

TRANSCRIPT

FAMILY AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE

Inquiry into services for people with autism spectrum disorder

Melbourne — 21 November 2016

Members

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Ms Cindy McLeish — Deputy Chair

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Witness

Ms Mary Thomson, principal, Western Autistic School; and chief executive officer, Autism Teaching Institute.

The CHAIR — Good morning. Welcome, everyone, to this public hearing for the Family and Community Development Committee's inquiry into services for people with autism spectrum disorder. This is the eighth public hearing to be held by the committee in a series of hearings that will continue into early next year. In addition to hearings in Melbourne, the committee has already travelled to Geelong, Bendigo and Shepparton to meet with stakeholders and hold public hearings. The committee is thankful for the ongoing support this inquiry is receiving from the public, particularly from people with ASD and their families who have participated in each of our public hearings to date.

These proceedings today are covered by parliamentary privilege, and as such nothing that is said here today can be the subject of any action by any court or to any proceedings for defamation. If you have any special needs today, please see the committee staff, who will assist you. We have a quiet room available today, which is the multipurpose room which is just down the hall from this room. Again, please see our staff if you need assistance.

I would like to welcome to our public hearing today Ms Mary Thomson — welcome, Mary — principal of the Western Autistic School and CEO of the Autism Teaching Institute. Thank you very much for attending here 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. Thank you very much for your submission to the inquiry, which we received. I would like to invite you now, Mary, to make a 15-minute statement to the committee.

Visual presentation.

Ms THOMSON — Thank you, Maree, for the invitation to make a presentation to the committee on our school and teaching institute. I have been a classroom teacher at Western Autistic School and was the founding director of the Autism Teaching Institute and am now principal of the school.

WAS is a government specialist school for students with autism in prep to grade 3 in south-west Victoria region. We have 325 students enrolled at the school in 2016. The school was set up in 1983 by a parent group. It started as an early intervention centre for six children. Eligibility criteria for Western Autistic School are determined by the department guidelines under the program for students with disabilities, or what is commonly known as the PSD. To attend Western Autistic School, children need to be deemed eligible for the PSD under the ASD category.

Families wanting their children to attend Western Autistic School are required to submit a PSD application through their closest government school. The mainstream school sends the application to the resources coordination group, the central department, which determines eligibility for the PSD. The RCG notifies the mainstream school of the outcome of the PSD application, and the primary school notifies the family, who then contact Western Autistic School if Western Autistic School is the family's first preference for their schooling.

The school is an open pathways schooling option for students with autism in the early years of schooling. An open pathways option provides early intervention teaching to equip the children to move into mainstream settings. The school provides a safe, supportive and child-friendly learning environment where children are supported to learn to build positive relationships with other students and adults and to gain the skills required for a successful transition into their next educational setting. The school has an autism-specific, evidence-based approach to teaching and learning that places the individual child at the centre. This is a pedagogical model that the school has developed over the 30-plus years.

Our values are diversity, respect, learning as an ongoing process, and sharing and growth of knowledge. Central to our method are ongoing individual learning plans. As children commence schooling, a detailed profile of students is built, based on observing and understanding the children's strengths, skills and learning needs; research-based assessments; multidisciplinary collaboration of allied health experts; teaching teams and case conferencing; and the development of close collaborative partnerships with families. Beyond that, all children are then supported by an ongoing individualised learning program, which is written in partnership with family and allied health. It includes goals focusing on functional skills which form the foundation for learning, such as

social communication and personal and interpersonal skills — things like attention to the task, being part of a group and making friends.

The individualised learning program is taught through a toolbox of evidence-based teaching strategies, and students also work towards learning goals drawn from the Victorian curriculum and tracked by the ABLES assessment tools. Students are then supported to transition to their next educational placement through parent information sessions, SSG meetings between WAS and the transition schools, supported visits to the new schools, and then outreach support to transition schools in the following year and beyond.

Every year 100 students enter the school and 100 students transition to their next educational setting. Schoolwork networks and outreach support are vital to the success of transitions. The WAS outreach program provides professional learning opportunities for schools to support inclusive practice in the classroom. WAS also supports the capabilities of schools through the Autism Teaching Institute's vocational postgraduate teacher training courses — and more about this in a moment.

The department supported a short video featuring Western Autistic School programs for World Autism Awareness Day this year, and I would like to share it with you now.

Video shown.

Ms THOMSON — I will now move on to the teaching institute. Regarding why we were set up, Western Autistic School defines its primary mission as preparing students on the autism spectrum to succeed when they move to mainstream classroom settings or local special schools. This principle of inclusivity led WAS to see that it could only truly succeed if it could also ensure the knowledge and teaching methodologies it had developed were also adopted by mainstream schools when the students were reintegrated. WAS has always engaged with mainstream schools for that purpose, but it was done on an ad hoc basis.

Hence in 2006 WAS developed the Autism Teaching Institute and the ATI gained accreditation as a registered training organisation. Over the last 10 years the ATI has trained and accredited around 400 teachers. The goal of this training is not only to equip these teachers but to provide a resource within the school that will assist all the teaching staff. The training has been an invaluable element of the current government's commitment to create a truly inclusive environment for all schools.

Why the Victorian education and training sector, or VET? It can often be a counterintuitive process to teach children with autism, and teachers require specialist knowledge. Even accomplished teachers can be baffled by their students with ASD in their grade and struggle to appreciate the meaning of the behaviour and learning style of the children.

The capacity to make a reasonable adjustment and modification for students with ASDs in schools is based on understanding the impact autism has on each individual student. It is common to hear students with ASD described as naughty children, but when teachers are trained to look at behaviours through the lens of ASD, they can appreciate that when the student calls out the answers in class, for example, or questions the accuracy of what the teacher is saying, that is likely due to their autism. Skills have to be explicitly taught to children with autism that typical children pick up naturally.

Funding for the establishment of the ATI came from the department in the form of a one-off grant of \$130 000. Subsequently ATI courses are paid for by tuition fees subsidised by the department and more recently from Catholic Education Melbourne as well. The numbers are that there have been 299 graduates from the certificate course and 201 graduates from the diploma course. The ATI has also delivered professional development to hundreds of the education department's education support staff, or teacher aides typically, through a one-day 'Window into autism' PD.

The completion is by sector. Over the period 2014–2016 the number of enrolments in the certificate course from the department fell away in 2015 and increased in 2016. One notable point that is not included in that data is that in more recent years 16 staff in leadership positions in schools have enrolled in the courses, including 6 principal class officers.

I will say a little bit about the training model. I think it is probably best described as a theory-to-practice model. It is an iterative process of theory informing practice. It is essentially sustained over time — sustained professional learning.

What distinguishes the ATI courses from other credentialled studies is the practicum component. All of our students get some academic input in a combination of lectures and tutorials from ATI staff. The practicum consists of applying that information in their own classroom setting and being observed and assessed and assisted by a travelling assessor employed by Western Autistic School.

Since 2015 the course has been delivered in three semesters over 18 months. In the certificate year, each teacher enrolled in the course comes out of their classroom for 10 days for a supervised practicum in a classroom at Western Autistic School or one of the ATI partner schools to observe best practice teaching by an experienced peer, and an ATI assessor-coach visits the teacher in his or her classroom for five days.

The practicum is spread over the year, usually starting with a three-day block, followed by one or two-day visits over one semester. In the diploma year this is reversed. The teacher comes out of the classroom to observe practice with a different teacher in a different school setting, and the ATI assessor makes 10 visits to the teacher's base school classroom over all semesters.

What is the impact of the training? Individual teachers develop specialist knowledge and practice. There are the development of school-wide approaches for students with ASD and improved wellbeing and learning outcomes for students with autism.

Regarding the results, the Australian government commissioned PhillipsKPA to write a report on the More Support for Students with Disabilities package 2012–2014. This is an excerpt from that report, under the heading 'Building systemic and school capacity':

The regional autism teacher coach and school principals also observed that the training through the Autism Teaching Institute had a sustained impact. This was especially the case with schools where teachers completed the full graduate diploma course. The mainstream and special schools reported a flow-on effect to staff who had not undertaken the course and all schools involved considered the investment of time and resources for this training to be highly effective and influential in improving their approach.

That is the end of the presentation.

The CHAIR — Thank you, Mary. Thanks very much for that. Can I just say congratulations on the great work that you are doing at the ATI and also at the Western Autistic School. Clearly the outcomes are there; the evidence is there for all to see.

I have a couple of questions. We do not have a lot of time, so if you could just perhaps keep your answers as brief as possible, that would be great. You mentioned that you take students from across the state. Is that correct?

Ms THOMSON — No, south-west Victoria.

The CHAIR — Only from south-west Victoria?

Ms THOMSON — Within a designated transport area determined by the department.

The CHAIR — Right. And do the students have or is there an intellectual disability involved with these students as well?

Ms THOMSON — The eligibility criteria are determined by the department, and the program for support, the PSD program, requires a range of assessments, but for our school it does not include a cognitive assessment.

The CHAIR — Okay, right. So you do have students with intellectual disability.

Ms THOMSON — The children are in their developmental stages. It is often unclear what or if there is to be an intellectual disability.

The CHAIR — Okay, sure. I had a question there about government schools only, but I see that you have actually engaged with the Catholic system as well.

Ms THOMSON — In respect of the teacher training through the Autism Teaching Institute.

The CHAIR — Yes. And some of your funding comes from Catholic Education Melbourne.

Ms THOMSON — Yes.

The CHAIR — What proportion of that would be from the Catholic system?

Ms THOMSON — Look, it changes each year because they are packages of subsidies that Catholic Education Melbourne offers, but, for example, this year we have had 15 teachers from Catholic education completing just the certificate-level course, and the cost of that is determined by the Catholic education office.

The CHAIR — And what would be the normal cost to a teacher to complete the course?

Ms THOMSON — The full diploma costs \$22 000, and the certificate costs \$11 000. The department subsidises and Catholic Education Melbourne offers subsidies for professional learning, there is at times some contribution from teachers themselves and there is a commitment from schools for teacher release for practicum purposes.

The CHAIR — So some teachers might be out of pocket if they choose to do the course and are accepted.

Ms THOMSON — Minimally, yes.

The CHAIR — Does the school use ABA therapy?

Ms THOMSON — The principles of ABA therapy are embedded in the eclectic approach that is offered through Western Autistic School.

The CHAIR — And do you have a view on ABA therapy?

Ms THOMSON — I am not really in a position to make a view about one specific intervention. Our school of course includes the principles of ABA in its work; in order to understand the children, one needs to do that. But we do not adopt any one intervention; we have an eclectic approach where a teacher needs to first come to understand a child and then selectively choose a strategy from the validated options matched to a child.

The CHAIR — So it is an individualised approach to each child.

Ms THOMSON — Yes.

The CHAIR — The committee recently visited Moomba Park Primary School, which is a pretty good example and very good model of integration. Do you have a view on the model? Are you aware of the model at Moomba Park Primary School?

Ms THOMSON — Not exactly.

The CHAIR — So do you have a view on integration?

Ms THOMSON — Our school is based on the principles of integration inasmuch as we provide a short-term intensive placement for the children, with the aim of the children being successfully integrated into their local mainstream or special setting.

The CHAIR — After grade 3, yes. And does that happen most of the time?

Ms THOMSON — Yes.

The CHAIR — That is a good outcome for students who finish grade 3 with you, and then they are integrated into their more localised school.

Ms THOMSON — Yes. Recently our outreach teacher called as a follow-up call to 27 schools, primary schools, inquiring how the children and the school were faring, and she reports that all 27 schools, bar one, stated that the children and the school were doing well and the children were learning and happy at school.

The CHAIR — Do you know how many students with you are in out-of-home care?

Ms THOMSON — We have no children in out-of-home care this year. We had one child in out-of-home care two years ago.

The CHAIR — How did you find that you helped that child in particular?

Ms THOMSON — We adopt the department's approach of a team around the child, and so with the support of a multidisciplinary team, including DHHS, we were able to support the child, the carers and the family to reconcile the difficulties. The child subsequently moved interstate, so I am not sure of the outcome.

The CHAIR — That is fine. Since 2006, it is just over 400 specialist teachers; is that correct?

Ms THOMSON — From the different sectors?

The CHAIR — Yes.

Ms THOMSON — From primary, secondary and special.

The CHAIR — Is there a reason why the numbers are small?

Ms THOMSON — It is an intensive course. The nature of the practicum, as described in the presentation, is intensive, with visits being not just about theory. It is about being in situ in schools with teachers, coaching, mentoring. There is only so much — —

The CHAIR — So the practicum part of the course is, you would say, vital to that course and to the success of the graduates.

Ms THOMSON — It is central.

The CHAIR — Do you think that teachers could effectively learn about teaching students with ASD online?

Ms THOMSON — A textbook or reference-based approach is best when it is supported with practice-based, classroom-based, on-the-job training with an expert colleague.

The CHAIR — Do you believe that the special needs plan for Victorian schools, which was just recently announced, a few months ago now, will improve training and professional development for teachers, particularly in relation to students with ASD or other special needs?

Ms THOMSON — Well, requiring all teachers to undertake special needs training as part of their ongoing professional learning may lead to a greater demand for the services of the Autism Teaching Institute.

The CHAIR — A very good point. Some components of the mainstream teacher training of course now have to include learning activities about teaching students with disabilities. While it is very early days, do you think the changes instituted to date are sufficient for teachers to teach students with ASD?

Ms THOMSON — I am sorry, Maree, could you repeat the question?

The CHAIR — Basically what I am saying is about the special needs plan and the requirement of teachers to be trained, and you mentioned that it would lead to an increased demand, but what I am asking is: do you think that the changes that the government has instituted to date are sufficient for teachers to teach students with ASD?

Ms THOMSON — I can really only speak in my position from the school. I really cannot speculate more broadly.

The CHAIR — That is fine.

Ms McLEISH — Thank you, Mary. I just want to get a little bit more of an understanding about your school in the first instance. How many students do you have under grade 3?

Ms THOMSON — All the children are in prep to grade 3.

Ms McLEISH — So the programs that you had first, for some of the older secondary-age students — —

Ms THOMSON — We have 15 students in a secondary program.

Ms McLEISH — Okay, so that is a very small component of it.

Ms THOMSON — Yes.

Ms McLEISH — How far away is the furthest person that would come to your school?

Ms THOMSON — The designated transport area extends from Melton to the edge of Bacchus March, coming in around the bay into Footscray, up along the airport and all in between.

Ms McLEISH — I thought you mentioned south-west.

Ms THOMSON — South-west Victoria? We do have — —

Ms McLEISH — Sorry, south-west Victoria to me is Warrnambool.

Ms THOMSON — Well, metropolitan south-west Victoria. I am sorry, yes.

Ms McLEISH — So Melton is kind of — —

Ms THOMSON — Melton is within our catchment.

Ms McLEISH — Thank you.

Ms THOMSON — There are two main campuses, one at Niddrie and one at Laverton, and the children will attend the campus based on the designated transport area.

Ms McLEISH — And is there a school bus that brings those children?

Ms THOMSON — Yes.

Ms McLEISH — What is the bus system? How many buses have you got?

Ms THOMSON — We have 15 buses altogether: 10 at Laverton and 5 at Niddrie.

The CHAIR — And are they school buses?

Ms THOMSON — The department contracts the bus company to provide the service for the school.

Ms McLEISH — What adults travel on those buses with the students, or is it just the students?

Ms THOMSON — No, there is a bus driver and a supervisor for each bus.

Ms McLEISH — And is the supervisor employed by your school?

Ms THOMSON — No, they are all employed by the bus company, which is contracted by the department of education.

Ms McLEISH — Okay, so the department contracts the bus company to have an additional staff member there, a supervisor, on the bus. So that is essentially picked up by the department through the contract to the bus company.

Ms THOMSON — That is right. But the school, Cindy, also provides the training, which is important, for the bus staff for our school.

Ms McLEISH — What does that training involve?

Ms THOMSON — At the start of the year a half-day PD on the types of presentations that the children might have in respect of the difficulties with transitioning between their family and the bus to school, school to bus, and the types of behaviours they may have so that bus staff may respond to those.

Ms McLEISH — Because we have heard a lot about the special traits of children and people with ASD and timeliness and things like that, are there ever issues when the buses get held up in traffic in congestion?

Ms THOMSON — Look, the children are very forgiving, as long as the route mostly stays the same. It depends though, of course, on how long.

Ms McLEISH — I just now want to just ask a question about when you started to offer the teacher training and becoming an RTO. Was the process for you to go along that path simple, or were their impediments along the way?

Ms THOMSON — The department supported Western Autistic School with that initial seeding funding — —

Ms McLEISH — \$130 000, I think you said.

Ms THOMSON — Yes, which enabled me to work to both develop the courses with an expert reference group and also register the training organisation in one year. In 2005 we did both — —

Ms McLEISH — And started in 2006?

Ms THOMSON — And we started in 2006.

Ms McLEISH — Was that process fairly smooth?

Ms THOMSON — Yes.

Ms McLEISH — Do you know if any other schools or organisations are looking at doing something similar?

Ms THOMSON — To the best of our knowledge this is the only vocational postgraduate training course that is offered in Australia, and indeed internationally.

Ms McLEISH — Can you give me a bit of a demographic about the people doing the diploma compared to the certificate — ages, males, females, coming from — —

Ms THOMSON — If I could just refer back to the graph, initially there were many more staff from specialist schools involved. Obviously the profession has high numbers of female staff, but over time the number of male teachers who have sought to do the courses has increased. For example, in 2014 with the certificate course there were 11 specialist teachers. I do not have a breakdown of gender. There were 21 mainstream teachers of the 32 who went through the course. Fourteen were from the primary sector and seven from the secondary. Increasingly the secondary sector has come on board, and that would be partly due to the department reaching out to the secondary.

Ms McLEISH — So whereabouts are they coming from?

Ms THOMSON — The state of Victoria.

Ms McLEISH — How far is the furthest that they might have come?

Ms THOMSON — Currently this year we have people from Warrnambool, Hamilton, Portland, and then across into Bendigo and then up into Wodonga.

Ms McLEISH — Okay, so pretty well the western half of the state.

Ms THOMSON — That is right. And the travelling assessors travel to those people 5 days in the certificate year and 10 days in the diploma year.

Ms McLEISH — My final question relates to the quote that you had up at the end, because I was wondering what sort of follow-up you did with the teachers to find out those who have undertaken this certificate or the diploma course. Where are they at? What has happened to them? Have they remained in the sector?

Ms THOMSON — We have an alumni group and we run an annual lecture day with an international guest speaker, and in fact next year it will be Professor Rita Jordan from the UK who will come to speak to the alumni and the current students and Western Autistic School staff on psychological theories of ASD. So there is that. We have a partnership school. One of the planks of this model of delivery is working with developing partner schools where we have graduates to support colleagues coming into the course on supervised practical — —

The CHAIR — How many partner schools do you have?

Ms THOMSON — Fifteen. A lot of those are special schools, particularly regional schools. Special schools.

The CHAIR — Across?

Ms THOMSON — Victoria.

Ms McLEISH — Thank you very much, Mary.

Mr FINN — Mary, what happens to those children in the western suburbs who will never mainstream?

Ms THOMSON — We have a new P–12 school for autism very close to Western Autistic School, in Jennings Street School. At the end of this year I think we have 22 families whose children will move from grade 3 at Western Autistic School over to Jennings Street School. Otherwise families can choose their local generic specialist setting — for example, Sunshine Special Developmental School, Jackson School — —

Mr FINN — So there is now a P–12 autism school in the west?

Ms THOMSON — Yes, and 450 metres from our school, so we have a close working relationship with Jennings Street.

Mr FINN — That is great. I am just interested to hear: the secondary component of Western Autistic School, what exactly does that involve?

Ms THOMSON — It is known as the Wattle program, and it was established as an interdepartmental program with DHS in 2002 for children with ASD, complex needs and mental health issues. The Wattle program remains today, and it has 15 students. In recent times we have shifted the focus of the Wattle program back to a short, transitional program, where we work with the base secondary college throughout the time that the student is at Western Autistic School and support the transition back to secondary base school.

Mr FINN — I was also interested to note that you have a one-day ‘Window into autism’ PD for the department. Is that the only professional development that the department has in the autism area that you are aware of?

Ms THOMSON — I am not in a position to say categorically, but I know the department offer other professional development opportunities for teachers in the state through the special needs plan. The one that comes to mind is the behavioural training that is offered online.

Mr FINN — How much can you teach about autism, or impart about autism, in a one-day course?

Ms THOMSON — I guess just that initial understanding of what autism is. Case studies or scenarios that show the impact of autism in children across the spectrum go some way in one day to enable teachers or education support staff to reflect on the children back in their schools, and then hopefully there will be a graduate of the teaching institute of that school who can then take further the professional learning.

Mr FINN — The four-year course that you offer at Western Autistic School enables children to transition into a mainstream school. That has been successful to a very large degree, as I understand it. Should we be looking at adopting this right across the state if it is so successful?

Ms THOMSON — I think that is a question that is better put to the people who make the policies. It is an early intervention model, whether it is part of a broader school provision, that has worked for our school and our families and students.

Mr FINN — In the northern region we have the Northern School for Autism and we have Jacana. Over in the east we have one or two as well. There are autism-specific schools around P–12. I would have thought that if we were to adopt the model that you are running in the west the need for autism-specific schools would drop significantly if your program was adopted across the state. Would that be a fair observation?

Ms THOMSON — Our program is an open pathways option that families can choose if they have aspirations for their children moving into mainstream school and indeed if they wish for their children to attend their local special setting.

The CHAIR — Mary, what is the breakdown of gender of students at your school? Do you have more boys than girls?

Ms THOMSON — Yes. We have 53 girls in our population of 325 students.

The CHAIR — Gosh. Do you have a view on why that is?

Ms THOMSON — I am not a diagnostician and I am not an epidemiologist, but certainly — —

The CHAIR — What a shame. We need more of them.

Ms THOMSON — Certainly our experience is that girls perhaps — the research indicates that girls — may be identified with the sorts of social difficulties that are characteristic of autism at a later stage in their schooling.

The CHAIR — That is pretty much what we have heard. I just wanted to clarify that that was your sense of it as well. Do you have therapists working at your school?

Ms THOMSON — Yes.

The CHAIR — Can you tell the committee what the therapists are and how they incorporate their work with the students in the program?

Ms THOMSON — We have a team of occupational therapists and speech therapists that are employed by Western Autistic School through its student resource package.

The CHAIR — How many do you have?

Ms THOMSON — We have 7.4 EFT therapists.

The CHAIR — So are they full time?

Ms THOMSON — Yes. The model is a consultative model, so it is not clinical as such. The speech pathologists and OTs work collaboratively with the teachers in terms of the design and development of the individual learning programs. That does require at times clinical assessment, but only inasmuch as it informs how the teacher comes to understand the sensory needs of the children or the language needs, the social communication needs, of the student. They are part of the team that writes and develops the ILP.

Ms McLEISH — When you have different services and courses that are offered, has anyone from the department bureaucracy attended?

Ms THOMSON — Yes. When we were running the ‘Window into autism’ program, the department would sit in on those days, from the different regional areas. That ‘Window into autism’ program was delivered across all the regions, and the regional contact would come to those ‘Window into autism’ sessions.

The CHAIR — Thank you very much, Mary. That is much appreciated. Can you please pass on to Stephen our thanks for the written submission. It is very thought provoking. Thank you again for coming along today. It is much appreciated.

Ms THOMSON — Thank you for the opportunity.

Witness withdrew.