

TRANSCRIPT

FAMILY AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE

Inquiry into services for people with autism spectrum disorder

Melbourne — 10 October 2016

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Ms Katy Haire, Acting Secretary,

Dr David Howes, Assistant Deputy Secretary, Early Childhood and School Education Group, and

Mr Alan Wilson, Acting Director, Inclusion, Access and Participation, Wellbeing, Health and Engagement Division; Early Childhood and School Education Group, Department of Education and Training.

The CHAIR — Welcome to our public hearing today, Ms Katy Haire, acting secretary; Dr David Howes, assistant deputy secretary, early childhood and school education group; and Mr Alan Wilson, acting director, inclusion, access and participation, wellbeing, health and engagement division, early childhood and school education group, from the Department of Education and Training. Thank you very much for attending today. All evidence at this hearing taken by the committee is protected by parliamentary privilege as provided by the Constitution Act 1975 and is subject to the provisions of the Parliamentary Committees Act 2003 and other relevant legislation. Any comments you make outside the hearing will not be afforded such privilege. It is a contempt of Parliament to provide false evidence. Recording of the proceedings will commence today, and you will be sent a proof copy of the transcript and be able to make factual or grammatical corrections if necessary. I might ask you to start. We are waiting for Christine, but I am sure she will catch up, so I might throw to you for a 15-minute presentation. Thanks, Katy.

Ms HAIRE — Thank you, Chair, and I would like to start by acknowledging the traditional owners of the land we are meeting on today and pay my respects to the people of the Kulin nation. I have a more detailed statement which I will table for you, but what I thought I would do is just really talk you through in a more conversational style the factual information in my statement. Then my colleagues and I are happy to answer questions, and along the way in my statement I have identified some things where we imagine you might like us to provide a bit more detail. So I will proceed with that.

Thank you very much for inviting us to share the important work of the Department of Education and Training with the committee in relation to this important inquiry. I am currently the Acting Secretary of the Department of Education and Training. My substantive position is the Deputy Secretary of the Early Childhood and School Education Group of the department, and I have previously worked in a range of senior management and executive roles in the Victorian public service, including at the Department of Health and Human Services and the Department of Premier and Cabinet.

Our department, the Department of Education and Training, is responsible for providing education, care and development services to families, children, young people and adults. It does this both directly, through government schools, and indirectly, through the regulation and funding of early childhood education and care services, non-government schools and vocational education and training. The primary goal of the Department is to maximise learning and development throughout a person's life. To achieve this goal the Department provides policy, resources and services aimed at developing the capacity of learners to lead full, healthy and productive lives, to contribute positively to society and to develop meaningful, respectful relationships with others. This includes a particular focus on vulnerable groups in society and learners at risk of disengagement.

To deliver on these goals as well as directly delivering services the department partners with many organisations that provide education and care services — non-government organisations, community-based organisations, vocational education and training, and higher education institutions. In my substantive role as Deputy Secretary, Early Childhood and School Education Group, I have responsibility for shaping the system through operational policy for early childhood through to the end of schooling. Our aim is to ensure a seamless, streamlined service system which is accountable, coherent and responsive to the needs of all Victorian children, young people and their families.

The government has made a commitment to establish Victoria as the education state, which is a vision for a fairer and more inclusive education system. Part of the work of the education state is to promote inclusive schooling and inclusive practices across schools. It is important to establish what we mean by inclusive schooling. There are many definitions in the education literature, which I imagine you may have considered, but they all focus on all members of every school community belonging and being valued and supported to fully participate, learn, develop and succeed within an inclusive school culture.

Schooling is a universal service. Ensuring children and young people with disabilities and additional needs participate on the same basis as other students requires the department to build a strong culture of inclusion within schools. Schools best meet diverse needs through a personalised learning approach, one that builds on each child's strengths while addressing their individual support needs. In over 1500 Victorian government schools we have around 580 000 students in our care. It is estimated that there are between 55 000 and 80 000 students in our schools who require support due to a disability.

The Program for Students with Disabilities, which I will refer to as PSD, which you would already know it as, is targeted to the group of students with disabilities who have the highest level of need. Of the Victorian

government school student population 25 000 — 4.2 per cent — are identified as having moderate to severe disabilities. More than 5000 students on the autism spectrum receive support through the PSD. This is approximately 0.9 per cent of the Victorian government school population. Additionally, some students on the autism spectrum or with ASD are supported under other categories of the PSD for which they meet eligibility, such as intellectual disability. Schools also support students on the autism spectrum who are outside the targeted cohort for PSD. These students will still receive adjustments and support for their learning, and we can discuss this further during the course of the hearing.

To deliver on inclusion, schools and systems need to support the diverse needs of children and young people. To do this there are some fundamental building blocks that need to be established, and I will outline some of these. We are currently undertaking major reform of provision of services to schools and students with disabilities. The reform underway seeks to transform the culture, policy and practice of Victorian schools to be fully inclusive of all students. The reform direction focuses on developing a personalised approach to learning for students with disabilities and additional needs. The flagship policies driving this reform agenda are largely set out in the government's special needs plan of 2015 and the Victorian government response to the review program for students with disabilities, which is titled *Inclusive Education for all Students with Disabilities and Additional Needs*. Together these policies aim to strengthen the capacity of Victoria's school system to meet the learning needs of all Victorian students and to deliver inclusion, participation, access and achievement of all students, especially those with additional needs.

I understand the committee is particularly interested in hearing more about the review of the PSD and the changes that relate to students with ASD, linkages with the National Disability Insurance Scheme, the future role of autism inclusion schools and specialist schools for students with ASD, and the vision for inclusive education. I have already outlined the vision for inclusive education, so I will move on to the special needs plan — and on any of these we can come back to it if you would like.

The government has made nine commitments which comprise the special needs plan: a \$10 million inclusive schools fund to provide Victorian schools with spaces and inclusive facilities based on best practice research and design for provision of classrooms and schools; requiring all new teachers to have completed a special needs component as part of their tertiary studies, and existing teachers to undertake special needs training as part of their ongoing professional development; third, requiring all newly built government schools or schools undertaking major refurbishment to provide facilities to accommodate the diverse needs of students; fourth, reviewing the PSD with a focus on the transition from primary to secondary school, and on the specific needs of children with autism and dyslexia; fifth, investigating the establishment of a schools commissioner; sixth, oversight of the use of restraint and seclusion by the senior practitioner, disability, from the DHHS; seventh, investigating an early years screening program for learning disorders; eighth, phasing in the use of the Abilities-Based Learning and Education Support, which is known as ABLES, for students who are not at standard school curriculum level; and finally, ninth, introducing an award category for outstanding, inclusive education at the Excellence in Education Awards, which are held annually. My colleagues and I can discuss these nine further if you would like.

The PSD review had a particular focus on how schools can best maximise learning for children and young people with disabilities and had a focus on autism. The review was informed by 170 submissions from the public, including a large number of submissions from families of children with autism; academic research and expert input; face-to-face stakeholder consultation, which was led by Dr Graeme Innes, the former Australian disability discrimination commissioner; and a comprehensive analysis of the effectiveness of the program. I have brought some copies of the review, but I imagine you have access to that. I am happy to leave this with you.

The CHAIR — Thank you.

Ms HAIRE — The government response to the PSD review was released on 18 April this year; 21 of the 25 recommendations were immediately accepted, and they are the ones relating to an inclusive education for all students with disabilities and additional needs. Further work is being undertaken on the remaining four recommendations relating to a new funding model. The work on the funding model, the four recommendations, is being further informed by the rollout of the national disability insurance scheme, discussion with the commonwealth government regarding school funding and the response to the related review of school funding, which was released around the middle of the year. For the remaining 21 recommendations, work has

commenced on implementing those. At the time of the release of the response a further \$20 million in funding was provided to support the implementation of those recommendations, \$17 million to provide additional support to students with autism and dyslexia who were not eligible for the PSD and \$3 million to support the transition of students into year 7 who are no longer eligible for the PSD.

Alongside the responses outlined in the government response, which I have also brought with me for you by the way, the department is also working more broadly to provide clearer direction and stronger support for schools to implement inclusive education; new guidelines and tools to help teachers and school leaders develop more tailored learning plans and provide greater access to training and professional development; local expertise to support schools to deliver inclusive education, with specialist schools and mainstream schools collaborating and sharing expertise; and greater accountability and transparency in how funding is used to improve student outcomes.

The review made three recommendations that relate specifically to students on the autism spectrum and their supporting schools: to develop options to support specialist schools to become centres of expertise; to make available ongoing autism-specific disability training and access to specialist support and expertise particularly in relation to evidence-based approaches to the specific learning needs of children on the autism spectrum; and to consider providing additional resourcing to schools to better meet the needs of students with autism, dyslexia and learning disabilities who are not eligible for PSD. The \$20 million I referred to previously is being used to implement those specific recommendations.

Although students with autism are supported in a number of educational settings, for many children and young people on the autism spectrum the best school setting to meet their academic and support needs is their local mainstream school, and currently 70 per cent of students supported under the autism category of the PSD attend a mainstream school. However, in some cases more intensive support is required. The government also has seven autism-specific specialist schools in metropolitan Melbourne. These schools specialise in teaching students on the autism spectrum. There are also students with ASD who attend our other specialist schools, of which there are approximately 80 across the state.

From 2012 to 2014 the department ran an autism-inclusion schools project which involved 15 schools from across the state. Each project school's individual approach was developed and implemented in the context of their school community. What we learnt from this project was that while each school needed to develop its own tailored approach to respond to local need, the following essential elements are a constant: first, a focus on the child and the young person first; second, the importance of leadership of the principal and the school leadership team; third, the promotion of inclusion at a whole-school level; fourth, the provision of coordinated and extensive professional development; fifth, meaningful communication and collaboration between all the people involved in the child's education, with an emphasis on families and parents; sixth, the need for continual review and implementation of evidenced-based pedagogy and curriculum; and seventh, the consideration of physical aesthetic elements that constitute an autism-friendly environment.

This project, which was concluded in 2014, provided the department with a range of models and learning to assist all schools to strengthen the inclusiveness of the school environment, and all schools across the state have access to the resources and lessons that this project delivered, which is on our website on the autism-friendly learning page. Have I got a few more minutes?

The CHAIR — Go ahead.

Ms HAIRE — Another important element of our approach is the role of partnerships. As discussed earlier, we deliver school education directly to government schools, but we do not work alone to build school and workforce capability to support students with ASD and their families. We partner currently with a number of non-government organisations to develop policy advice, provide professional learning and development, make practical resources available, and offer in-school services for children and young people on the autism spectrum. Specifically, we have partnered with a number of organisations, some of whom you would be familiar with — AMAZE, Autism Partnership Australia, the I CAN Network and Positive Partnerships. A number of the resources that have been developed through these partnerships are also on our autism-friendly learning website. We also provide a range of professional learning options that support quality teaching and strengthen the capability of our workforce.

Workforce is a critical element to supporting students with special needs, children with disabilities and, specifically, children with ASD. That is the reason why strengthening the capacity of our workforce is a crucial element of the special needs plan and also is one of the key actions we are undertaking. The department's commitment to building workforce capability is ongoing and targets all levels of experience and specialisation. It is a critical factor in the inclusive education agenda. It is also one of the crucial elements of the special needs plan and it is now a condition of teacher registration, as I mentioned earlier.

We have had an excellent uptake of a range of learning opportunities provided to staff, specifically in the area of ASD. A couple of them I will just describe to you as examples; 4190 teachers from 706 schools, which is almost half the schools, have completed online learning in autism through the department-funded inclusion online learning courses and we anticipate further growth in this figure as more courses are being run in the fourth term, the final term of the year; 200 Victorian government schools have completed the five-day professional learning course offered by Positive Partnerships and, again, we expect there will be an increase in participation from our schools as further courses are being run throughout Victoria between now and 2019; and 187 teachers have received financial support to undertake postgraduate qualifications in teaching students on the autism spectrum through the Autism Teaching Institute, which is located at the Western Autistic School. A further 20 places in this course will be advertised later this year for the 2017 intake.

The committee is also interested in linkages with the National Disability Insurance Scheme. As you are already well aware, this is a long-awaited reform for people with a disability in Australia. It is critical that we ensure that the linkages between the services and support we provide in schools and the other services for children with disabilities are seamless. Our schools, the department and the NDIS are committed to working closely together at the local level to plan and coordinate services for individuals, children who access both school education and disability services. We are very aware that ensuring that there is, where possible, a single plan for a child and that the supports that a child receives maximises both the social and educational benefit for the young person. Work is being undertaken in line with the recommendation of the PSD review to have a formal relationship with the NDIA — the National Disability Insurance Agency — through which we would formalise the alignment between our services.

We are also undertaking in the meantime specific actions working with the NDIA, including working together on phasing in our programs into the NDIS, such as the disability transport program and personal care in schools; and writing to parents with students who will be clients of both to provide additional advice to support their entry into the NDIS. Our staff are co-presenting information sessions with the NDIA for parents of students with disabilities and for school principals as the NDIS is rolled out across Victoria, and we are providing schools with information about the process. Consistent with our commitment to maximise the benefits of the NDIS, we are also developing guidelines and licensing agreements to help school principals accommodate NDIS-funded support staff at schools where necessary.

In addition, we are leading a national project here in Victoria with the NDIA to determine the scope and working arrangements for the NDIS-funded personal care in schools, and we have commenced doing that in partnership with the NDIA. We are also working closely with community organisations and have worked with Amaze and the Association for Children with a Disability to develop the [ndis4kids](#) website to further support families of young children to understand the range of services accessible through the NDIS. Our goal, our hope, is that all of this work will translate into better learning and life outcomes for all children and young people on the autism spectrum and a more seamless and streamlined service offering for children and their families.

I would like to finish today by acknowledging that what underpins most of the things I have talked about today are collaborative partnerships between teachers, families, schools and the community to ensure that every child receives the care, support and education they need to thrive and grow and to live a rich and fulfilling life. We in the department are constantly striving to improve the service that we can provide for all children, especially those with additional needs.

The CHAIR — Thank you very much, Katy, and thank you very much Alan and David for coming in today. I should declare that I am the government ambassador for the special needs plan, so I should probably maybe take a little bit of a step back, but I do think there is a lot of really good work going on in this space that probably has not happened for a long time and is probably just the beginning of what will become a much bigger and more embracing approach to children with special needs, particularly in the autism and dyslexia areas. As the mother of a child who is dyslexic, I understand the desperate need for that intervention.

I have a couple of questions that have come up more as a consequence of the public hearings that we have already held and some questions that have been raised with the committee in relation to some funding issues. Currently the special needs funding goes directly to the school and the principal administers that funding on behalf of the parents of the children; is that the way it works — the special needs funding?

Ms HAIRE — Yes, PSD — Program for Students with Disability — funding is a package of support that goes to the school to develop a plan for the child.

The CHAIR — One of the questions, I guess, that has come up is, for example, if one child needs 20 hours of an aide a week and another child only needs 5, the funding is then pooled and one aide is provided for both of those children, if you know what I mean, so instead of having individual supports for each child, it is more of a combined approach. I guess what has been raised as a consequence of that complication around how the funding works for some parents is that perhaps, particularly with children with autism who need individual supports, the parents are not being listened to in response to what their child needs and that there is no flexibility around the aides and what those aides can supply or how they support the child. Often those aides are not trained in autism, so they are more trained for other children with special needs.

I guess it is around the flexibility that has been raised with the committee, that the flexibility is not there in terms of what the children need and what the parents think the children need and what is not being communicated with the school about how that is implemented for those children. If I was going to ask you a question around all that, it would be: how do we ensure that children with autism, particularly those who are on the high-need end, are getting the support that they need through that school?

Ms HAIRE — I might kick off, Chair, and I will pass to my colleague Dr Howes perhaps for more detailed information. Every child who is eligible for the PSD funding has a student support group, which you would be aware of, and there is detailed collaborative planning about the support that is provided to that child. The student support group comprises the principal or delegate, teacher, parents and often other support providers as well. It is through the development of that plan that the appropriate program should be developed and agreed for the child. I understand you are referring to some instances where the parents are not satisfied.

The CHAIR — I think it is about where that plan is not actually done in collaboration with the parents in terms of what the child needs, so while it is great to have that idea, the fact is that perhaps in some schools in some instances it is not actually happening; it is not happening that there is that collaborative approach to the plan and then the implementation of that plan.

Ms HAIRE — I think that might go to one of the aspects recently announced by the government. Under the special needs plan, as you are well aware, Chair, there was a commitment to investigate via a complaints commissioner process; and just in last month, I think it was — I should have asked you that question, Chair, because I think you might have announced it — —

The CHAIR — Yes, I may have.

Ms HAIRE — Yes. The announcement was of an expert independent panel that would play a role in assisting parents to address their concerns. So consistent with the policy approach about inclusion and responding locally, the first port of call for parents for whom the student support group process has not been mutually satisfactory is to go to the school principal, and from the school principal to the recently enhanced support that we have at our area and regional offices. But recognising that at times there are still sometimes difficult situations which need some expert support, the expert panel has been announced. It will be an independent panel of people with expertise in not just education but also disability and other related areas, who can consider these cases where there may be some lack, or where there may need to be some support to resolve the provision of — —

The CHAIR — And that is great because that is dispute resolution. I guess it can fall down potentially when you have perhaps a principal who is not prepared to take that complaint to the panel; there is perhaps that little issue there. In terms of the funding, with the NDIS coming in and with the NDIA, will there be a restructuring of how that funding is applied to those children who will be eligible?

Ms HAIRE — The program for students with disabilities is not in scope for the NDIS because the Program for Students with Disabilities is about the provision of support for education. One of the opportunities of the

NDIS is to make very clear and specific the difference between the education-specific support and the disability-specific support. The education department remains responsible for and absolutely committed to ensuring that every child, regardless of their ability, is supported to receive an education, and the program for students for disabilities is an educational support to ensure that.

What the NDIS will do for eligible children is provide additional support that relates to social and other needs, and so the work that we are doing and the reason that this report recommends a formal agreement with the NDIA is that we will need to ensure, despite the fact that a child is receiving educational support and other support, that we are working to a single plan to create a seamless support structure around that child, because the stability and the quality of that support is what is going to be critical for the child. So it should result in more support, I think, in answer to your question.

The CHAIR — Yes. We have been to visit a couple of schools. One of the issues that that raises, which the committee has heard, is the accessibility of other supports within the education sector, and instances where private therapists are being allowed into schools and being paid for by parents who might be getting the NDIS to come into the school, and paying for that — and that is separate to what the education department is providing. Then there is the issue of whether the schools actually will allow those therapists or other allied health supports into the schools during education hours, because it is detracting from a child's education. Some of these issues have already been raised with the committee. Does the department have an overall idea about how this is going to work, because I think we are going to see more and more of this?

Ms HAIRE — It is absolutely crucial to ensure that the services are streamlined and that while children are in school the focus is on their education. That is why we are undertaking the joint work that we are doing with the NDIA. It is relatively early days in the projects that we are doing together, but one of the aspects of it is working out the protocols and processes for other therapists to support people to come into the school and working out with principals and supporting principals to understand that, because that is a new thing. We need to work out how to do that, and we need to provide the support and guidance.

One of the other aspects is a trial that we are doing on personal care in schools, which we are doing in conjunction with the NDIA, to work out and develop policy and guidelines around how personal support is provided, which is different depending on the type of disability or special needs a child may have but could include support to go to the toilet, to feed themselves. It can also cross over into educational support, so we are working very closely with the NDIA to develop a model, guidelines and processes for that. What we learn from the work we are doing here will then be used across Australia, so it is a very important question, and it is one into which research is still ongoing. The goal that we have discussed with the NDIA is, as I have said, a single plan for a child in a school with special needs.

The CHAIR — The other issue around that, particularly in relation to children with autism and their education, is that speech pathology is such an important part of their learning. To be able to communicate is so important. Some would perceive that as part of the overall education, particularly for a child with autism. I know that we have speech pathologists in schools, but we also know that there are some schools that see that as an intrusion on a child's other learning, but for children with autism it is absolutely vital that they have language and can communicate, and that early intervention is really important. Is there going to be perhaps a policy going forward around particularly children with autism and access to speech pathologists within the school setting during school hours?

Ms HAIRE — We are working at the moment on an approach, a range — not specifically speech pathologists and children with ASD, but the general problem that you have described. The issue of how do other support workers and specialists come in and work with children with a range of special needs in our schools is very much one of the things that we are working on with the NDIA.

The CHAIR — Do you have a time frame around all of that?

Ms HAIRE — Is that one next year, Alan? We might have to come back to you on that, Chair. I have not got it in my head exactly, but it is on our project plan.

The CHAIR — I know it probably depends on the rollout of the NDIS across different regions, but it is already rolled out in some areas so they are already behind.

Ms HAIRE — Yes. Can we come back to you on that specifically?

The CHAIR — Yes, absolutely. I have one more question — I had better give the others a turn. The Autism Teaching Institute — Alan and I were at the graduation, I think it was last year — is a fantastic institute which is supported by the government and has been for quite some time. I guess what I could not quite grasp was the small number of teachers going through that — I think there have only been about 207 or something since the program started — and that the teachers who go through it are on professional learning subsidies or on scholarships, so they actually have to apply to do the course, then get accepted and I think it is a 12-month course, a graduate diploma course.

I just wondered if any thought had been given to expanding that program into other tertiary institutions, or other ways of delivering that program so that we could get more teachers trained in autism specialist teaching? Clearly there is a shortage, and I understand that the professional development is being rolled out. I actually have some concerns about that too, because I have had some feedback around the online learning, that it is not the best way to teach people about autism because you really have to have that interaction to have a good grasp of how to respond to children with autism or how to teach children with autism, but that is a separate thing.

Has some thought been given to how we can expand that program so that we have more teachers who are professionally trained — who are already teachers but who get professionally trained to be autism specialists — because we really do desperately need them?

Ms HAIRE — We have got a further 20. We will have a further 20 scholarships to the ATI that will be advertised later this year, and then we will have a further 20 the year after that.

The CHAIR — There are about 20 every year and have been since 2006.

Ms HAIRE — The particular course that you are referring to, Chair, is a very intensive course, and a small number of teachers each year, as you pointed out, undertake that course. What we are working towards is having a suite of options to improve the capability of our workforce and to have options for teachers who wish to have or need to have autism-specific skills. You have made some comments about the online course, but we have had over 4000 teachers from almost half our schools in the state.

The CHAIR — There has been a big uptake.

Ms HAIRE — Having a range of different options, depending on the purpose, and the school is probably the model that we are supporting the moment. There is also the five-day professional learning course that I mentioned earlier that is offered by Positive Partnerships. So we have a range of different types of workforce uplift support, and that is all underpinned by that kind of critical element, which is that now as a condition of registration all teachers must have undertaken special needs training as part of their initial teacher education and as a condition of reregistration.

Increasingly the overall capacity of the workforce to teach children with special needs and enabling specialty into autism spectrum disorder is one of the important things that is being done, but it is done in a range of ways and not only through the ATI course. Did you want to add anything, David.

Dr HOWES — It is striking a balance between depth and breadth of wanting to get as many teachers as we can trained in working with students with autism, plus providing that really intense offering through the intensive course. We feel we have got a balance available at the moment. Whether that needs adjustment is something that we will be keeping a keen eye on, and part of that will be measuring the demand that is there by the number of people who apply for next year.

The CHAIR — It also might be through a parliamentary inquiry.

Mr FINN — Thank you, folks, for coming in and making your time available. Is there a circumstance under which a child at a Victorian school should be locked in a box?

Ms HAIRE — No.

Mr FINN — Is there a circumstance in a Victorian school where a child should be locked in a cage?

Ms HAIRE — No.

Mr FINN — What is the department's policy on restraint of children with autism?

Ms HAIRE — The department does not support the use of restraint or seclusion for students except in the circumstances — I have not actually got it; I can find the exact wording — where there may be some exceptional circumstances in the interests of immediate safety. We have a process that has been established where any kind of use of restraint or seclusion must immediately be documented through our alert system, it is immediately investigated and our principal practice leader takes steps to ensure — thank you, Alan. It is only in the case where there is a danger, where the child is in immediate danger to themselves or others, and only in that momentary circumstance, and it must be immediately documented and the department must take steps at once to investigate the circumstances. But our approach overall is to take all other measures and support teachers to assist students in every other way before — even in the cases — —

Mr FINN — What lengths have you gone to to notify teachers and schools of this policy?

Ms HAIRE — We have a new policy. We have released last year a new policy on restraint and seclusion. I am just trying to find that for you. I will come back to that in a moment. As part of the special needs plan the principal practice leader was appointed. The principal practice leader reports to the senior disability practitioner in DHHS, and the senior disability practitioner, as I expect you know, has a statutory role under the Disability Act to monitor and report on the use of restraint and seclusion in disability services. We are drawing on that expertise and professional insight through employing the principal practice leader in our Department to support the development of policy and to support schools, in a positive and constructive way, to address behaviours of concern.

Last year when the principal practice leader commenced, a new policy — I am still trying to find the name of it; I apologise — on the best practice approaches to supporting and responding to students with challenging behaviours was released, as part of her work. It has been communicated extensively to the principals of all the special schools, including a letter to every principal when the principal practice leader commenced. My colleague Bruce Armstrong, Deputy Secretary, Regional Services Group, and I again wrote to all the specialist school principals only I think a couple of months ago, reminding them again and drawing their attention to the policy. Through our Department of Education and Training school update, which is our regular weekly bulletin, we have reminded and sent communication to all school principals in the state about the requirements of that policy.

Mr FINN — Presumably the school at Bendigo would have been notified along with all the others?

Ms HAIRE — Every specialist school principal has been written to twice, and every principal in the state receives our DET update, which is our weekly bulletin.

Mr FINN — Thank you very much. We had a witness earlier today saying that his child was having extreme difficulty at a government school and, after some trouble that he had with teachers there, he took the child out from a public school, or a government school, and put that child into a private school. He told us the money did not follow the child to that private school, but in fact the funding ceased. His son has autism. Does that happen? Do we have situations where parents exhibiting or making a choice as to where they send their child actually lose funding if they go to a private school?

Ms HAIRE — The Program for Students with Disabilities — it is probably difficult and not appropriate for me to comment on a specific case, and I do not know about the case you are referring to, Mr Finn.

Mr FINN — No, I am not asking you to talk about the specific case, just generally speaking, can that happen?

Ms HAIRE — The Program for Students with Disabilities is a program for students with disabilities and special needs attending Victorian government schools. Support for students with disabilities in private schools is provided through a commonwealth government grant, and then the terms and conditions for that, so it is a different stream of funding, and there would be a change.

Mr FINN — Okay. You would be aware of the ABA program, the applied behaviour analysis program?

Ms HAIRE — Yes.

Mr FINN — And you would be aware that that has been, for some years now, in operation at Moomba Park Primary School in Fawkner.

Ms HAIRE — Yes.

Mr FINN — What is the department's policy on ABA, particularly as it relates to Moomba Park? Because I have had to, over a number of years now, go in to bat for Moomba Park just to keep their funding as the department has tried to basically destroy that program. Has the department changed its attitude to Moomba Park and the ABA program at that school?

Ms HAIRE — Moomba Park was one of the 15 schools that participated in the autism inclusion support project that I talked about earlier, where 15 schools were supported to undertake research and best practice in supporting children with autism. The autism support model that is delivered at Moomba Park was developed to respond specifically to the needs of their children. The department does not have a single model that is mandated or recommended. We understand the ABA to be one of several, or many, effective strategies. Earlier — I will not go through it again — I went through the set of principles that came out of that project.

We do not think that there is any single approach that will meet the needs of all children and young people on the autism spectrum. Across the state, in both mainstream and in specialist schools and in autism-specific schools, there are a range of actions, strategies and approaches that are employed. Within the school budget all Victorian government schools have the flexibility to make decisions about how to best support the learning needs of their students, and the goal of the inclusive education for students with disabilities and additional needs is to improve the capacity of schools to make those decisions, in conjunction with parents and the school community. So we do not mandate a particular model.

Mr FINN — I am fascinated to hear you say that, because whenever I have mentioned the word 'flexibility' to anybody who has given evidence before this committee they have, at best, laughed when I have referred to flexibility in the education department with regard to autistic education. Is there some plan that you have hidden away somewhere to provide some flexibility, to provide extended education — educational needs — for those children with autism? As we know, it is a wide scale, it is a wide spectrum, and a wide variety of needs must be met. I am told by just about everybody that the education department is pretty rigid in the way that it goes about these things. Is there some hope that we might be able to get some flexibility from the department anytime soon?

Ms HAIRE — I can assure you that we do not have a plan hidden away. But if you would like, I could talk you through the principles that sit sort of within the special needs plan that relate to the provision of services for children with autism.

Mr FINN — Given that everybody that I have spoken to to this point testifies that there is no flexibility, perhaps — apart from the current plan, or the current policies — we can look forward to a future policy which will provide that flexibility. Could we hope that that would happen?

Ms HAIRE — As I have said, schools have flexibility, and Victoria has got a strong reputation for the flexibility that individual schools and principals have to address the needs of their school community. The goal of the inclusive education plan is to work even more closely with parents and with the community to address the needs of individual students, and — picking up the Chair's point earlier — with the NDIS also coming into the picture more and more across Victoria, I think people in the disability sphere and parents of children with disabilities, ASD included, are optimistic that this is going to mean a greater suite of choices, choice and control.

Mr FINN — Did you just say earlier though that the NDIS will not impact education?

Ms HAIRE — No — well, the NDIS provision and educational provision need to work alongside each other to ensure the social, economic and educational needs of the students are met. So we are working very closely with the NDIS to work out how to do that.

The CHAIR — I think you said there is a policy being developed now around what that will look like within our schools, within our state system for, for example, therapists et cetera to work in conjunction with schools and the education of children with autism.

Ms HAIRE — And we are working to developing those models and then formalising that we hope — we intend — into a formal agreement with the NDIA about how we will work together to support students in Victorian schools.

Mr FINN — I have a question from Ms Kealy, who had to run, and it refers to your comments in your submission that the assessments must have been completed by a psychologist and a speech pathologist within the past year. Now, given that there are limited psychologist and speech pathologist services within country Victoria and indeed the western suburbs as well, if I might be slightly parochial — —

The CHAIR — Never. Bernie, you are never parochial!

Mr FINN — No, that is right, Madam Chair — never let it be said.

Does that mean that children in the country, children in the west, are actually missing out because these services are not available — the psychologist and speech pathologist services — to the same extent as they are in the suburbs?

Ms HAIRE — Are you referring to assessment of students for the Program for Students with Disabilities?

Mr FINN — Yes.

Ms HAIRE — The department has a workforce of speech pathologists and a range of other experts who undertake the assessments, and then it goes to an accredited body to assess them. So we employ directly a large number of those experts in order to do that.

Mr FINN — So those experts will service the country, will service the western suburbs, in the same way they would service, for example, the eastern suburbs of Melbourne?

Ms HAIRE — I have not got the numbers with me to speak to the proportion of the workforce across the state, but we certainly have them in every one of our 17 areas across the state, our four divisions. We could come back to you on the numbers.

Mr FINN — If you could do that, that would be wonderful, and I am sure that Ms Kealy will be delighted.

One last question, Madam Chair, if I may, and I will be parochial just this once. There are now two autism schools in Laverton. After years of what I would describe as educational neglect of children in the western suburbs, we now have two autism schools in Laverton. What is the long-term — or what is the short-term plan, much less the long-term plan, for those schools and for autism-specific education in the west? Will children in the west be able to get a P–12 education in an autism-specific school?

Ms HAIRE — The special needs plan provided and the announcement of the inclusive education policy provided additional support for specialist education. There are two new special schools under construction: in North Geelong and in Armstrong Creek.

Mr FINN — I am not talking about specialist schools. I am talking about autism-specific schools. There are two in Laverton, and you can kick a footy between the two. For years and years and years we could only get four years education in the western suburbs for kids with autism, and now we have two in Laverton. What is the plan there?

Ms HAIRE — Look, I am afraid I cannot speak to you directly about the provision plan for Laverton, but I can seek advice from the Victorian School Building Authority. I think the other crucial thing to draw attention to, and I understand that you are talking about autism-specific schools, but there has also been some significant policy change over the last couple of years, which means that every new school that is built has to be built according to inclusive and accessible guidelines so that all mainstream schools are also welcoming and physically appropriate for students with disabilities. I appreciate that is not the question you are asking. I think that the question of provision of school education needs to go hand-in-hand both about the specialist provision

and also the mainstream, given, I think I mentioned earlier, that 70 per cent of children with ASD attend a mainstream setting in Victoria at the moment.

Mr FINN — If we could also get a guarantee from you that all children in the western suburbs with autism could get a P–12 education at an autism-specific school.

Ms HAIRE — I think what is clear is that all children with autism or any other special need are guaranteed an education in a Victorian school wherever they may be.

Mr FINN — P–12?

Ms HAIRE — From P–12 is the goal — —

Mr FINN — That is a change. That is good.

Ms HAIRE — That all of our mainstreams schools are inclusive and address the needs of their local community.

Mr FINN — I am delighted to hear that. That is a change of policy. I am very pleased to hear that. Just one more question: the schools commissioner — what relationship with the department will the schools commissioner have?

Ms HAIRE — I think you are referring to the expert panel.

Mr FINN — Is it a panel? Is it a commissioner?

The CHAIR — No, it is a panel.

Mr FINN — Well, the minister has referred to a commissioner. So I do not know who is running the show, but perhaps you can enlighten me.

Ms HAIRE — The special needs plan had an action in it, which was to consider the appointment of a commissioner, and the minister considered a range of models and ended up deciding that an independent expert panel was the best way to address the issues that parents had put to him. So rather than there being one single commissioner who would have to be all things to all people, you would have a panel of experts who are independent of the department, who are appointed by the minister, but who — —

Mr FINN — On the advice of the department?

Ms HAIRE — If the minister asks for the department's advice, of course, but —

Mr FINN — Hardly independent.

Ms HAIRE — as you know, it is a very different matter for the minister to make an appointment compared to a departmental appointment. It substantially changes the role of the appointees.

Mr FINN — But if the minister is asking you for advice on who he should appoint and he follows that advice, that is hardly at arm's length from the department, is it?

Ms HAIRE — That is not quite what I said.

Mr FINN — I know it is not quite what you said, but it is the truth.

Ms HAIRE — I think the process of an independent appointment by the minister is substantively legally and statutorily different to an appointee by the department and creates a link and an accountability directly to the minister rather than through the department, and that was the goal that the minister had — and that there would be a panel of people who have got a range of different types of expertise.

Dr HOWES — It is probably worth adding there is another layer. It goes back to the earlier conversation about resolving these disputes between parents and schools. There is a new responsive school complaints framework that is being introduced that will sit as an intermediate step before things get to the panel. I think it is

an indication that the department takes those issues that you are raising extremely seriously now. So there are these two new additions. It is not just the panel that came out of the proposal about the commissioner, but it is this new process that is what it says it is: a more responsive process to issues and complaints.

The CHAIR — And it has only been in action for just over a month really.

Dr HOWES — Just been rolled out.

Ms HAIRE — Six weeks.

The CHAIR — Six weeks; so we have got some time to see how that rolls out before we get to the end of our inquiry, Mr Finn. I think we will be able to assess that at a later date and maybe invite the department back again early next year to have a look at that again.

Mr FINN — I am watching it very closely.

Ms COUZENS — Thank you all for coming along today, and congratulations on the work you are doing too. I think it is quite extraordinary. I know the Andrews government is committed to working towards providing the best education for everyone, including people with disabilities and people with autism. I know in my electorate people are really keen to see what the outcome is from the department. But, of course, as a committee we want to make sure that the issues we are hearing about being addressed as well. I suppose it is more a comment that I have been hearing in my electorate and as part of this inquiry; it is about the establishment of multidisciplinary teams within schools or within a region, and what you think about that idea and the value of that and seeing if it works.

Ms HAIRE — Part of the education state reforms was to establish a stronger level of support for schools at the regional and local level. As you know, the education state is a focus not just on improving student outcomes in specific academic outcomes but it also a focus on the health, wellbeing and resilience of children and students in our schools. So with the additional support at the regional and area level, part of the new workforce has been focused particularly around health, wellbeing and support for schools, and the idea of a multidisciplinary team, with a range of expertise, to then provide support to principals and their leadership teams and teachers through the senior education improvement leaders' interaction with the school leadership team. It is a new level of support and expertise and will ultimately be also linked up with the SSSO workforce as well so that we have a strong support for schools to support all students and particularly those students with additional needs.

Ms COUZENS — Would that include assessments as well?

Ms HAIRE — The SSSOs work at the moment on assessments.

Ms COUZENS — Okay. I do not know what SSSOs are.

Ms HAIRE — I think your point is — perhaps just to get a sense — there is significantly more support at the regional and local level for schools in relation to health and wellbeing, and inclusion.

The CHAIR — Is there an expansion of the SSSOs? Have we got the same numbers that we have had for a while, or have we employed more SSSOs recently, or are the numbers pretty much the same?

Ms HAIRE — There has not been any increase recently, but there has been a substantial increase in these other workforces which kind of complement and augment the role of the SSSOs, so there is a net increase in the support for schools in relation to student health and wellbeing.

Ms COUZENS — We still hear reports of parents not getting the support for their child. For me as the member for Geelong I want to make sure that my constituents are getting the service levels they need. We know about early intervention and all those things, and there are services that are providing that — albeit limited. I mean there is a long waiting list for that as well. My idea of the multidisciplinary teams is to deal with some of those backlogs as well in terms of assessment for, say, autism.

The CHAIR — Like strike teams.

Ms COUZENS — Yes.

Ms HAIRE — The multidisciplinary teams have only been in place since March this year. I think what you might find is that over the next few months, and certainly into next year, we would hope that you would hear from parents that they are getting the support that they need for their children. The purpose of those teams is to support the school leadership to provide the right environment and support for the students in their schools.

Ms COUZENS — Yes; because we do hear that parents are paying for the assessments themselves, which is an extraordinary amount of money. Those that cannot afford it are waiting long periods of time to get that assessment done, and in the meantime, things are not great with their child or with their education or with what is happening at home. So there are some serious issues around that particular area of assessment.

The other thing I want to raise is the regional and rural focus — and I know Bernie raised that a bit earlier — and the number of parents that are saying, ‘We don’t have the same access to services as metropolitan Melbourne does’. Is there some way of dealing with that issue, do you think, in terms of assessments and getting the services that students need?

Ms HAIRE — At the moment I think — you are talking about specialist staff to undertake assessments.

Ms COUZENS — Yes, the specialists. Speech therapy and that sort of thing.

Ms HAIRE — We are going to come back to you with, I think, the distribution of the staff across the state. We do have the SSS workforce, who undertake the assessments in the rural and regional parts of the states as well as in the metropolitan part.

Ms COUZENS — But there are long waiting lists, are there not?

Ms HAIRE — I have not got the waiting lists.

Ms COUZENS — I think there are.

The CHAIR — I am pretty sure there are.

Ms HAIRE — I think it is possibly harder to recruit to some of those positions. I am happy to come back to you with some more information about the provision outside of metropolitan Melbourne if that would be helpful for the committee.

Ms COUZENS — There are probably some skills shortages happening there too.

The CHAIR — I have one more question around the screening program that the government is rolling out for the early years, which we have just been sort of talking about. When the teams go in there and the child is screened, and perhaps there is a diagnosis of autism or dyslexia — I am more interested in autism of course for the committee — what happens then? What happens after that? What does the parent do? What does the child do? Where are they referred to? How does it happen? How does the principal get involved? What are the next steps once that assessment diagnosis has been done through that early screening process?

Ms HAIRE — Are you talking about the new English online assessment process that has been brought in in the — —

The CHAIR — No, the screening program for early years which you documented in this particular piece.

Ms HAIRE — That is it. Yes, that is the English online, which rolls out next year.

The CHAIR — So it has not started yet. It is part of the special needs program.

Dr HOWES — The first time will be for preps next year.

The CHAIR — So the first lot will be preps next year.

Dr HOWES — Yes, that is right.

The CHAIR — All right, so let us take a step back then, because I thought it had already started. What will be the approach taken once a child is screened, assessed and diagnosed?

Dr HOWES — There will be two pathways. One would be, if there were evidence of severe need, then there would be the referral, if it had not happened already, to the assessments that you referred to to see if they qualify for PSD. But what we are anticipating that we will do and the intent of it is to enable much earlier intervention to take place, in the first instance by the teachers themselves, because the issue that this is trying to address is that it is taking too long for teachers who have got those preps to be aware of the difficulties.

The intent is earlier identification, earlier intervention and using the increased professional development to ensure that those teachers have the capacity to deliver that, but schools also have access to that banded funding where they are able to engage the assistance that they think is needed. Coming back to this model of what will be the most effective intervention for that child in that setting, schools then determine how many of those students they have and what will be the best deployment of that additional funding they receive. Its intent is earlier intervention and more effective support.

The CHAIR — So that is the education focus in terms of the teacher being able to give some, perhaps, more intensive teaching to a child who is diagnosed or will be eventually.

Dr HOWES — Yes, more appropriate and more targeted.

The CHAIR — Will there be incorporated into all of that a referral for parents to behavioural supports, interventions, therapies, speech therapists and all of the other services that are usually required for a child who has been diagnosed with autism?

Ms HAIRE — I think, as David said, as needed, the child could then undertake an educational assessment for the Program for Students with Disabilities, which then brings to bear a package of support as we have described.

The CHAIR — Will that be done through the education system or will that have to be a private diagnosis?

Ms HAIRE — The educational assessment for the PSD is through the education department, but as David — —

The CHAIR — But the diagnosis still has to go through a psychologist or a speech therapist.

Ms HAIRE — Yes, a qualified provider will undertake diagnosis.

The CHAIR — Will the parent have to pay for that?

Ms HAIRE — As currently, there is support through the SSS workforce, psychologists and speech therapists, to confirm a paediatrician's diagnosis of autism. As David has said, there are two pathways. There is improving the teacher's ability to support and intervene early with appropriate classroom pedagogical techniques for that child — and not every child who might have something arise through that English online test —

The CHAIR — Through the screening process.

Ms HAIRE — through the screening process, would fall into the moderate to severe category of PSD. They may well fall into the inclusive education approach in the mainstream school.

Dr HOWES — Because that tool itself is not a diagnosis.

The CHAIR — No.

Dr HOWES — It is just screening for any indication.

The CHAIR — It is just a screening process which then gets a child refer to be diagnosed.

Ms HAIRE — Or supports the educational practice.

The CHAIR — It brings more support in, but I am still a little bit concerned about the cost of that diagnosis for parents of children with autism, because it is a huge impost. That has nothing to do with education, but it is a huge impost on parents to have a child diagnosed and then to be out of pocket and have to pay for many of the

therapies that a child would need for that early intervention. Having that screening process, I guess, is a good start in actually making sure that there is early intervention, even though some experts we have heard from have suggested that early diagnosis, as early as six months of age, is a better way of making sure that we have appropriate early interventions. Certainly by the time the child gets to school in some cases it is a challenge to have that intervention in place.

We may get back to you with some other questions that perhaps we did not quite get around to asking today if that is okay; we might do that in written form.

Ms HAIRE — Of course.

The CHAIR — We would also like to invite the department to return again for a further hearing some way down the track once we have heard from a range of other groups, organisations and individuals, and also of course once some of the programs we have talked about today are actually implemented and up and running. We can have another conversation about what the assessment is of all of that. Thank you very much for your time today. It is much appreciated.

Ms HAIRE — Thank you.

Dr HOWES — Thank you.

The CHAIR — That draws to a conclusion today's public hearing. Can I thank everyone in the gallery. I thank Hansard and I thank our secretary and staff for today.

Committee adjourned.