

# 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 Nancy Sidoti, principal, Baltara School.

**The CHAIR** — Welcome, Nancy Sidoti, principal of Baltara School. Thank you very much for attending a public hearing today. I just need to read this spiel, and then we will get going. 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 in contempt of Parliament to provide false evidence. The recording of the proceedings will commence today, and you will be sent a proof copy of the transcript to be able to make factual or grammatical corrections if necessary. We will hand over to you, Nancy, for a short presentation to the committee. Nice to see you again.

**Ms SIDOTI** — Thank you very much for this opportunity. It is an absolute privilege being a principal of a special school like Baltara School, and it is always. Just in terms of questions that you might have, I have just prepared some documents. I will just start with a little bit of history about Baltara School. It has been around for a very long time as a specialist school. We have got a small staff-to-student ratio, and our specialisation for this school has always been children with challenging behaviours. We have a range of programs.

**The CHAIR** — How many students do you have there?

**Ms SIDOTI** — There are intake and outreach programs, so for 2016, it is 80. That is for intake and outreach programs. I might just go through and explain those programs. We have the Hurstbridge Therapeutic Farm. That is a DHHS facility in Hurstbridge. Children in out-of-home care are educated by Baltara School staff. We have the school on site, and they deliver programs to the children who are under an order to the secretary.

**Ms McLEISH** — How many have you got in out-of-home care?

**Ms SIDOTI** — It is a six-bed facility, and in our intake programs we have three children in out-of-home care. I will have to get the figures on the outreach program children; some of those children are also in out-of-home care. In working closely with DHHS we also have a monitoring program, which is called the Inclusion Support Service, that monitors primary school aged children — up to about 100 children — in primary schools in out-of-home care. It is a program that monitors their engagement and attendance at school, providing resources support to schools as well, including professional learning. Schools value the professional learning services that we provide to them. They are the out-of-home care programs that our school delivers.

We then have short-term intervention programs. So with the intake programs, we have one facility in Thomastown, and that caters for children in primary school from years 4 through to 6. We have another intake program in Preston, and that caters for children in years 1 through to 3. Short-term intervention goes for no longer than six months, and all of our students are dual enrolled, so they have an enrolment in a mainstream school. Part of that referral process is that we work very closely with mainstream schools in identifying the needs of that child, conducting comprehensive assessments and re-engaging the children back at school.

**Ms McLEISH** — Are there lots of mainstream schools or only a few that you work with?

**Ms SIDOTI** — With the intake programs, obviously geography plays a big part in terms of schools closer to Thomastown and Preston, because there is a level of conveyance for parents or carers in terms of driving their children to the facilities. Then we have our positive outreach schools service. That is a wholly dedicated outreach service that we have in the metropolitan area, and we also have a program in Bendigo.

I might just step back a little bit and talk about the feasibility study that was conducted by the school council of Baltara School in 2014, really shaping the direction of the school and our services. We are a small school — —

**The CHAIR** — Do you have a copy of that feasibility study, Nancy?

**Ms SIDOTI** — Not with me.

**The CHAIR** — Would you be able to get a copy to our secretariat? It might be a little bit helpful, that is all.

**Ms SIDOTI** — Yes. With the feasibility study, it made a number of recommendations. One of those was working in outreach capacity. So in the development of our new strategic plan, which was developed in 2015 and goes through to 2018, it targets a lot of this work — building the capacity of mainstream schools — and I am really pleased to see such a very, very strong alignment with the education state improvement cycle and also much of the PSD recommendations where special schools work as centres of expertise, because we do harness a

lot of experience and skills in working with children with challenging behaviours. So with that we are really well positioned to deliver these outreach programs, and it is pretty much on a referral basis that the students are referred to our service.

**The CHAIR** — By teachers?

**Ms SIDOTI** — Yes, by schools, leadership. It could be by the SSS service, the psychologists or speech pathologists, and then we work in the school. It is a mentoring program, so we work side by side with mainstream classroom teachers, leadership teams, in that sort of sharing, mentoring role. It is really taking our program that we do intake and try and deliver it on site at schools in that ‘just-in-time’ space. That has been very exciting delivering this new program, and we have received some very positive feedback from mainstream schools, so we really do gather quite a lot of our own local data — surveys — which really help us to inform the programs that we are delivering. As well we know that education is not static, and we can respond to the changes that are needed in our programs.

**The CHAIR** — We can ask some questions if you like. We have got quite a few.

**Ms SIDOTI** — All right. Good.

**The CHAIR** — Thanks for that. You mentioned that kids get referred to Baltara, and are there eligibility criteria with that?

**Ms SIDOTI** — We have quite a comprehensive referral form. We try to make it reasonably straightforward, but we do like to gather as much data as we can. One of the eligibility criteria is that the students need to have a WISC assessment, a cognitive assessment.

**The CHAIR** — Do they have to have funding under PSD in Victoria?

**Ms SIDOTI** — No. Some of our students are funded, but I cannot give you those figures. I do not have them with me, but the students that are funded that come into our service are usually funded under severe behaviour disorder. Some of the students might have an autism diagnosis, but because of their language scores being too high, they would not meet that.

**The CHAIR** — So they do not have IDs, intellectual disabilities?

**Ms SIDOTI** — No. In terms of responding to the program, that is one of our criteria.

**The CHAIR** — Can you perhaps talk about some of the strategies that you use for the challenging behaviours?

**Ms SIDOTI** — We are informed largely by assessments. Certainly we will unpack cognitive assessments by psychologists. Also assessments in terms of speech and language are very important in terms of guiding the program directions, and also a child’s ability to process language in the classroom. We have worked closely with Drs Pam Snow and Patricia Eadie in piloting a language intervention program.

**The CHAIR** — Where are they from?

**Ms SIDOTI** — From the University of Melbourne and La Trobe University in Bendigo. We really wanted to be informed by the student’s level of language ability in the classroom. Especially when we are talking about student re-engagement, it is absolutely crucial that we look at that as educators. It is also developing that evidence base for the delivery of our programs.

**The CHAIR** — Do you use ABA?

**Ms SIDOTI** — Yes, we use functional behaviour plans. They are quality plans that are planned over time. Over time we have a clinical psychologist that works at Baltara School two days a week. He is employed by the school, and he works with staff in developing those plans, but they are also plans that are consulted. So we have parents that contribute to that as well as mainstream schools.

**The CHAIR** — Primary school only?

**Ms SIDOTI** — Yes.

**The CHAIR** — Is the goal to transition your students back into mainstream school for secondary education?

**Ms SIDOTI** — For primary?

**The CHAIR** — From your primary level is it the goal to transition them into mainstream secondary schools?

**Ms McLEISH** — So the kids that leave Thomastown at grade 6.

**Ms SIDOTI** — What we do is we have year 6 students attending our first semester. We do not take students in second semester because what we find is that the students in year 6 are part of an important transition plan to secondary, and we know for children with autism — —

**The CHAIR** — So you do not need to do that?

**Ms SIDOTI** — No.

**The CHAIR** — So you do not work with the secondary school on that transition?

**Ms SIDOTI** — No. The earlier the intervention, the better. We do have children coming in from primary school, so generally we do not work with the secondary schools.

**Ms McLEISH** — Could I just ask, following on from that, the grade 6 kids, you have got first semester where they are actively involved with you. Second semester they are transitioning back into their mainstream primary school. Does that mainstream primary school have a strategy or the work to transition them into year 7?

**Ms SIDOTI** — Yes. They are with us in the first term — the first part of their placement — four days a week. One day a week they are back at their base school, and then in the second part of their placement they are with us three days a week and two days a week in their mainstream school. We deliver a lot of outreach, so each child has a key teacher that works with them closely, liaises with families and the mainstream school, mainstream classroom teachers. So in terms of gains, shared knowledge, strategies, that is all done in unison. It is a great partnership between Baltara School and mainstream schools.

**The CHAIR** — Do you follow up post their transition to secondary school? Do you follow up the kids?

**Ms SIDOTI** — Yes. We do some outreach once they have left our programs. Then we track the students at 3, 6, 12 and 18 months down the track, and that data helps to inform us in terms of what other strategies we might need to provide to schools.

**Ms McLEISH** — How does that go? Eighteen months is a year and a half, so they are halfway through year 8 at that point. What sort of feedback do you generally get at that point about what is going on for the kids?

**Ms SIDOTI** — We started collecting this data at the start of 2015, so we are not quite there yet.

**Ms McLEISH** — You are not there yet, okay.

**Ms SIDOTI** — But it has been valuable data, certainly valuable feedback for the program direction and any resources that we put into schools. So that is the intake program. Can I talk a little more about the outreach program?

**The CHAIR** — Yes.

**Ms SIDOTI** — The outreach program is one of the staff working with up to three children from the one school two days a week for a 10-week period based at a school, and then there is follow-up fortnightly a term after that. So that is a little bit different from our intake programs in that the children are supported in their mainstream classrooms, and the opportunity to work more closely with the classroom teachers is obviously there.

**Ms McLEISH** — I just have a couple more questions about the Hurstbridge Therapeutic Farm, and you mentioned a six-bed facility. Can you tell me what happens there? What do they do? What does the program look like?

**Ms SIDOTI** — The children live on the farm — —

**Ms McLEISH** — And are they primary students?

**Ms SIDOTI** — Yes, they are up to the age of 18, so it really — —

**Ms McLEISH** — Okay, so this is a separate program altogether.

**Ms SIDOTI** — Yes. So as the students are enrolled on site at the Baltara School campus obviously these students make huge educational gains as our school is on site. Most eventually transition to a mainstream school, which is very important. Then they are also residents; they still continue to live on the farm, but they may be attending a mainstream school or an alternative setting. Baltara plays an important role in those transition plans as well, but also certainly in providing that absolutely necessary therapeutic engagement and containment to support children, particularly in terms of developing those comprehensive plans so that mainstream schools can then understand and follow through in supporting them.

**Ms McLEISH** — So what sorts of therapies are they having that go along with their mainstream schooling?

**Ms SIDOTI** — In terms of — —

**Ms McLEISH** — You know, it is a therapeutic farm, so what are the therapeutic aspects of it?

**Ms SIDOTI** — In terms of a facility it is based on a farm. Certainly lots of farming engaging activities. Farm studies is a part of the learning program on the farm, as well as literacy, numeracy and social skills.

**Ms McLEISH** — How big is it?

**Ms SIDOTI** — Probably a couple of acres, but I will have to check and get back to you.

**Ms McLEISH** — That is okay.

**Ms SIDOTI** — We have enjoyed a really strong partnership with DHHS, and that is something that we continue to do. We use the ‘team around the learner’ model, as some of our children with complex needs have a range of different services that often do support them. The ‘Team around the learner’ as well as our regular student support group meetings really help to coordinate those services so that the child is at the centre of those plans and the child has a voice in those plans and that there is a coordination between home and medical services, let us say. There might be some other paediatric or even OT services that come into that space, so if we are all on the same page setting the same goals, it just means that those services are more targeted and specific for the children.

**Ms COUZENS** — Thanks for coming in today, Nancy. Do you think there are opportunities to have similar activities around the state as to what you are doing?

**Ms SIDOTI** — Such as?

**Ms COUZENS** — In your school, could that be duplicated elsewhere?

**Ms SIDOTI** — What I can say as principal delivering these programs is that the feedback that we have received from mainstream principals, mainstream schools, is very positive. Our data also tells us that we can actually see improvements. It is really very much strongly aligned with the direction of our strategic plan. I can only speak about the programs that we are delivering, but so far the feedback that we have received from schools has been very, very positive. It provides that just-in-time service in mainstream schools, but at the same time we are delivering both the intake and the outreach programs.

**Ms COUZENS** — Is there anything in particular that you think could be rolled out in other schools with what you are doing?

**Ms McLEISH** — The separate campuses, for instance. You have got the younger kids at Preston and the older kids at Thomastown. Does that work well, or is that just a capacity thing?

**Ms SIDOTI** — We are working towards actually combining those two campuses together. We have received some capital grants funding, and that plan is being proposed. We are working with an architect at the moment to have our Thomastown and Preston campuses combined.

**Ms McLEISH** — So how would you do that? Have you got enough land at Thomastown, or have you got enough land at Preston, or were you looking for a new space?

**Ms SIDOTI** — It is being worked through at the moment with the central office and the region. The plans are being developed at the moment, so it is a space that is being explored.

**Ms COUZENS** — So what does Baltara do to encourage the students to participate in the local community?

**Ms SIDOTI** — In the local community? It is about, primarily, engaging their interests. What we do is try to personalise supports to engage the students in an activity and then transfer that to learning as well. There is one particular activity that the students are involved with in terms of animal care at Bundoora farm. That is a regular activity that they do. It is about getting the students to recognise their needs and at the same time developing that self-awareness that they have and engaging them in the work.

**Ms COUZENS** — Are they involved in sporting activities, for example?

**Ms SIDOTI** — Yes, they are. We have external sporting centres that we go to. The younger students at Preston attend swimming once a week, and at Thomastown students do futsal and tennis as well.

**Ms COUZENS** — And any performing arts?

**Ms SIDOTI** — We are in partnership with the Song Room. At the moment the students are involved in a drumming program, which they enjoy.

**Ms McLEISH** — What is the Song Room?

**Ms SIDOTI** — The Song Room is a not-for-profit organisation that provides music programs to schools. It is a range of programs that are available through this organisation. It is called the Song Room.

**The CHAIR** — So is that one of those programs that schools choose to purchase?

**Ms SIDOTI** — They can. I do understand that there might be some sponsorship available, but also they make available some music programs that are a very reasonable price.

**Ms COUZENS** — Thank you.

**The CHAIR** — Do you think there is an increase in the number of students with ASD?

**Ms SIDOTI** — I can talk to you about our figures. In our intake programs for 2016, 61 per cent of our students have an ASD diagnosis or are in the process of. Would you like me to talk about the multidisciplinary team?

**The CHAIR** — Yes, because that is not the sole reason they come to your school.

**Ms SIDOTI** — No, that is exactly right.

**The CHAIR** — That is one of the secondary. It is the behaviours of concern that make them end up at your school, and then the autism is usually discovered along the way, so talk about that.

**Ms SIDOTI** — Yes, so I do like to use the iceberg analogy. Probably for a majority of our students what is immediately noticeable are their behaviours of concern, escalated behaviours. That is something that as a specialist school and through our comprehensive assessments we are able to unpack — the function of those behaviours.

**Ms COUZENS** — How do you manage those behaviours internally?

**Ms SIDOTI** — It takes a little bit of time and investment certainly in getting to know the children that we work with. The referral process does take a little time. Sometimes we have students coming in three or four times to visit before they are actually engaged in the program, and that is about developing that relationship with the child because that is very important. It is also important for them to be familiar with the environment, the intake program, the spaces. So we identify or sometimes the child themselves identifies some calm spaces. At Preston, for example, we have a sensory room. It is a small space. It is a demonstration space that we encourage mainstream schools to come and visit and have a look at. We have got a range of supports from fiddle toys to weighted blankets to a bubble tube.

**Ms COUZENS** — When things go really wrong, though, do you have an actual process for dealing with that particular child?

**Ms SIDOTI** — Yes. We have a range of strategies to try and engage the student in the classroom. If that is not working, then the child might need to be guided to a supervised space so that they have some time to calm. because that self-regulation is something that takes some time for children to learn to do. So their behaviours can be quite escalated.

**The CHAIR** — This is very similar to the model we heard last week at Mansfield Autism Services and the Dookie campus. It is very similar.

**Ms McLEISH** — Are you familiar with those?

**Ms SIDOTI** — No. The idea is that students will learn to self-identify through their personalised program and through the practice of strategies eventually they will learn to identify their triggers and learn some good strategies about self-calming.

**The CHAIR** — Because none of them have an intellectual disability, do they?

**Ms SIDOTI** — No, that is right.

**Ms McLEISH** — Can I ask you a quick question about the Hurstbridge Farm. Who owns it?

**Ms SIDOTI** — It is a DHHS facility.

**Ms McLEISH** — Are you the only tenant, the only ones who use it?

**Ms SIDOTI** — So DHHS are the owners of the site. They are the managers of the site, and we provide the education program to students living on the farm. We have got education classrooms on site.

**Ms McLEISH** — So you have that classroom on site. I was thinking it was yours.

**Ms SIDOTI** — No.

**The CHAIR** — Is it basically out-of-home care?

**Ms SIDOTI** — It is, yes.

**The CHAIR** — Thank you so much, Nancy. We really appreciate your time this afternoon. Keep up the good work.

**Ms SIDOTI** — Thank you very much.

**Committee adjourned.**