED VERSION

## EDUCATION AND TRAINING COMMITTEE

### Inquiry into dress codes and school uniforms in Victorian schools

Melbourne — 4 June 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

#### Witness

Mr D. Schmidt, manager, State Schools Relief Committee.

**The CHAIR** — The first witness at our public hearing today on the school uniforms inquiry is David Schmidt from the State Schools Relief Committee. Just so that you are clear, David, you will see that we have Hansard here recording what is being said, for our benefit. It is confidential initially and then what has been said at the meeting becomes public. You are covered by parliamentary privilege in the things that are said in here. Whether that is relevant or not I do not know. However, that is the case for things that are said in here but of course not the case for things that might be repeated outside. We have a submission from you in regard to issues associated with the State Schools Relief Committee. It is an issue that has of course been raised through our school uniforms inquiry, so we are interested to gain more information on state schools relief issues and we are pleased to hear from you and interested to hear what you have to say to add to your submission.

**Mr SCHMIDT** — My name is David Schmidt. My background is in education. I have been about 20 years a principal of schools. Most of my time was spent in places like Turana and Baltara, when they were large institutions. I said, ‘Please release me from Turana’ and then went back to being a principal of a primary school, Kingswood in Dingley, where we actually introduced a uniform policy. So I do have an understanding of uniforms. I retired under 54/11. Some years ago I ran a training organisation. I have been a consultant, and over the last 12 months I have been managing the State Schools Relief Committee. That just gives you a little background on me. So if you wish to talk about governance and those sorts of issues that come into it, I am quite happy to respond. Our submission relates to that invitation by Karen to respond to the committee and a later request to actually come in and talk to you. I believe that my submission covers most of the issues that Karen raised.

Briefly, the background: the State Schools Relief Committee started, informally, in the drought of 1902, with the Mallee being in desperate straits and the social welfare attitude of schools. Actually the network of schools began then and that continued. There was money raised, and supported Mallee farmers in 1902. State schools relief did not start until the Depression in 1930, but it just built on what was already there. The government of the day asked the union, which is now called the VTU, to assist with the network and the development. The AEU then asked the head teachers branch. Since then, it has been a state schools group. It went throughout the state. It was organised by the Department of Education, and inspectors. In those days it ensured that there was a representative in every region. So there was money raised by each region and the schools supported each region. When we started there was food, second-hand clothes et cetera being used. These days we only supply new uniforms.

Each successive government since 1930 has supported the State Schools Relief Committee. Each has paid salaries and given us a facility to work from and a small administration grant. That continues to today. My job is to raise the money to do the charity work. We proudly say that every cent raised goes into the charity and provision of uniforms. On the current committee membership, whilst we do not have a specific view on whether or not we should have school uniforms, if you look at the membership of our committee that I report to — it is a board — you may understand why. We have members from the Department of Education, the Victorian Association of Principals of Secondary Schools, the Australian Principals Association, the AEU, the Victorian Council of State School Organisations, the Association of School Councils in Victoria, and Parents Victoria. So we do have a rather wide-ranging group on our committee and we have wide-ranging views. We are a tax-deductible charity. Last year, to raise the funding issue at the bottom of page 1, and the financial year before, the government provided, through the Community Support Fund, \$150 000 for each financial year in support of the State Schools Relief Committee. Prior to that we were running at a \$75 000 deficit and if we continue to that then we will be looking at some major restructure of the committee and the service we provide.

**The CHAIR** — What year was that, again?

**Mr SCHMIDT** — It was three years ago. When I arrived, 2003–04, was the \$75 000 deficit and last financial year we ran at \$85 000-plus. That is with the \$150 000 donation from the government. This year I think will be the last of the \$150 000 influences. My thoughts would be that we will probably come out in front again, but just. So far this calendar year the average cost has gone up by \$19.20. There are a number of reasons for that. Last year the committee decided to increase both the cost items that we give out — and I will talk about that in a second — and also the amount that we give out, so rather than having one pair of trousers, for example. I think anyone who has kicked a footy in a schoolyard knows that you do not go home with clean trousers every day. The people we are dealing with and provide for are from particularly disadvantaged backgrounds, so we said, ‘Why have one pair of trousers? You really need two pairs of trousers, and you do need two shirts’. We almost doubled a lot of things that we were giving, so that added to the costs, of course, of what people can get. Also we raised the financial limits in most items, so that has tended to increase the costs, plus the fact that we have actually got more

applications so far this year than we had last year, by 341, which is a significant amount when you are adding the increase of \$19.20.

The average at the moment is \$128 per student — that is the average. On the stock issue we have two things: we have an authorisation and we have a stock. That is the process by which we work through. The authorisation is when we authorise a school. A principal makes application to the state schools relief. Every principal in the state of Victoria, whether they like it or not, whether they know it or not, is our representative. They authorise the application to come to us. I do not know whether Mrs Johnson in Patchewollock is a worthy recipient of welfare or not. The principal should have a fair grasp of that so they make application. They make application on how much they want. Quite a number of times we only do a pair of shoes, and we will provide the shoes if we can. It might just be for underwear or it can be for a whole uniform. We authorise a limit for the purchase at the school shop or the local school, or we will provide the stock from our stock.

It should be noted from the submission that the stock distribution is decreasing. The reason for its decrease really is to do with the fashions. School uniform is now becoming more fashionable. The materials required are different. You might have, for example, in a pair of trackpants, four or five different styles of trackpants. We cannot carry that in stock but we will carry one or two in a range of colours — black, green and navy blue — and reinforced bootleg arrangements, but that is about as much as we can carry. If you wanted a fairly swanky one, which some of the schools seem to require, then we will not be providing that out of our stock. Fashion is an issue, as is the nature of the material, as I just said. Like grey trousers — when I was a kid grey trousers were grey trousers but now there is a whole range of different materials. We do stock fairly standard grey trousers. If you wish, there is an example of it there. Over the last years, since 1 July 2003, we have provided 74 000 items which is about 18 500 items per year we provide.

We have appendices. You can see appendix 1 and appendix 2 at the back. That talks about the authorisations and shows you how much we authorise. The second one is the cost — the limits to which we authorise. For summary purposes, appendix no. 3 is the stock supplied. That just gives you an overview of the stock we have provided over the years. The application trends in table 1 demonstrate the usage since 1997 — over the last 10 years. You will see that last year there was a slight decline. That slight decline is something I will talk about; I am happy to answer questions about that afterwards. That slight decline was probably as a response to the belief from the committee that some schools may have been overusing us or not using us judiciously, and a letter went out across the state saying please be careful. I know a number of principals I have spoken to have since decided to refrain from using us. That decline last year was in response to that letter. This year already, though, we have done 4280 and we expect to do close to 8000 applications this year. The agreed purpose of the State Schools Relief Committee is to support government schools in the wellbeing of their students by providing quality school wear to those in need. We provide only new uniforms. We provide underwear, underclothing, socks and shoes for school.

On page 3 I have a note that committee allocation limits were raised considerably last year, and I have already addressed that, and that allocations may be exceeded in necessitous circumstances — for example, house fires. We have a turnaround time normally of a week, but if a principal rings up and says we have had a house fire — and there was an example from last week — there is an on-the-spot turnaround authorising the school to immediately purchase, on the child's behalf, a full uniform. Then we provided support stock by transport that day, so the next day that student had not only a complete school uniform but also had additional stock from us. Another case was where a principal rang and said because of peculiar circumstances in the family — the mother had died from alcoholism — a boy in grade 5 and another boy in prep were to go to live with their stepsister, who was a married woman, and following court action their father was not to have anything to do with them. Those kids were not allowed by the father to go back into the house to get their clothes or toys or any belongings, and the emergency came to us. That was an immediate response by us. We can provide a full uniform and we will go over what we have in allocation. In those sorts of circumstances we will give them two or three pairs of trousers plus tracksuits and we will do tops. We will do a range of things to make sure that the kids are not only provided with a uniform but also supported. In necessitous circumstances we go over what we would say is our limit.

On the limits on the authorised items, we have mainly the polo shirts. You will see from the appendix there that the polo shirts and the windcheaters are probably our most popular items apart from underwear and socks, which we give out in pairs of five. We authorise the cost by averaging the cost across the state over about 100 primary schools and 100 secondary schools. If you look at the last appendix, you will see what we have done for you there is give you a range of three metropolitan secondary schools, three metropolitan primary schools and six country

primary schools just to give you an idea of the range of costs in uniforms. You would obviously by now have a fair grasp on that, I imagine, if you have been listening to other people talk about uniform costs.

Because we deal with every school in the state we ask them to provide their uniform list to us, so we have an extensive range of material there. Because they are high-use items we will go over maybe the average — it is up to the committee. It is not up to me, the committee decides. They have gone on those high-use items, over the average, so that people who wish to access them do not have to contribute. We do that with windcheaters so that the average cost is raised. The committee has gone above that so people do not have to contribute to the uniform cost where it is authorised. I am speaking on behalf of the committee so I will be careful. The committee has lowered the average cost for blazers so the committee does not see it as probably the highest priority; it does see the high-use material as important enough to give everyone access to it.

If I go down then to the actual authorisations made and the stock delivered, that is self-explanatory. This year the cost is \$107 000 in excess of last year, so you can see that the need is there at the moment. On table 4 we have there 'Assistance by region'. There is an interest there from the region, I have described there the number of applications, the value of the stock and the value authorised. The stock is what we provide, the authorisation is what we authorise schools to purchase, or the parent to purchase, and the total cost there is for each of the regions from 24 January 2006 to now, and the comparative data for 2007.

I am currently attending a conference at Loddon Mallee. Its total last year was \$18 800 for all of last year and its total has already exceeded that for this year — that is, for its costs. The income and expenditure of the schools is shown on table 5 — that would be just the income from schools. What you see there, in 1997 \$120 361 was raised from schools, and in that year \$219 000 was spent — so not quite half the money was raised. You will see in 2006 that \$211 000 was raised and that \$483 000 was spent. The authorisations to date, they are \$631 000 this year. So whilst we do not expect all that to be claimed, the costs were up.

I have also given on page 6 a sample of the school uniform costs. We have provided that just for the committee's information and reference. In the notes section, we believe the costs are rising and are unsustainable for us. We cannot continue without additional support. We also believe that the rate is increasing with need; so there is an increased need in the community.

The rapid increase in the metropolitan areas can be attributed to the increase of refugees, particularly in the western region where we have language centre schools and things like that. The refugee issue is really biting and hitting us because we are doing full uniforms for people like those from the Horn of Africa — those people who come in with nothing and we are being asked to supply. I believe that the submissions to the immigration department we will probably be filing reasonably soon will say that we are funding the policies, and I would like some support from it. The need also appears to be increasing. I do not know whether you have had this also, but with rental, the issues we are getting through from principals is that the rental accommodation, mortgages, petrol prices and just general costs of living are really exposing some of the people who were previously on the fringe and are now actually the poor.

In a discussion with principals today — with the Loddon Mallee — I asked them some questions so that I could bring the issues to you. — I was talking to a principal about three weeks ago and they said the children — from country and city areas — could not afford the bus fare to come to school. That is exclusion. Kids are not coming to school because of that. So, of course, we help with that; but we do not help with cash. Today two of the principals I was talking with, said that — they raised the issue not me — the parents, one could not come and pick up sick kids because they could not afford it, they were waiting for the school bus because that was paid for; and there is a whole range of issues there where people are becoming marginalised, I think.

I think community services may also be an avenue that we could look at for some support, because I think those issues are department of community services issues. I have talked about the non-metropolitan region using us less as there is less connection with country regions. That has just dissipated over years. There are dinosaurs like me who left the Department of Education, left the principalship — whilst I never considered myself as a theoretical dinosaur, just my age. My upbringing was: born in mid-1940s; my parents brought me up with a history of the Depression, with a history of the world war, and the history of helping and supporting each other.

The State Schools Relief Committee was a statewide and recognised as a statewide committee in supporting people. As people like me disappear from that and the younger principals come in, they do not have that same

family background, nor do they have the cultural background of support for state schools relief throughout the community. Certainly district inspectors do not exist any more, and the structural support from the Department of Education now does not exist as it did before.

Whilst Minister Allan is very supportive and a lot of the managers of the Department of Education are highly supportive of state schools relief. When we ask them for money, we do not belong to corporate, we do not belong to schools. We have been trying to rectify that issue so that we can actually get a budgetary line running a little bit stronger. However, the schools have complied with our processes. That is important for you to know that schools have complied, they are not overusing us, and there is considerable evidence that schools underuse us. I would like to raise that issue when I have finished this. Certainly the relief committee believes many worthy cases are not being adequately attended to.

We also believe it is the school council's responsibility to set uniform policy, including pricing and support programs for families who are experiencing financial difficulties. If you set up a uniform policy, which I think every school does, then they should also include the pricing and those in financial difficulties, and also those who object to wearing uniforms. I know I had that when I was a principal and no doubt that still occurs. SSRC also believes there are many requests for support in the area of books. We receive those. In January when I was at work nearly every second phone call was from a parent who asked for support with a booklist. SSRC is not in a position to expand its service at this stage, given the financial constraints. We would like to go into that, but we cannot do that because we just financially cannot do that.

With projected modifications, we have just finished the planning for a strategic plan, but I believe with the network that we have and with our connection throughout the state that we could provide a whole range of different services, current services, better, more effectively, and with financial support we could also provide additional supports than maybe some other agencies are doing in some areas at the moment. I have also said that we are willing to work close with other welfare agencies if they wish. I have been asked by the committee to be sure to pass on their best wishes to you for an excellent outcome. I am happy to take questions.

**The CHAIR** — Thanks, David, I am sure there will be questions.

**Mr KOTSIRAS** — Can I ask, first of all, does every school with students requiring assistance make application, or are there schools which do not make application, and what are the reasons why the schools do not make application?

**Mr SCHMIDT** — No. I think some of the attitudes of my colleagues are the problem. I think some principals do not see welfare as an issue, strongly enough. But in the main most schools do see that, and they do not make application to us because they see us as being overused. Certainly two principals that I spoke to just before coming here today — two of the three principals I spoke to — were saying, 'No, we do not make applications because we do not want to overuse you. We have many needy families'. I asked them, 'How do you deal with those families?'. And they said, 'We are frightened if we start with the State Schools Relief Committee, people will know it, and then there will be floodgates'. I have some difficulty with that position, because we are their charity, and this is what I talked about in the submission, the disconnection between the State Schools Relief Committee and the principals, particularly in the rural areas, not so much in the city. I would like to re-engage them so that people see it as their welfare agency, that they can actually use it, but then also support us. The main reason is one of principal attitude, and the other is overuse — they do not want to overuse us because they think we are under stress. They are pretty correct in that.

**Mr KOTSIRAS** — Can I ask: how much money do you require to ensure that every child who needs assistance gets assistance? How much extra would you need per year?

**Mr SCHMIDT** — I believe the 150 000 kept us in front, and with increasing costs at the moment I would say about 150 000, maybe 200 000.

**Mr KOTSIRAS** — Okay.

**Mr SCHMIDT** — With current increases at the moment, if the floodgates were open and we dealt with every person, every needy family, and with their books — financial assistance for books would not provide books, but would give financial assistance, say, \$150 for a secondary school, off the top of my head for a student who needed it — we would be looking close to \$1 million turnover a year.

**Mr ELASMAR** — Following that question, I believe you said it costs an extra \$19.20 per student. Is that one year we are talking about, and are there any items of the school uniform that are not covered by your committee?

**Mr SCHMIDT** — That is the average cost rise between 1 January this year until now compared to the same period last year from 1 January to now. Last year to this year the average cost has gone up by \$19.20. That is just the average cost. The average cost per uniform is now \$128. That is the average across what we are giving out. We will provide anything that is on a school uniform list. So if a school uniform has a peculiar item on the list we will provide that item. For religious reasons some schools have long dresses, for example. We can provide long dresses at a cost. So that is not an issue. There is no — —

**Mr ELASMAR** — No restrictions on any item?

**Mr SCHMIDT** — I cannot think of an item of a uniform that we do not provide at this stage.

**The CHAIR** — David, I am just wanting to clarify this. I am still a bit unclear as to where your funding all comes from. I see clearly some of it comes from schools, and I am wondering on what basis schools contribute. I presume it is up to the school, but do the schools that would utilise your support most contribute most?

**Mr SCHMIDT** — No.

**The CHAIR** — Or is it pretty varied? And what are the other major sources of funding from the private sector?

**Mr SCHMIDT** — The major funding for the charitable work can be seen on page 19 of our annual report. Our major donors are the Australian School Canteen Association, which is the school canteen buying group; the Victoria Teachers Credit Union and mecu, the two credit unions associated with education, both around about \$30 000; and Stambo's, a company run by someone who was supported by State Schools Relief when he was a child. Other than that we are looking at foundations and philanthropic trusts. If you get down to the Kingswood Primary School in actual fact that was my last school when I started running a golf day for the State Schools Relief Committee. They should be with in the primary schools. You can see the primary schools donated \$144 000, and post primary \$67 000. We could put in the Hansard transcript that I think the secondary schools as a group are lousy. Other sources amount to \$36 000. For the department grants, there is \$40 000 for administration — that is also lousy. The lease grant is \$14 000. Other grants — that was \$150 000 — is the Community Support Fund.

**The CHAIR** — So in fact if we take out the \$150 000 from the government, your funding basis in fact from other sources has been reducing slowly or —

**Mr SCHMIDT** — Yes, in comparison it has been going down. The costs have far outstripped the rise in donations.

**The CHAIR** — So is there something being done to try and promote additional funding sources from those or other private sources?

**Mr SCHMIDT** — The strategic plan has not been agreed to yet. On 16 June, at our meeting, it should. After that I am hopeful of some support. But until we get some strategic approaches lined up I do not think that anything successful is going to come of it.

**The CHAIR** — Because you are generally seen as being a pretty quiet operator, a lot of people, maybe some of the charities or other private operators, might be in a position to contribute but they are not perhaps aware of your need.

**Mr SCHMIDT** — Our image is very low key, and that is something that we are going to address in terms of the logo and how we promote ourselves. There are two questions here. One is the floodgate issue which one of the principals raised with me, that if everyone knows about they will all be after it. If you can get free uniform, why not? State schools relief is this charitable institution that can provide it. But also then other people will not provide the financial support. I believe we need to have increased financial support from government. That is critical. And we also need increased connection and support from our schools. We believe for reasonable charitable work for a school — because it is their charity — some \$2 a head in donations for each school would give us \$1 million. We need to work out how many students we have got in the state. We would be able to do well with government

support then and actually provide a whole range of issues, also add-on support, because we can do add-on issues. Why should we be restricted to only uniforms and books? There are other welfare issues that this charity could pick up if it had the financial support and authority to do so.

**The CHAIR** — Very good. Any questions?

**Mr FINN** — Just a quick one, Chair. David, I commend you on the work that the relief committee does, and I wish you all the very best for your continuing efforts. I am just wondering with regard to this issue that we are looking into, school uniforms, if the government was to in some way to say that school uniforms were no longer required, would that alleviate the problems that you are facing immediately?

**Mr SCHMIDT** — I would not think so, Bernie. Certainly my experience is that most schools want them. Most school councils want uniforms. If they were not required I think they would still probably be saying they will have them. If it were not compulsory it may alleviate it. But it is the disadvantaged groups, those in the community who will not buy them because they cannot afford them, that you would disadvantage. They would not get applications to us because they do not have to make that application. What I would suggest you would like to do is ensure that any disadvantaged person was able to get access to some support, whether it be picked by another agency like the Smith Family or one of the other agencies. But certainly I do not know that it would be able to make a great deal of difference. I do not know.

**The CHAIR** — I am aware of the time. Any more questions?

**Mr SCHMIDT** — I have three issues that I would like to raise. I will only take 30 seconds, I promise. One of the issues was if \$8000 was raised in a school. A principal put up that if we raised \$8000 and we spent \$8000, why would you want to go to a charity? Why would we use state schools relief? My response is really partly from our history — I have already dealt with that — but the cost effectiveness. This is one of the issues that has really concerned me about the bush. While there have been a number of charities providing financial and uniform support for schools in the bush — with the drought relief money there has been quite a considerable amount going to agencies apart from the Department of Education — a lot of charities have been using and getting drought relief money. But as to the cost effectiveness, if, as I said the other day, we send the kids up to the uniform shop to buy their uniform because an agency, a charity provides funding for that, we actually can halve the cost. If we authorise it, the parent can get the uniform so much cheaper from us or through us, so it is just not cost effective for other charities or the school to provide that uniform. You can then offset that \$8000 into other things for the welfare of the child.

On families, one school said they had 10 families in need of it, but none of them wished to contribute the small amount of money that we ask for the uniform, so they did not put applications in. I find that just an amazing thing because if we get asked and it is a particular issue with the family that they cannot afford, then we will pay it. We will do the lot, we will authorise the lot. I just wanted to make those points.

**The CHAIR** — Thank you, David.

**Mr SCHMIDT** — If there are any further questions you would like to ask, you are welcome to.

**Witness withdrew.**



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#### Staff

Executive Officer: Ms K. Ellingford

Research Officer: Ms J. Hope

Committee Administrative Officer: Ms N. Tyler

#### Witnesses

Mr A. Van Krieken, executive director, Council of Textile and Fashion Industries of Australia,  
Mr S. Stewart, sales and marketing manager, apparel/yarns, Macquarie Textiles, and  
Mr D. Powers, managing director, Powers Textiles.

**The CHAIR** — The next submission is from the Council of Textile and Fashion Industries of Australia. Thank you for agreeing to address the Education and Training Committee in regard to our inquiry about school uniforms and dress codes. I do not know whether you were here, Ashley, when I spoke to David, but as you see Hansard is taking down the information that you share with us so we can follow it up in more detail if we require it. The things that are said here are covered by parliamentary privilege. Whether that is relevant or not I do not know. That would not be the case for things that might be said outside. As we have worked through our inquiry we have been pleased to hear from a range of sectors — from the school sectors of course — but we are interested to hear more from your group in regard to issues that you want to share with us about uniform as it certainly forms a significant and important component in our inquiry. I trust you will introduce the others who are here today, Ashley, and we look forward to your contribution.

**Mr VAN KRIEKEN** — Yes, I will, and thank you very much, Chair. I have with me today Steve Stewart from Macquarie Textiles and David Powers from Powers Textiles, both longstanding companies in the industry. If I could just make a couple of points to begin with — —

**The CHAIR** — Certainly, and I see we have a written submission from you, so that is good too.

**Mr VAN KRIEKEN** — Yes, and my apologies for the delay. It was an administrative mix-up in the office. I would like to thank the committee for its time, and we certainly welcome the opportunity to make comment on this very critical issue from our industry's point of view in regard to school uniforms and dress codes. I note that in addition to the points in our submission there is certainly strong support from within the industry to support the contention that school uniforms be made mandatory for a variety of reasons including a cohesive image for the schools; safety and identification issues — that is for teachers to readily identify their groups of children on excursions and within the school grounds; the removal of peer pressure or designer competition in terms of clothing, although perhaps some of my other members may not want to hear that; and obviously a positive effect on the school body. I just note that that is not in the submission but it is certainly our view.

Just as a little bit of background, the Australian textile, clothing, footwear and fashion industry, contrary perhaps to the views of many in the community, is a vibrant, innovative and in many areas a growing sector in Australia, and particularly in Victoria. We employ 60 000 Australians nationally, around 26 000, or just over 40 per cent, in Victoria alone. We probably employ that many again indirectly. Companies are focusing on niche products, innovation, technology, research and development, and the branding and supply chain advantages that exist in Australia to compete in the global market. Certainly the strengths in terms of apparel are seen in the corporate uniform wear, in personal protective equipment, high-end fashion and, of course, school uniforms. In our submission you will note that a quick search via *Yellow Pages* and other means identifies around about 140 different companies that operate in this area of manufacturing or of providing school uniforms.

The most important point I would like to get across to the committee before we have questions is that one of the core platforms for the industry is to see recognition of Australian manufactured products in the decision-making of procurement agencies, both government and private. In that light we would certainly want to see the committee looking at ways and means of in some way differentiating Australian-made products or products that have a majority of Australian content from imports. We are not talking about trying to put in place barriers, but what we are suggesting is that there be an emphasis on providing information and detailed resources in terms of the processes used in the manufacture of school garments, the materials used and where they come from, and that this be provided to schools and school councils and the government to enable them to make a full and proper assessment of the best items for the industry.

Some of our members have noted that an increasing number of imported products are probably below the standard of Australian-made products; they are not lasting as long. As a parent I am certainly looking for durability and long-lasting uniforms. But we are certainly concerned that in itself that is tinging the uniform sector as a whole, both Australian and domestic, because beside the standard labelling required under the Trade Practices Act there is not a lot of other information that is provided about school uniforms in terms of where they are made and what they are made of. I think that also flows through to providing adequate care instructions on the garments as well.

Going a little bit further we would contend that if schools or parents are purchasing garments which have an Australian content of, say, more than 60 per cent, that some sort of incentive or some sort of benefit be made available to those schools which are encouraging that. Again, it is about trying to engage the domestic industry to continue growing.

The final point I will make is in respect to distribution. The industry has noted that there are many ways that it can be undertaken, from a voluntary school uniform shop through to a third party providing services outside the school and inside the school. Certainly each has its own pros and cons, and I know some submissions have addressed them in detail. The consistent message that came through from members, and certainly I will ask David and Steve to comment on this, was that probably a voluntary school uniform shop causes the most problems and headaches from an industry perspective in terms of ordering and in terms of stocking. In our submission we propose that guidelines be followed as an interim step. I do not think the committee can change overnight the way uniforms are distributed and the logistics of that, but having a clear set of guidelines which are developed in conjunction with industry that look at industry time frames for delivery, for production and for accessing materials, would be a very positive step. On that note, Chair, I might throw back to you for questions.

**Mr KOTSIRAS** — Are you aware of what percentage of uniforms are manufactured in Australia and what percentage are manufactured overseas? Are you aware of the percentage profit that schools make from the sale of uniforms?

**Mr VAN KRIEKEN** — I am not aware of the percentage profit that schools make from the sale of uniforms. In terms of knowing what is made domestically and what is imported, the data is difficult to get. It is not collected officially, or if it is collected it is not available to us for confidentiality reasons. Without wanting to put the gentlemen on the spot, I might ask whether either David or Steve might know. The feeling is that the majority of school uniforms would still be Australian made at this time, but we are seeing increasing signs of imported uniforms coming into Australia.

**Mr POWERS** — Basically the situation is that because most schools have an original uniform which they have made up themselves at some time or another — and let us take a school check — it is theirs exclusively. There may well be each year only 250 metres of that check made for that school. Unfortunately the Chinese or the Indians cannot do that small quantity, so it is left to us in Australia to do that, and it is a fairly big slice of the business. It is a niche market, but it is a very important niche market.

**The CHAIR** — Could I ask if you have any advice that would help in regard to making school uniforms more cost-effective for parents and families?

**Mr POWERS** — Yes. There are two things. Firstly, as you are probably aware, there are a lot of uniforms now that are exempt from the fringe benefits tax — Crown Casino, the banks, everybody is into a uniform now because it is all exempt from the FBT — and there has got to be some way that schools can take advantage of this. I know there is a tax deduction at the end of it, and it is a very important situation. That is one aspect worth looking at.

Secondly, there are four or five different ways of buying uniforms — from the situation where the school organises the uniforms right through to the most expensive way, which is a retailer. We supply fabrics to all of them. We supply individual fabrics and things like that to schools that can organise their own uniforms, so the price points are quite different at each level.

**Mr ELASMAR** — Do you see a problem with school uniform shops that are run from school premises?

**Mr VAN KRIEKEN** — Certainly, some of the comments I received seemed to indicate that it was probably the least preferred method for some distributors. There were problems in the sense that they are voluntary, so there are often issues around stock ordering and having the right uniforms on hand. There was also how well people had the ability to actually sell the garments and talk about their construction, what they are made of and the way to care for them. They are some of the problems that came out when companies discussed it. Do you have anything to add on that, Steve?

**Mr STEWART** — No, not really. I think David covered my sentiments exactly. The biggest problem, as David touched on before, is particularly the imports from China. Their minimums are 600 metres, compared to the Australian 240, and there is only a minority of the schools that can handle those big quantities. The other issue that comes into play there is the lead times. We can make fabrics in Australia in five to six weeks, as opposed to China where you are looking at, say, 60 or 70 days to make it and another 30 days to get it here. Therefore, these schools have got to be well regulated or discipline themselves to have those uniforms ready on time.

We are getting complaints that schools actually have some kids in their brother's uniform which is either greyed out or worn out or basically the traditional uniform is not being upheld properly. Whereas with most of the schools — David and I are in opposition to each other but chasing the same market — we are servicing that industry quite well. So there is that threat of the overseas market eroding the local manufacturing.

**Mr VAN KRIEKEN** — As Steve said, because the quantities are so large there is a risk that wholesalers or importers are able to buy in very large quantities, so then you get every school having to wear a green uniform perhaps with just a screen print of a logo embossed on the same uniform, so you start losing some of that individuality that David was noting before. But also it is our estimation that you would probably see a general deterioration in the quality of school uniforms.

**Mr HERBERT** — Your submission talks a little bit about competition with imported garments, but I wonder just on the cost factor that Nick alluded to how much competition there is within Victoria from different suppliers in terms of the school uniform market and what is the nature of the process whereby a school community will end up purchasing a product that is made in Victoria, say. Do schools normally approach a manufacturer or are there middle groups such as retailers that do it? What is the nature of the industry, and how competitive is it in terms of school uniforms?

**Mr POWERS** — Probably most of them have already got a uniform that has been designed in the past — a lot of the wrong checks and a lot of the wrong colours et cetera — so they have actually got one. New schools coming along tend to have a competition or somebody decides to design it for them. Then they come to a company like ours which will produce a piece of fabric to their specifications et cetera. And I have to say the school uniform thing is really a grudge purchase, but the thing about it is it has got to last and has got to last probably four years at minimum. We get back uniforms that are 25 years old.

One of the things that happens is they get recycled down to the next generation or the next kids in school, or whatever it is. There is a lot of that. I think that is the underlying thing that tends to be forgotten. I would say most of the parents who have at least two or three kids going through the same school will recycle those. That is one of the quality aspects that is produced locally. More or less without saying it, you can get a uniform that will last at least five years — I would say probably more like 10 or 15. It is an underlying situation.

**Mr HERBERT** — Not with my kids, I can assure you!

**Mr POWERS** — But it is a good purchase in the first place, but one of the things is that because of the quality that is built into that sort of thing, it will last, whereas the overseas stuff that come in tends to last three months — fades, runs, all the other things. In fact most of the school uniforms are actually of a higher quality and durability than things like the police uniform.

**Mr HERBERT** — Yes, but is there much competition within Victoria? For instance, how many of the main manufacturers of uniforms are there, and do they go out there and competitively try to pick up new schools; compete in the marketplace?

**Mr POWERS** — Yes, absolutely.

**Mr HERBERT** — So how many manufacturers of school uniforms are there?

**Mr POWERS** — In Victoria?

**Mr HERBERT** — The main ones, yes.

**Mr POWERS** — Probably a couple of hundred.

**Mr HERBERT** — Okay, so there is a great diversity. You have got your client list of schools; do you go and pitch the schools on a price or quality basis to try to grab a bit more business?

**Mr POWERS** — Yes, they are always trying to point you to the business and trying to offer the same garment. That is the whole thing: it has to be the same colour and everything else —

**Mr HERBERT** — Do we have a situation where the price of uniforms is inflated because there is not much competition? What you are saying is that if a school is paying over the odds, or the parents are paying over the odds, for a uniform, pretty soon some other company will go in there and pitch for that?

**Mr POWERS** — I would say there is a lot of that, but, as I said, it really depends on how the school wants to buy that uniform. If it wants to buy it at the cheapest price it can, there are different ways of doing it. They do not have to go to the retailer, to Myer and everything else, to buy a uniform. You can get exactly the same uniform by other methods of doing things.

**Mr STEWART** — If I could try to answer your question and maybe use Australian-made product as a benchmark for the price. A jacket would cost, say, \$200 — if someone is bringing it in from China, for argument's sake, working on the same mark-up, they should be able to sell that 30 or 40 per cent cheaper, but that is not happening. So the cost saving is not being passed onto the families.

**Mr HERBERT** — Not so much the imported versus local — through you, Chair, perhaps the last question: given what you have just said, would you think then that there is a percentage of schools which basically do not shop around, and if they were perhaps a little bit more active for Australian-made products, they could in fact get a better deal for their parents.

**Mr VAN KRIEKEN** — Yes.

**Mr STEWART** — Yes.

**Mr POWERS** — Yes.

**Mr HERBERT** — So in some cases you would find it is just an issue where it is easier for the school to just go with one supplier rather than shop around.

**Mr POWERS** — Yes, but there is a lot of loyalty there as well.

**Mr STEWART** — A lot of the school shops, unfortunately, are run by volunteers, so they are not professional in ensuring the best dollar.

**Mr HERBERT** — Thank you.

**The CHAIR** — Thank you for your contribution. It has been very helpful.

**Witnesses withdrew.**



# CORRECTED VERSION

## EDUCATION AND TRAINING COMMITTEE

### Inquiry into dress codes and school uniforms in Victorian schools

Melbourne — 4 June 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

Mr J. Tonson, project officer, Victorian Student Representative Council,

Ms G. Kennelly, student, University High School,

Ms K. Burnham, student, Northland Secondary College,

Mr D. Flakemore, student, Frankston High School, and

Ms J. Rose, policy officer, Youth Affairs Council of Victoria.

**The CHAIR** — Would you like to introduce the group now?

**Mr TONSON** — I am James Tonson. I am the project officer with the Victorian SRC. These are our three students who are going to do most of the talking today. Georgia Kennelly is a year 9 student from University High School; Kera Burnham, a year 11 student from Northland Secondary College; and Doug Flakemore, a year 10 student from Frankston High School. Jen Rose, over in the corner, is sitting in. Jen is the policy officer from the youth affairs council, which acts as the auspicing agent for the VicSRC.

**Ms ROSE** — I am just in a support role, so I am going to sit back and allow them to be at the table.

**The CHAIR** — That sounds good to us. It is the students we want to hear from in particular.

**Ms ROSE** — That is right.

**The CHAIR** — Thank you very much for coming along and addressing the parliamentary committee on education and training. As you are obviously aware, we are looking at uniforms and dress codes in schools. You will see that everything you say is being taken down, not to be used in evidence against you but so we can look over that information again if we want a check on things that are said so we do not miss some of those details. You are covered by parliamentary privilege. I do not know whether that is something that is an issue for you, but those same sorts of issues would not apply if you said anything outside the hearings. We are certainly looking forward to your contribution. As you might be aware, we have heard from a great many groups, but it is terrific to hear from students their viewpoints in regard to uniforms and all of those issues that are associated with uniform dress codes in schools. Who going to speak first, James?

**Mr TONSON** — Kera is going to start off.

**Ms BURNHAM** — The Victorian Student Representative Council is a democratic network of the SRC, working to represent the views of secondary students in Victoria. The student representative council, SRC, or sometimes known as other names, are the bodies that exist within most secondary schools to represent the opinion of students. VicSRC has 49 members. SRCs represent more than 35 000 secondary students. Our vision is to bring student representative councils together across Victoria to make their voices heard at all levels and in the process grow their vision and capacity for making a difference in their schools and across the state. As an organisation representing secondary students the contents of this submission relate primarily to uniform and dress code policies for secondary students. However, as Victorian primary schools have no equal body to represent them, the VicSRC believes that the principles expressed here are largely applicable to primary schools as well. We have addressed only the points where we had a relevant contribution to make.

**Ms KENNELLY** — The primary concern of the VicSRC with regard to school uniforms and dress codes is that students have meaningful involvement in the decision-making process at an individual school level. Students should be treated as partners in the process, as they are the people who are most affected by these decisions, as they wear the uniforms. The recent SRC Congress, representing over 25 000 students from 39 Victorian secondary schools, resolved with overwhelming agreement that the student body should have a say in decisions about uniforms and that school uniforms should be approved by the SRC before implementation. The congress debated further but did not agree to any specific directions for what uniform and dress codes should be. This reflects the diversity of student opinion across Victoria and the fact that each school has its own unique culture of which uniforms and dress codes are a reflection.

However, this does not mean that all students are happy and content with the culture or uniform policy at their school. Many students feel that the imposition upon them of a particular policy is an attempt to coerce them into a particular culture and does not reflect their personal values or identity. By involving students in the decision-making process schools can arrive at a policy that students have a sense of ownership of and that reflects the values of the whole community.

**Mr FLAKEMORE** — There are the benefits and costs of having mandatory school uniforms. Secondary students hold a diverse range of views on the benefits of school uniforms and dress codes. Some students express a sense of oppression in having a uniform imposed upon them. They believe this places a serious constraint on their ability to express their individuality and feel that the school does not respect them for who they are. Many of these students would like to have a degree of choice about whether or not to wear a uniform.

Other students believe that having a compulsory uniform has useful benefits. It helps to present a positive image of the school to its community and prevents students from being subjected to peer pressure about what they wear and the potential stresses of having to choose new clothes every day. For these students having an optional uniform would defeat the purpose of having one at all. Students from schools without uniforms report that not having a uniform works well for them and that peer pressure is not an issue as students eventually become comfortable in their own identity and dress sense. Students generally agree that uniforms represent a significant financial cost to families, especially when more formal items — such as school blazers — are part of the uniform.

Support in purchasing uniforms should be provided to families who need it. The VicSRC commends the work of the State Schools Relief Committee in providing support to families attending state schools. There is concern that this leaves a gap in the independent and Catholic school system in which families also need support.

**Ms BURNHAM** — There are the views of school communities on dress codes and school uniform. The VicSRC appreciates the notion that a student's physical appearance demonstrates a level of respect for a school and the wider community; however, we believe this needs to be balanced by the school's respect for student individuality and their right to express it within a school and community context. These two principles should be taken into account in each school community as they discuss and develop their own set of uniform and dress code policies. In particular most students accept that extreme ideas — such as offensive tattoos or Nazi symbols — should at least be covered up in respect for other people. However, some students question whether such lines can be drawn et cetera — for example, is a hairstyle such as a Mohawk, offensive, or is it just different? They point out that part of being a young person in the community is testing social norms and boundaries and argue that schools and communities should demonstrate a degree of tolerance of this behaviour.

**Ms KENNELLY** — There is also a range of areas that need to be considered in relation to cultural and religious items that people wear. We also need to cover the issue of health promotion.

One issue we came across was that a student had been supporting the Leukaemia Foundation of Australia 'Shave for a Cure' event for several years during primary school; however, in the first year of secondary school that student was told they were not allowed to shave their head because doing so was against the school uniform policy. We believe this shows how schools are not flexible sometimes in their school uniform policies, and we did not believe that was a fair decision. The VicSRC thinks and believes that if students are involved in the decision-making process there would be less decisions like this, and students would feel better in their school community.

**Mr FLAKEMORE** — Where a uniform or dress code policy exists, a system of enforcement and sanction should be implemented. Again, this should be done on an agreed basis involving students in decisions about systems that impact upon them and, if agreed, the enforcement of such policies. In some cases, punishments imposed by a representative panel of students are more effective than those imposed by teachers or principals. However, this process would need to be carefully managed and completely transparent to avoid placing undue pressure on students involved. The VicSRC recommends that in general a system of tiered sanctions or penalties is most effective, giving students the chance to make good and allowing the appropriate flexibility to reflect the nature and circumstances of their individual offences.

**Ms KENNELLY** — We recommend that appropriate exemption, criteria and processes should be established with the students input. We need to make provision for issues such as discrimination for religious areas and health promotion, as well as individual student circumstances such as financial issues and physical ability to comply.

**Mr FLAKEMORE** — In closing, the VicSRC believes that students can make excellent partners in forming policies at local and state level — that is, if they are given the chance to make a meaningful contribution. We encourage all schools to make use of student expertise in formulating a range of school policies. We, the VicSRC, would like to thank the committee for conducting this inquiry and seeking student views. However, we would like to request that in future more time be given for groups to respond.

We note this inquiry allowed four weeks for a response, two of which were in the school holidays. This makes it almost impossible for us to effectively consult with our members and limits the potential feedback we can give. The VicSRC recommends that at least two months be the minimum time allotted for seeking public submissions. Having said that, we are extremely grateful that you have allowed us until this day to submit our submissions.

**The CHAIR** — And we do allow longer time, as you would be aware.

**Mr ELASMAR** — First of all, thank you for coming here today. I believe students can play a good role on the issue of uniforms. I believe students should be asked their opinion. At this stage in these talks between students themselves, what is the feeling if the cost of the uniform were free? Would students agree there should be a uniform?

**Ms BURNHAM** — From my attending Northland high school, everyone seems to be themselves and show their true colours by wearing just casual clothes. In saying that, people wear the same clothes day in day out, and we do not go judging them or anything like that. But I reckon if school uniforms were free, they still would not go for it.

**Mr ELASMAR** — They would not go for it?

**Ms BURNHAM** — No.

**Ms KENNELLY** — I think if school uniforms were free, there would still be the issue of individuality and religious issues and stuff like that. There would still be that issue, and there would still be division among students of whether or not we should have a uniform. I do not think it would solve the complete issue and everyone would have the same view. It might bring more students on to the side of having a uniform because financially it is a big cost, but some students believe that financially having casual dress is a bigger cost than having a uniform. I guess it is just the way you look at it. I still reckon there would be division over school uniforms. I would still believe that we should not have school uniforms, even if they were free.

**Mr KOTSIRAS** — I am sorry; I did not hear the last one.

**Ms KENNELLY** — I still think that we should not have school uniforms, even if they were free. But that is just a personal opinion.

**The CHAIR** — That is an interesting issue. Obviously the group you represent has a broad range of views, but one of the key things I notice you have said is that students should be consulted within their own school community. I am wondering what your experience is within your own school communities and among other young people you are talking to from other schools. Do they believe they get much of a say at the moment, or are they being generally overlooked when schools are determining their uniform policies?

**Ms BURNHAM** — Most schools actually do not have the interaction between the teachers and parents about the school uniform. I have even heard my friends who go to Catholic schools or private schools say, 'Why can't we design it? Why can't we be more involved? We are the ones who have to wear it'.

**Ms KENNELLY** — At schools I have been to which have uniforms we were never consulted. When the SRC tried to talk to the school council to try and see if we could talk to them about changing the uniform possibly and making it better for students to wear and stuff like that, we were told kind of, yes, but then we were never really consulted. They mainly just believe they design it, they choose what we wear and we have to go along with it.

**The CHAIR** — Are there any other questions?

**Mr HERBERT** — I have got a fairly straightforward one. Thank you very much for your presentation. Two of you — Doug and Kera — your schools do not have uniforms. You are from University high?

**Mr FLAKEMORE** — I am from Frankston High School. We do have uniforms

**Mr HERBERT** — I know Frankston high does, I know it very well.

**Mr FLAKEMORE** — It is casual dress day today.

**Mr HERBERT** — You have an excellent member of Parliament and a friend of mine, who is a member of this committee who could not be here today. In terms of University high and Northland, what do you think would be the response of students firstly and then the school community if the government made uniforms compulsory? Do you think students would wear them, and would the school accept that decision? There is a hard question for you.

**Ms BURNHAM** — No, it is not hard. From my school I know, and I have heard students actually say, if it was compulsory to wear school uniform, you would not see a single student in that school because they are not going to be forced to wear something when they can show their true colours and be themselves by wearing what they feel comfortable in.

**Mr HERBERT** — So you think the school would go along with it but the students — they would have a massive enforcement issue there.

**Ms KENNELLY** — I think at my school some students would be happy. I think there would be a lot of uproar among lots of the students. I think lots of the students would wear it but would do everything they could to find loopholes in the policy — wearing as much jewellery as possible to cover the school uniform and stuff like that. Among the school community I know that my mum and lots of the parents believe we should have school uniform. I think they would be happier with school uniform, but there would still be a lot of uproar considering that Uni high has not had a uniform for a while and it is just well accepted that we do not have uniforms.

**Mr KOTSIRAS** — How many year 12 students in the three schools wear their jumpers — you know, their ‘VCE class of 2007’? Have you got that at your school?

**Ms KENNELLY** — Yes, we do.

**Ms BURNHAM** — No.

**Mr FLAKEMORE** — We do.

**Mr KOTSIRAS** — And what percentage of those students wear those?

**Mr FLAKEMORE** — All the year 12s who want one, basically.

**Ms KENNELLY** — I do not know, about 60 per cent. We are actually trying for the SRC to get a jumper for all students — 7 to 12 — currently and lots of students are in support of that.

**Mr KOTSIRAS** — Isn’t that a uniform?

**Ms KENNELLY** — Not necessarily because it would not be compulsory — just to have a jumper that students could purchase.

**Mr KOTSIRAS** — But you said most of the students wear it even though it is not compulsory?

**Mr FLAKEMORE** — It is not compulsory, they can wear their other, alternate school jumper.

**Mr KOTSIRAS** — But they choose to wear it?

**Mr FLAKEMORE** — But they choose to wear it. I suppose it is theirs, it is their generation, it is their year’s one.

**Mr FINN** — I would like to raise the issue that has come up time and time again and that is the issue of peer group pressure. If there is no school uniform, are we putting kids who perhaps might not be as financially well resourced as others at a disadvantage by putting them in a situation where they might not be as well dressed as some of the others and they might actually suffer social stigma and a whole range of things as a result of that situation?

**Ms KENNELLY** — At my school there is not a heap of peer group pressure. I know there is a bit but it is dealt with as well as any other form of bullying — it is just basically a different form of bullying. I know that if we did have a uniform, there would still be forms of peer group pressure because you could still tell who was financially not as well off as other people. There is stuff like iPods and phones and other things that people have that you can tell that some kids do not have them and stuff like that. It is just dealt with as any other form of bullying. It should not be separated from bullying as a full issue. If the school has a good bullying policy, then there should not be any at all, in my view.

**Ms BURNHAM** — At my school there is no peer pressure at all, and I would know because I started there only this year. We have people who cannot afford expensive clothes or be up with the fashion and that and we

do not judge them at all. You just see all of the kids — 195 of us — sit on the oval and we will talk and laugh. We all just get along. The only thing we judge people about is, like, how big their eyebrows are, or what score they got on their test. It is never about clothes or that.

**The CHAIR** — It is Northland?

**Ms BURNHAM** — Yes.

**The CHAIR** — Where is Northland?

**Ms BURNHAM** — It is in Preston.

**Mr KOTSIRAS** — Next to Northland shopping centre.

**Mr HERBERT** — It has a long history.

**The CHAIR** — Any other questions from anyone? Anything else you would like to add that you do not think we have covered yet?

**Ms KENNELLY** — Not really.

**The CHAIR** — If we were recommending something to the government — it seems like you do not want us to recommend compulsory uniforms, or that is one of the views.

**Ms BURNHAM** — No. I know it is going to take ages because it has been around for centuries, having a compulsory school uniform. But I know even the students were looking at maybe having the same coloured jumper or pants or having black. For some schools the girls have to wear a set dress and then a set skirt for summer and winter. They were thinking about maybe having pants and having the option of wearing several different clothes, but also just showing themselves that they can wear headbands and rings and crosses and know that they feel comfortable in them. I know it will not happen overnight, getting rid of school uniforms, but even if you have a set coloured jumper or pants without the school logo and that.

**Ms KENNELLY** — Also I think what we are really trying to enforce is having students and school councils talking to each other about school uniforms and having more student involvement. We are not saying that you should get rid of school uniforms or you should make all school uniforms compulsory, but that school councils should be talking to the students so students have more of a say.

**The CHAIR** — So you would rather us say to schools and school councils, ‘You make your decisions, but consult your broad student community’. Is that the sort of thing you are saying? I hear you all have said yes.

**Mr TONSON** — I think it is important that the school policy is made at an individual level where it can reflect the culture of that school; that is the key thing. The different schools that have representatives here have different cultures in them, and the ones that are not represented here are the same. Is the committee thinking of recommending in that direction?

**The CHAIR** — We have not made up our minds about that.

**Mr TONSON** — But you are thinking about it?

**The CHAIR** — We are just listening at the moment and we will get to a stage where we can look at the recommendations from there.

**Mr HERBERT** — One more question, through you, Chair: do you think there is a difference between primary school and secondary school and perhaps senior secondary and junior secondary on the issue of uniforms? I just say that in that you are talking to students, but really you are talking about different people at different age levels — VCE, very much young adults; early secondary, early teens; and primary school and pre-teens. They are quite different kinds of levels of a person’s development. On issues like uniforms do you think it makes a difference whether they are at primary, middle or senior level?

**Ms KENNELLY** — I think it does. At my primary school we had an optional uniform. There was a full uniform that you could wear but it was not compulsory, except on certain days and stuff like that. I know that the

preps to about grade 4 were very happy to wear it and they would wear it every day all day. Parents also made them, but most of the preps were happy to wear it, and stuff like that. Whereas by grades 5 and 6 you would wear a pair of jeans and a school jumper, and that was all you would wear because you felt you were individual. I am not sure with the VCE students — Doug can tell you more on that — but years 7, 8 and 9 and my group of friends do not really like the idea of a uniform and like to be ourselves and be individual.

**Mr FLAKEMORE** — I am not currently in VCE myself, but I know that many of my peers in VCE would, if we remove the uniform at Frankston high, quite happily wear whatever they wanted whenever they wanted. They would not go near the school uniform. Perhaps the jumper — the student class, or whatever it is, for year 12, they might wear that.

**Mr HERBERT** — Thank you.

**The CHAIR** — Thank you for your contributions.

**Mr TONSON** — Thank you for having us.

**Witnesses withdrew.**



# CORRECTED VERSION

## EDUCATION AND TRAINING COMMITTEE

### Inquiry into dress codes and school uniforms in Victorian schools

Melbourne — 4 June 2007

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Chair: Mr G. Howard

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#### Staff

Executive Officer: Ms K. Ellingford

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Committee Administrative Officer: Ms N. Tyler

#### Witness

Ms J. Cashen, president, Victorian Council of School Organisations.

**The CHAIR** — Thank you, Jacinta Cashen, from the Victorian Council of School Organisations, for coming along and talking with us this afternoon as part of our inquiry into dress codes and school uniforms. As you can see we are recording anything contributors say so that we can follow that up in detail if we want to later. Anything you say is covered by parliamentary privilege, if that is relevant to you. We welcome any contribution you would like to make, and we will probably want to follow up with some questions in regard to your initial presentation.

**Ms CASHEN** — My name is Jacinta Cashen, I am the president of the Victorian Council of School Organisations, and we met at the education dinner a couple of weeks ago. We are a not-for-profit organisation. We are independent; we receive no funding from government; we get our funding from member schools. About 450 schools — government primary, secondary and special schools — currently are members. Our business is keeping governments accountable for high-quality public education — that is one aspect of our job. The other obviously is to service our members around governance in schools.

When it comes to this issue I have two really simple things to say, in a sense. One is that you have school councils making policy decisions around school uniforms and dress codes, and we think that is probably the best and most effective way for people to make decisions about these things. It is an issue that polarises people, like the issue of homework. When I look at our members — and I go and visit a wide range of schools and we get lots of phone calls from our members so I have been asking them — we probably have as many schools with compulsory uniforms as we have with non-compulsory or optional uniforms. There are a wide range of decisions made at a local level about school uniforms.

In terms of polarising people, I have had that experience myself. I have two children in government schools — one at a school where they do have a school uniform and the other at a school where they do not have one. I have often seen parents get frustrated and annoyed when there is no school uniform. You have probably heard all the reasons: pride in the school, identification on school excursions, getting rid of the competition around clothing — those sorts of things — or that uniforms are cheaper. I was also a primary school teacher so I had the experience in a Catholic primary school of people wearing a uniform. In terms of the kinds of arguments people put forward about school uniforms I think none of them stack up particularly well when you analyse them, and they are open to people's personal views and people's personal biases.

I guess there are two kinds of people in regard to this issue: those who like everything to be neat and tidy and those who do not mind if things are not neat and tidy, and we are not going to change those types of people. I am the wild and woolly kind, and I have friends who are neat and tidy, and it seems to me it is one of those characteristics of just being a human being that is really hard to argue about. That is why we think school councils are the best place to check out what your school community is saying about what they require from policy in this regard and have those debates at a local level rather than just impose something.

The other thing I would like to point out is a nice anecdote from a principal to highlight some of the things that can go on in terms of school uniforms. He is a principal who is recently at a new school where they do not have a uniform. He has been there for about 18 months and the previous school of which he was principal did have a school uniform. He was telling us about how one day when he was out in the yard before school and talking to students, greeting them and just saying hello — and this was in a school without a uniform — and he was wondering why he felt so good and happy, and he had been at the school for 18 months. He realised it was because at this school he did not have to spend his time in the morning asking students to put their jackets on properly or point out that they were not wearing the right shoes.

Instead he was able to engage in a conversation about who they were and what they were up to and how they were going. He really noticed the significant community difference between a school that had a uniform and one that did not. We have also seen increases in real divisions in schools when a school uniform that might have been in the school but was not really adhered to suddenly becomes an area of discipline. There was one school we have been dealing with this year that had serious repercussions right throughout the school community. In fact you have got letters from the school, I know. They had about 18 parents turn up to a school council meeting last year because the school introduced a very expensive blazer — or it was perceived as an expensive blazer — and as a result of that three parents ended up on the school council this year because the process around that was not particularly good. At this school there are things like it being insisted that students wear the school blazer in hot weather, and parents being asked to get medical certificates for non-compliance with the woollen jumper. So there are some silly things that do go on when schools have a strict uniform policy.

The other thing that I wanted to highlight is probably what is missing from some of the discussion is more of a focus on dress codes. The anecdote I gave you earlier about the principal at the school where they did not have a compulsory uniform, its focus was on dress code — what is appropriate for woodwork and being SunSmart and those sorts of things is where their discussion lay. So they did talk about a dress code more seriously. I also noticed that in my own child's school a few years back — I thought it was kind of hilarious but stupid too — the principal on the first day of second term announced to the whole school community that because it was second term they no longer had to wear their sun hats. It was 23 degrees — like the May just gone has been quite a warm month. People get locked into silly ideas around uniform; they are not even thinking about what it is for. I know the Cancer Council in that particular example is arguing that schools, as I did with this school, could actually look at the UV readings each day if they wanted to be serious about it and work out then whether or not a hat or sticking to shade was appropriate. Some people get really strict about the uniform without thinking about what it is really about.

The other thing we have seen a little bit of, which is also worrying from our point of view, is the increase in the number of kids who end up on suspension because they have not been wearing the school uniform correctly. In respect of all the kinds of things that you could be asking the students to behave around, if you like, one of them should not be school uniform, I would have thought, when we are trying to build a community where we understand each other, share resources, live a good life and consider other people. I have seen schools get really locked up in the whole school uniform thing, and it becomes a serious focus and distracting from other more important issues, we would argue.

The other thing about schools that do not have compulsory uniforms, because some people say visibility on school excursions is an issue — and I think that is fairly legitimate — is that a lot of schools have a specific uniform when they go out into the public arena. For example, at this school they did not have a compulsory uniform, but they had a choir uniform because their students performed at choirs. I think some of the arguments about school uniforms being cheaper do not wash so much anymore. It depends again on your community. I am from Brunswick. A lot of people in our community shop at Savers, and they do it with great pride. To be able to buy things at Savers — I do not know whether you know Savers; it is very cheap at Savers — that argument about uniforms being cheaper does not necessarily wash.

The other thing I have felt about competition — they say uniforms get rid of competition, but my daughter wears a school uniform at secondary school — is that it does not. There are still brands around the kind of school shoe you wear, depending on how strict the school is. She certainly does things to her uniform that identifies it as being different from other students' uniforms. There is always the thing about whether you have a knitted jumper or one bought from the shop. I wore uniforms my whole life, and you could always tell who the haves and the have-nots were regardless of whether they were wearing uniform or casual dress. So that one does not wash particularly well either. We do see in our organisation a trend for schools, especially secondary schools — it seems to be less of an issue in primary schools sometimes; it is more of an issue in secondary schools — to try to compete with local, independent or private schools, so they think one way of doing that is the school uniform.

I guess it is that thing again of depending on your community. Not every parent wants to see a school uniform and believes that it is a sign of a good school. In fact plenty of parents do not necessarily see uniforms as being a sign of a good school, especially if schools are very strict about it and it is a big focus. We have seen evidence of that in our dealings with our members. The main point is that schools have councils where these decisions can be made and they can reflect what their school community is wanting from them. Basically that is probably where the decision should lie.

**The CHAIR** — Thanks, Jacinta.

**Mr HERBERT** — I was interested in your idea of the organised person and the let-it-all-happen kind.

**Mr KOTSIRAS** — Which one are you, Steve?

**Mr HERBERT** — I am disorganised, that is for sure.

**Mr KOTSIRAS** — That is in the transcript now.

**Mr HERBERT** — I think anyone reading *Hansard* would have recognised that long ago! One of the issues school councils face when making decisions is enforcement. That seems to be an issue to which some groups have alluded in terms of how much time and effort and what sorts of powers a school administration should have to

enforce a school uniform. Do you have any comment on whether that has adequacy in terms of the guidelines or support for schools?

**Ms CASHEN** — I think it goes more to how effective school councils are in terms of their governance. We did some research around school councils. I will leave you a copy of it if you wish. We found that there was a lot of goodwill around school councils. By the way, nobody else has done research in this state on this subject. Although there was a lot of goodwill around school councils, they were not truly operating effectively. If you look at some of the guidelines from the Public Administration Act through the State Services Authority, it is clear that governance is patchy in schools. In terms of enforcement, in part it has to do with how effective a school council is and whether it has consulted its school community. I suspect if a school council has consulted, then the enforcement should not be that significant. However, if a council has been a power unto itself — and lots of them are; we know that — then it may be that a council is up against a community that does not want to be part of whatever the policy has been. It may not have been reviewed for a long time. There are some issues around school councils in terms of enforcement.

Personally I am clearly biased. I am not at all interested in school uniforms, and I was not when I was a teacher. People often used the same line about school uniforms as they did about being called by their first name or 'Ms' or 'Mr', or whatever it was. I do not think you necessarily get respect and pride from those things. I do not understand why enforcement needs to be such an issue for people. I have heard people say that the department does not back up schools when they say they are having trouble enforcing a school uniform. I think those people need to go back and talk to their students.

You were at a forum I attended many years ago, Steve, at which I met some students from out Darebin way. They said that they had asked their school council for a more sensible school uniform in terms of what they actually wore. These girls told me that they wore fairly short skirts and that their lockers were outside — as many lockers now are. When wind blew through the corridors they had to hold down their skirts while they opened their lockers. Enforcement might be an issue in that situation, and I might have been one of the girls who said, 'Bugger this! I am wearing pants'.

I would go back to the community and ask how serious these enforcement issues are. Is it because people are not really listening to what people are saying or because they have a silly uniform? I have seen plenty of silly uniforms that seem to me to be totally impractical. It might have more to do with that than anything else. I think principals have plenty of power in terms of suspension and detention anyway. I do not know what else they would want. Because we are human beings life gets tricky, — does it not? — and sometimes we have to deal with the tricky, too. Bad luck! It is not simple. Somebody is not going to say, 'Sorry, you have to do it this way'. Do we not want that kind of disagreement and diversity of views. It is healthy, rather than having a homogenous group who are happy to toe the line and do what everybody say, provided it is not malicious or disrespectful.

**The CHAIR** — One of the issues that has been raised with me and others here, Jacinta — and you alluded to it too — is how a principal who is watching over the students at lunchtime and recess time knows whether people who are not part of that school community are coming onto the grounds and causing problems, or whether there is an occupational health and safety issue? I wonder if you have a viewpoint or some advice in regard to observations on schools that do not have uniforms?

**Ms CASHEN** — Again, it has never actually been raised as a serious issue amongst our members around identifying people who do not belong, and I have to say I have been to plenty of schools where I have been a stranger and even when I was teaching myself I always thought it was interesting that people did not actually ask people they did not know, 'Who are you?'. I know in a big school that is probably difficult for some principals, because they do not necessarily know every student in the school, if you are talking about 1200 students. But it seems to me that if you have got a rock-solid community and you have really focused on building community, then you do know who is in the grounds that are not normally in the grounds. It does not matter whether they have got a uniform on or not. It does not seem to have been a particularly big issue. Despite the media, how often do you get strangers kind of just wandering around your school? I think at secondary school level if you are worried about that, as I was once — when I was at secondary school I actually alerted the staff to some kids that were on the school grounds that were not part of that school. Big dobber back then!

It has not come up as a major issue. I know it gets brought up, but I do not know how right that is; I suspect it is not very. But a lot of schools now are on the ball about filling in forms at the beginning, checking badges and that sort

of thing, so I actually think schools are addressing it with badges and signing in at the office. Then if teachers on yard duty are being vigilant about their job, which is to check that kids are safe and secure, most teachers would be able to identify, in or out of uniform, whether or not somebody was a regular at the school. I think it is a bit like entrapment. You can kind of tell when somebody is not really where they are supposed to be, because there is something about their behaviour or the way they look. I know it is a tricky one, but I do not think it is major, really. I think if you really build a community that cares about each other, that is not just focused on compliance and conformity, that you actually get people being aware of those things, or more likely to be. That has been my experience anyway.

**Mr HALL** — Can I ask how big an issue is school uniforms or dress codes for school councils?

**Ms CASHEN** — Not really much of one at all. It certainly does not come up. We get a lot of phone calls over the years from parents about various things, and it is rarely to do with policy around school uniforms. Having said that, our research clearly showed that people are not necessarily focused on policy development. They have gotten sucked into doing more superficial things, which is partly an issue too. But actually at my own son's school, where they do not have a compulsory uniform — and a lot of schools do this — they have a uniform that people can choose to wear if they want to, even if they have not got it compulsory. They were talking about changing the uniform, and it had nothing to do with school council, and it was in the newsletter: 'What do you think of the current school uniform? Is it appropriate? Do you want changes made?'. And my school council alarm bell rings, because I am on school council at the school, and I think, 'This hasn't come to the school council yet and here they are technically talking about changing the school uniform'. So again it is that problem of governance and where policy gets made. The only times we hear about it is anecdotally when it has caused real friction in a school, because I would argue it has not had been through a proper consultation process. Somebody has decided, 'We need to look like the private school down the road, so we are going in there and we are going to quickly change the way we do things'.

**Mr HALL** — Do you think the guidelines for school dress codes published by the department are sufficient for school councils to develop a policy from, or do they need to be stronger in the area of consultation, for example? Because that is why some school councils get it wrong, as you have suggested in some of your opening remarks.

**Ms CASHEN** — Although that is not a bad point, we are deeply frustrated at the lack of focus right across the department around school councils. They do not have a profile in the community at all. In fact our experience at many levels of the department is that people do not actually get governance, and that it is an accessory. So I would rather that energy be spent on telling the department that school councils have the potential to really enhance the leadership of the principal; they have the potential to reflect what the community is saying about what they require from education. I think, having been a teacher, that that is tricky for teachers and principals. I know myself that I have got plenty of friends who are teachers, who really do not like parents discussing education policy, so it is pushed off to the side and not necessarily encouraged.

But to answer your question a bit more precisely, I think the guidelines are fine. I think probably there could be a bit more sensible stuff around dress codes and how they might tie more into occupational health and safety issues. And that is the way school councils might look at that: are there any risks to the students in the way that they are dressing; should we remind them about the kinds of shoes you need to wear in woodwork or technology and those sorts of things as well as in the so-and-so? Yes, probably a little bit of tinkering with the dress codes, but otherwise they are fine. The issue, of course, for lots of people is where guidelines are and some people are not even aware that there are guidelines, too, because in some schools it is usually not a big deal.

**Mr ELASMAR** — Jacinta, it is good to see you again. Are you aware of any schools facing legal issues regarding the school uniform?

**Ms CASHEN** — Not from any of our members letting us know about that. Actually, yes. I am sure you have got letters from Whittlesea Secondary College. They went down that path to seek something with the antidiscrimination legislation, so yes, a little bit of that. But mostly what I notice in the papers over the years and years — even when I was teaching for 20 years — are earrings and those sorts of things. I have seen that in the paper. But no, we do not have members ringing us saying, 'Hey, we've got a legal issue here, with non-compliance with uniform or being forced to wear something that they do not want to or omit something from their clothing that

they do not want to'. I think we hear the odd little thing, but no, it is not rampant out there, by any stretch, I do not think.

**The CHAIR** — Thank you for that, Jacinta.

**Ms CASHEN** — That is all right. You are welcome. If anybody wants to know who we are, this is just a little pamphlet, if you want it. Is anybody interested in our research on school councils? Anybody got a particular interest?

**The CHAIR** — Yes, if you leave a copy.

**Ms CASHEN** — Thanks for your time. I am sure it must get a bit boring sometimes, too. The other quick little point I did want to make, which I thought personally interesting, I guess, is that the business world is increasingly doing the casualisation of their dress code — for example, Friday casual dress stuff. I just kind of think it is interesting that there seems to be a bit of swing in schools back to being more formal about the school uniform, while the business world is swinging the other way, being a bit more casual about what they wear.

**Witness withdrew.**

# CORRECTED VERSION

## EDUCATION AND TRAINING COMMITTEE

### Inquiry into dress codes and school uniforms in Victorian schools

Melbourne — 4 June 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

#### Witness

Mr L. Twentyman, outreach worker, Open Family Australia.

**The CHAIR** — Welcome, Les, to the Education and Training Committee. As you understand, we are conducting an inquiry on school uniforms and dress codes. Not just on should we, shouldn't we, but on a range of issues as to how they do affect the broader school community, equality issues and so on. So we are very interested to get your perspective, representing Open Family Australia, in regard to school uniforms. You will be aware we are recording things via Hansard so that later if we would like to we can follow up on anything you say. Parliamentary privilege does apply in here — whether that is relevant to you or not, I do not know — but it would not apply to things you say outside.

**Mr TWENTYMAN** — So I can put it on Bernie about his Richmond tie and I will not be — —

**Mr FINN** — At least we got two points out of the weekend.

**The CHAIR** — That is right. Two points for the year is a good start, I suppose we could say. Welcome, Les. Thank you for your time. We look forward to your contribution.

**Mr TWENTYMAN** — I guess overall school uniforms are very important in giving young kids a sense of belonging and things like that. Quite often that is basically where they have not had the opportunity of being part of a group before. But the big problem we see with school uniforms is the entrenched poverty and the problems that it creates at the start of the year. We have been running a back-to-school program since 1989, where to this date we have put something like 10 650-odd kids through school by providing them with their schoolbooks. Unfortunately Victoria is one of the few states, if not the only state, that does not provide textbooks for secondary students. With that being the first hurdle comes the other hurdles, particularly on top of Christmas when families have already been plunged into massive financial problems and, as I said, then the schoolbooks and then the school fees and the school uniforms all hitting at the one time. It really does become a major trauma. When we set up our back-to-school program in 1989 we said kids can be educated without a uniform, without paying their schools fees, although that is debatable in that some kids are denied access to various subject matters and to various equipment and camps and things like that if they have not paid the school fees, but they really need their textbooks.

I remember when I went and spoke to the Treasurer at the time, Alan Stockdale, about the problem. He said we would not have to worry about that particular textbook problem because computers were eventually going to take that problem away, that everything would be there on computers. Unfortunately it has not. In the days when I was a kid, being the oldest of five you could hand the book down year by year by year. You cannot do that today because of the changes. It only has to be a couple of pages or a couple of paragraphs and that book is basically no good. So you have the book problem and then on top of that you have the uniform problem.

The uniform problem is very complex because you have situations in some schools or some areas — for example, if you are in a school in Ballarat obviously you are going to have to have warmer sort of clothing. I remember speaking at Canberra Girls Grammar a couple of years ago when it was minus 9 degrees. They were able to get around their uniform problem because they all wear their pyjama bottoms underneath their school uniform to keep warm! I was speaking to a school principal this morning because we are now in winter and talking about just how inadequate some of the clothing is in the school uniform stuff. In some cases if they have to wear the blazer or they have to wear the jumper and they have not got the right one, sometimes they have to take the shirt and put it over the top of the jumper or whatever because the jumper is not the school jumper and all this sort of stuff. That is a problem in the warmth thing. But, as I said in the initial stages, the big problem we see is the poverty thing. If it was not for state relief, I would probably suggest that something like 20 per cent of the school population in this state would not have school uniforms.

I know it is important because with some of the things like taking kids on camps or on excursions it is very easy to be able to identify their kids if they are in uniform. A principal was telling me today about some dramas they are having at their school with school invasions where gangs are coming in and picking on students and it is very easy at lunchtime to identify people who are foreigners to the school because they do not have the uniform on. There are all those sorts of benefits, and also the equality where you have not got the rich kids in the load of designer clothes showing up the others. But the mere fact that families cannot afford the very basics is a huge concern to us. And it is not just the basic uniform; now they have to have sports uniforms as well and things of that nature. And there are uniforms and uniforms. There are some schools' uniforms that are not much better than what you see if you go to Port Phillip Prison to visit people in their uniform. Then, of course, you have the private school kids getting around in designer-type things. You have got that sort of discrepancy in itself with uniforms and uniforms, but the thing

that we find is the fact that it is a massive burden on families who are trapped in the poverty areas such as the Braybrooks, the St Albanses and the Dandenongs and areas like that.

**The CHAIR** — Some questions?

**Mr FINN** — I will start. You mentioned at the very beginning that a uniform gave kids a sense of belonging, if you like, and quite often in a situation where they may never have felt as if they belonged to anything before. As well as a number of other arguments for school uniforms does that outweigh the economic disadvantage that that imposes on families by them having to buy a school uniform?

**Mr TWENTYMAN** — That is a very good point. I do not know the answer to that because I rang a principal — it was the same one who was telling me about his problem of the school being invaded — and it was about checking up on a kid who has not been to school all this year. This kid is only 13; he should be in year 8. It started off with the schoolbooks which we were able to provide last year. The family had been notified to DHS because of other siblings — a boy — who is also at risk. This kid has not been to school. DHS has been notified by the school and also by us. We have very big concerns about his welfare because his mother is a drug user and hangs around the needle exchange, so the kid hangs around the needle exchange with her all day looking after the two-year-old. So you have got that sort of situation. That was tipped over initially by the poverty part of it, but now other things have come into play. DHS has not followed that up and the school is pissed off about that, as I am, because it is setting that kid up to be an inmate of Port Phillip and that sort of stuff down the track. So in trying to answer your question, I do not really know; it is a difficult one.

In the big picture I would say that uniforms do play a big role in that sense of belonging. I was at the Children's Court this morning and I thought it was the bloody MCG on grand final day. It was just packed full of families that are going to the wall, and I was thinking to myself then that the only thing these kids would have as a means of pulling them and plucking them from that would be if the school networks were strong and those kids were able to access education and make something of it. In the big picture I would say yes, but when you look at some of these individual cases, a school uniform and school fees are enormous burdens.

**Mr FINN** — I just ask further to that how important is that sense of belonging to the self-esteem of a child?

**Mr TWENTYMAN** — I think if you look at what schools are now trying to do, some schools such as Williamstown Secondary College are now trying to implement the type of uniforms that some of the private schools have because if kids cannot go to a private school they are the next best thing. It has become all about numbers. You have all these economic things and funding things that are coming into things such as uniforms as well. I think a sense of belonging is important for kids in areas that are very vulnerable, in almost ghettos in some instances, and where education is their only means of getting out. But if the school that they are attending has a reputation for issues — and that could be bullying, it could be drugs and it could be non-academic achievement — that is an issue in itself. So wearing a blazer of a school that people have attitudes about could also put a downer on it. But the thing is, as I said, a sense of belonging to a lot of kids is very, very important. It is a means of getting out of it. But I really do think that is one of the big issues that we are seeing: the rich have got richer and the poor have got poorer. Kids get jobs because they go to certain schools, and kids miss out on job interviews because they go to certain schools, so there is much discrimination around the postcode of the school you go to. If that can be resolved around the personal issues, then the uniform factor would not be such a big thing. But, as I said at the start, at least the uniform thing is a part of a structure and is a part of a system to a lot of the kids who have no structure and no systems at all because the families are not just dysfunctional, in some cases they are downright dangerous.

**Mr HERBERT** — We have heard many times that what a school offers a young person who is perhaps in a dysfunctional family or who has pretty bad circumstances at home can be the guiding point that gets them through a rough time, but my question relates to the essential point about the impost. We have heard that most schools have alternative arrangements for uniforms, or in poor areas in particular for families that cannot afford it, a second-hand uniform, the old, the lost and found, they make those available for students. Is that your kind of experience?

**Mr TWENTYMAN** — Yes, that is one way of doing it, although kids are kids today. I mean, it does not matter if they are poor or whatever, they tend to always want to be — it is a bit of a thing about wearing —

**Mr HERBERT** — A new one.

**Mr TWENTYMAN** — Something that has not been purchased simply for them. But I heard someone say the other day that they would like to outsource to a particular place — like a tailor or whatever — so kids can go and get their uniforms with the school being able to help them out.

One of the other big issues is that there is a crisis line or whatever, or a hotline, a 1800 number or whatever, for families who say they are struggling, but out of the hundreds of families that come to us and we put them onto that, none of them has ever been able to get through to it. So that is another thing that really pisses us off. There is a number there for a crisis hotline, but no-one has ever been able to sort of make contact with anyone at the other end. It is very easy to fob people off onto that and say, ‘Ring that about your school fees; ring that about your school uniforms’, but if people are not able to get someone to answer at the other end — and I verified that with a couple of social workers prior to coming here, because that has always been my experience, and they said yes. They said they have never had anyone — and they get hundreds of requests for help with school uniforms, and school fees even more, and they put them onto that, and no-one has ever been able to get through.

Whether it is because there are too many people trying to get through, that may be another matter. But you are right. As I said, school to a lot of the kids we are dealing with is a big issue, and it brings about other issues. I know this is only about uniforms, but what about how many kids are just getting tiptoed out of the schools? There were — what? — 16 000 kids expelled, or whatever, last year, and that creates another problem for us at the street level, because no-one else is picking up on them. As I said, in some cases it is about very zealous principals picking up on minor indiscretions on uniform. I had an example given to me recently of a girl who had been slashing herself, so she was trying to conceal that, and this principal came down like a ton of bricks because she had a bit of clothing to try and hide that, and she was made to take it off. That girl has not returned to school since, so it needs to be looked at. We do not need uniform Nazis running the schools as well.

**Mr HALL** — Your last point, Les, touched on the issue I was going to ask about, and perhaps you have answered the question in some way. I would have thought most school councils and school principals would be pretty sensitive or understanding of their school community and therefore would set some sensible policies and procedures in respect of school dress codes or uniforms, whatever they happened to have?

**Mr TWENTYMAN** — It has been my experience that there are school principals and then there are school principals! Some have just been a godsend and the best thing that has happened. I had an experience that somebody may have read about late last year in the *Herald Sun*. A girl that who was being bullied accidentally kicked a teacher in a fight when she was being mobbed by about five or six students. She got expelled and was out of the system for eight months. She wanted an education, yet all the schools gave me what I call the dance of the lemons — that is, you ring up and they say, ‘Yes, Les, but, sorry. Look, you know, we are full in year 9, and we have not got any spaces’. Eventually there was a principal from a school just out of the area who took her on, and that girl graduated with honours last year. That principal was prepared to put his butt on the line and has a reputation for it. You have other principals who are the ones who any time there is any sort of difficulty — they cannot fast-train the kids out of there quickly enough. So in trying to answer your question, yes, there are those, and there are also the others who are just very inappropriately placed in some of these schools.

**Mr HALL** — With the myriad issues that you have to deal with in all the aspects of your life, do school uniforms rate highly amongst those issues?

**Mr TWENTYMAN** — Yes, it does, equally with the fees and the schoolbooks. Yes, it is a huge problem.

**Mr HALL** — Is it?

**Mr TWENTYMAN** — Victoria, as I said, spends \$1200 or \$1300 less than New South Wales per student. That would cover all the uniform issues, cover all the school fees issues and the schoolbooks issues. We could wipe out our bloody back-to-school program overnight. Do you know what I mean?

**Mr HALL** — So do you think there is a role for government to play with greater assistance in terms of provision of school uniforms?

**Mr TWENTYMAN** — Absolutely. Eighty per cent of the prison population left school pre-year 10. That is what annoys me about this 13-year-old who has not been to school all year. The principal says, ‘We write letters, and we have had only one call from DHS in that time’, because this kid is very much at risk. And he is still out there running on the streets, getting into trouble.

There is no teamwork between departments. I sit on the Crime Prevention Council, and we have asked the committee for so long why is there not someone from education sitting there when — as Bernie saw firsthand when we went out to Sunshine one day — within minutes, fights break out among the various schools and gangs, and there is no-one sitting from the education department there when a lot of it involves kids in school uniforms. The *Sunday Age* came out with me late last year, about kids carrying weapons. Every kid they went up to at the bus depot and asked pulled knives out of their bloody schoolbags. There are all sorts of things. As I said, schools in some cases are not being part of the whole community when we look at the whole gamut of things — poverty, youth, antisocial behaviour and street gangs. Schools have all got a role to play in that.

**Mr ELASMAR** — Les, talking about getting a job or losing a job, do you believe parents or students are picking different schools because of the school uniform costs?

**Mr TWENTYMAN** — Yes, I think so. It is very hard argument to argue against, because everyone wants their kid to have the best opportunities. Sadly the old school tie is flying high and strongly at the moment, and that is a concern to us, because that is further going to create divisions. I do not need to go through the fact that in my day kids could leave at year 9 and get apprenticeships. That is not the case today, so because of that education and where you come from is so important in getting the first step into a job or a university placement and things like that.

I will tell you a quick story. Last year I wrote a story about postcode discrimination that appeared in the *Herald Sun*, and *Today Tonight* wanted to pick up on it. I had this girl fax me from a law firm here in the city, one of the top ones. She said, 'You are so right about that. When we have people apply for jobs, first of all I have to eliminate them on which university they went to. I am not allowed to take anyone unless they have been to Monash or Melbourne. Once I have done that, then I have got to eliminate them on where they live'. This is the sort of stuff that you people do not want to hear, but I have to deal with it every day. I have had hundreds of emails from people giving me examples of how they missed out on something simply because of the school they went to and where they live.

**The CHAIR** — Can I ask you too, Les: under the program that you run from Open Family, the Back to School program, you support kids or families to have the schoolbooks, but you do not support them to get uniforms; why is that?

**Mr TWENTYMAN** — Because, as I was trying to explain at the start, we believed they could be educated without a uniform or whatever, but they could not be educated if they did not have a book to be able to do their text. We have got some good examples. One kid at Werribee Secondary College was told by the teachers, 'Don't worry about the book issue, we'll help you out by getting things photocopied', which did not happen. The only textbook he had was his maths book, and that was the only subject he passed. Of all the subjects you would have thought it would probably be the last one he would have passed, because the academic requirements you need for that. That is our attitude to that.

**The CHAIR** — Even though you have said it is good if they have a uniform as a sense of belonging and that sort of thing.

**Mr TWENTYMAN** — Yes, but we do not get any government money for this.

**The CHAIR** — So it is your funding limitations?

**Mr TWENTYMAN** — I tout myself around on TV in running things. The other thing that is unique about this Back to School program is that we started in 1989, and we got people who were exploiting it. I caught one woman one day with a whole heap of books getting into a Mercedes sports car, and all that sort of stuff. By refining and refining it eventually we got it down to the best way to do it, which was the kids had to be referred to us by the pupil welfare coordinators. Then we would put it back on the school.

We even had charities that were rorting it. People were going to places like the Smith Family, and because it has got volunteers, they would say, 'She is a friend of mine' or, 'Go down to see Les, he will look after you'. So we were giving out all these books inappropriately, and the genuine ones were missing out. So what we did was put it back on the pupil welfare coordinators and told the schools, 'You send one inappropriate referral, and we will just black ban your school, and that means you will have kids that miss out'. The pupil welfare coordinators are professional people, and that is the way we have been running it for the past five years. But the problem is when the

money runs out. We were lucky last year; Variety gave us \$130 000-odd, which enabled us to put an extra 300 or 400 kids back to school. But that money was not there this year and we had thousands of people wanting to use the service. As I said, only 500 this year, so there are probably 2000 people who just missed out and may not be even in the school system because of that.

**Mr FINN** — Les, on that issue, you mentioned that you think Victoria is the only state that does not provide schoolbooks. You have obviously been working on this one for a while. Why is that the case?

**Mr TWENTYMAN** — I do not know. The only way I found out about it — Open Family has offices in Canberra and New South Wales — was when I have been speaking to other states and I have been talking about our Back to School program and they say, ‘Don’t the schools provide the books?’. That is how I have come across it. As I said, we have offices in Canberra and Cabramatta, and that is not an issue because the kids get provided with the books.

**Mr HALL** — What do those officers do, then, if they are not providing books? What other support do they provide?

**Mr TWENTYMAN** — The one in Cabramatta, we run a program called Links to Learning, where we have TAFE come in from 1 o’clock to 3 o’clock every day. Our youth workers go out and recruit kids, mainly kids out of the Asian gangs. Last year I think we put about 88 kids back into mainstream education or into work. But we mainly provide services such as food, a combination — —

**Mr HALL** — What you are saying is that there are greater priorities than a uniform?

**Mr TWENTYMAN** — We are not just an education — we focus more down here in Melbourne on education because it is a bigger problem because of the fact that there is no financial support for books and things like that. This year we have been lucky also. We had a guy come out of the woodwork who provided us with around about 50 or 60 scholarships. Most of those have gone to Somalian kids. Out of the 500 kids we put back to school this year, about 200 of them would be African kids who are refugees and kids like that. It has added to the problem again. It is a huge problem because of their issues and they have so many complex issues.

**Mr HALL** — Do you reckon the education maintenance allowance is a help to those parents getting the kids to state school?

**Mr TWENTYMAN** — One of the problems with that is that it comes too late. There is a thing about they have to be in school for so long and that sort of stuff. It is a bureaucracy thing again, which really sets families up because, by the time they have qualified for it, the kids have fallen through the net because they have let other kids have first place. It is the old saying, ‘You can’t pull your socks up if you’ve got none on’. That is where a lot of it is at.

**Mr HALL** — The basis of the maintenance allowance is to actually provide some equipment, is it not, for kids to get to school?

**Mr TWENTYMAN** — Yes, but these families are drowning so much in poverty for a whole range of reasons — and throw into that a mix of poker machines and things like that, food costs and all that sort of stuff. So, as I said, the uniform overall is a good thing but it is creating so many problems financially to those families that are drowning.

**The CHAIR** — Thank you very much for coming in, Les. It is good to get a sense of what Open Family are doing, too, through what you have said and gain an appreciation of the issues that you are challenged with.

**Mr TWENTYMAN** — Most of our youth workers have an educational background. I am ex-teacher — believe it or not, phys. ed. We think that if kids cannot get an education, then they are very much going to be part of the problems that we have.

**Witness withdrew.**

# CORRECTED VERSION

## EDUCATION AND TRAINING COMMITTEE

### Inquiry into dress codes and school uniforms in Victorian schools

Melbourne — 4 June 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

#### Witness

Ms S. Hassan, executive secretary, Islamic Council of Victoria.

**The CHAIR** — Welcome to the Education and Training Committee. Thanks for providing your time so you could add some further information to our inquiry on uniforms and dress codes in schools. You will see that with the formal inquiries we do tape the information that you share so we can refer back to it if we would like to. I should also let you know that things that are said in here are covered by parliamentary privilege, whereas things that are said outside would not be. We are really just pleased that you are able to come along and share your views in regard to issues associated with the Islamic communities in the state and your experiences within the school system and any suggestions you would like to make to us. We are all open to hearing what you say and then we might have some questions to ask of you.

**Ms HASSAN** — My name is Sherene Hassan and I am the executive secretary of the Islamic Council of Victoria. I thank the parliamentary committee for inviting us to address this important issue. I will begin by providing a brief introduction to the Islamic Council of Victoria, which I will be referring to as the ICV. The ICV is the peak representative body of Islamic societies in Victoria and represents over 90 000 Muslims. It comprises more than 24 independent societies across Melbourne and regional Victoria including most major mosques. A principle aim of the ICV is to serve as the Victorian Muslims' peak body for consultation, cooperation and advocacy with the federal, state and local governments. The ICV aims to promote unity and cooperation between all Australian Muslims and Victorians and the wider community.

I would note that our submission today does not purport to exhaustively address all contentious issues regarding dress code. As a representative body whose constituents form the bulk of Muslims in Victoria our submission seeks to deal specifically with aspects within the purview of the ICV's objectives. As such we propose to address one particular issue concerning freedom of religious observance, and it is submitted that any outcome from this inquiry shall seek to uphold this fundamental right. The recent debate made in relation to the wearing of religious headscarves known as the hijab has resonated amongst the Muslim community in Victoria. Victorian Muslims have contacted the ICV and expressed their deep concern about suggestions from some prominent figures that the hijab be banned from certain schools.

In a comprehensive consultation with the Victorian Muslim community conducted in 2006 the ICV notes that the overwhelming majority of Muslim women that were consulted viewed any ban on the wearing of the hijab as a fundamental derogation of their right to freedom of religion. The ICV submits that any outcome from this inquiry shall not be in conflict with the Victorian charter of rights. The Victorian Charter of Rights and Responsibilities became law on 25 July 2006 and came into operation on 1 January 2007. In particular, it is submitted that section 14 from the charter be highlighted for the benefit of the committee. Section 14 states:

Every person has the right to freedom of thought, conscience, religion and belief, including —

- (a) the freedom to have or to adopt a religion or belief of his or her choice; and
- (b) the freedom to demonstrate his or her religion or belief in worship, observance, practice and teaching, either individually or as part of a community, in public or in private.

Importantly, the section further states:

A person must not be coerced or restrained in a way that limits his or her freedom to have or adopt a religion or belief in worship, observance, practice or teaching.

There has been overwhelming support from the Muslim community in Victoria for the inclusion of these sections in the charter of rights on the basis that it will serve to protect the right to wear religious clothing, such as the hijab, whether in schools, workplaces or in public.

The ICV places on record its support for the proposition that the right to wear religious clothing at schools apply to all individuals without discrimination pursuant to the charter. This includes, for example, the right for people of the Jewish faith to wear a yarmulke or people of the Sikh faith to wear a turban. We further impress upon the committee that the ICV is supportive of any outcome that does not conflict with the aforementioned provisions of the charter of rights.

**The CHAIR** — Thank you, Sherene. The first question I would like to ask is: have you heard, or is there any anecdotal evidence of where in schools Islamic people have already had problems in that regard, in being able to wear the hijab?

**Ms HASSAN** — Just from the outset we would be more than happy to provide community consultations to explore these issues further, because anecdotal evidence that we have is quite limited. Certainly there are instances. I know of one particular individual where the school, or the administration, was quite happy for her to wear the head scarf, her principal was very supportive, but when it came to school photo day her hijab, her headscarf, was actually airbrushed so that it would not stand out. That is just one particular scenario. You can imagine that that was quite demoralising for the individual. There is definitely anecdotal evidence, but we would really need to form focus groups and consult the community to get more evidence.

**The CHAIR** — I would have thought that information would generally come through you, if there were complaints.

**Ms HASSAN** — Yes, definitely. We hear about some things, but not everything is reported. I am aware of one particular school which has stated that it would not accept an individual wearing the headscarf at that particular school. That individual, because she was so keen to attend that school, decided not to wear the headscarf.

**The CHAIR** — But in the clear majority of cases schools are prepared to acknowledge — —

**Ms HASSAN** — Yes, definitely. In the majority of cases there is support by schools to allow the headscarf to be incorporated into the uniform.

**Mr ELASMAR** — Firstly, welcome. If a particular school bans the hijab, what would happen to that student who used to go to the school? Would they move to another school, or would they obey the new rules?

**Ms HASSAN** — I think it is important to acknowledge that because we do have the charter of rights it is actually not legal for them to ban the headscarf in schools. But if an individual is not aware of their right, they might choose to go to another school — they might go to an Islamic school, where the hijab is accommodated more, without any kind of objection.

**Mr HALL** — Is the colour of the hijab an issue? That is, if a school required those of Muslim faith to wear a hijab of school dress colour, is that appropriate and is that a reasonable request?

**Ms HASSAN** — It is a reasonable request. The Muslim community is not an homogenous group. It is important to note that we come from over 70 countries of origin, so it is impossible to have a one-size-fits-all approach. You would get differing interpretations, but as far as I am aware there would be no problem in terms of colour.

**The CHAIR** — It is interesting, Sherene, that in general we have not heard of any issues either. The schools that have been drawn to our attention have normally been pretty sensitive to those issues, and we have not had anybody suggesting that we should do otherwise. That is certainly something that the committee will look at in further detail. I pass that on for your general information.

**Ms HASSAN** — One additional issue might be that a school's policy is such that it embraces or accepts the hijab as part of its uniform, but members of staff might have concerns about the hijab and perceive it to be a symbol of oppression. Those members of staff might make disparaging comments towards the female students who choose to wear the headscarf. That might be an issue if the sentiment is not consistent with the school policy. Perhaps the Islamic Council of Victoria would be more than happy to conduct cross-cultural training for schools as part of the professional development of staff. That is something that we do on an ongoing basis anyway in many schools. We do not advertise that we do that. We are very much reactive, so when schools have a problem with bullying in the schoolyard, for example, or if schools generally want to know more about the Islamic faith, they call upon the Islamic Council of Victoria and we can provide a workshop on Islam to address their issues and concerns about Islam.

**The CHAIR** — When issues like that are brought to your attention you would follow up with the school administration in general terms and try to work through that issue with that school community?

**Ms HASSAN** — Yes.

**The CHAIR** — Have sporting activities become an issue? For example, does wearing the hijab limit women's opportunities for sporting activities? How do they deal with special other activities that happen in a school program?

**Ms HASSAN** — That is a good question. A number of designers have developed swimwear and sporting uniforms that conform to the Islamic dress code as well as conforming to sporting regulations and work and safety requirements. One designer has been around for about three or four years, so there really is not any reason for a female student to not participate in sport because of the hijab. Having said that, sport seems to be a particular area of concern because certain schools seem to be a little bit more inflexible regarding the sporting uniform as opposed to just a normal school uniform. An example would be that some schools might be reluctant to allow female students to wear tracksuit pants underneath their netball skirts. Personally it took me two years to have my uniform approved, and I now play on Monday nights at a local netball competition, but it took a while for that uniform to be approved. I can envisage there would be more issues regarding sporting uniforms. Swimwear that conforms to the Islamic dress code is also being designed, and the material used is of a very high quality and conforms to health and safety regulations. Some of these designers have gone all over the world and promoted their costumes and there is no problem at all.

**The CHAIR** — Does the Islamic council have any particular view about compulsory uniforms as opposed to schools that do not have uniforms.

**Ms HASSAN** — No.

**The CHAIR** — I do not know whether we have any more questions. You have been pretty succinct in the points you wish to make. We are certainly interested to take that on board and have been interested to follow that up.

**Ms HASSAN** — Just to reaffirm that we would be happy, given that we do have a bit of time on our hands, to facilitate community consultation to provide focus groups, if you would like to explore these issues further with the Muslim community.

**The CHAIR** — Okay. That is very useful. If there were specific schools, for example, that you have found have been particularly positive in being able to work with the issues that you are talking about, then we would be interested to know of those.

**Committee adjourned.**