

TRANSCRIPT

FAMILY AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE

Inquiry into services for people with autism spectrum disorder

Swan Hill — 14 February 2017

Members

Ms Maree Edwards — Chair

Mr Paul Edbrooke

Ms Cindy McLeish — Deputy Chair

Mr Bernie Finn

Ms Chris Couzens

Witness

Mr Graeme Scoberg, former principal, Swan Hill Specialist School.

The CHAIR — I welcome to our public hearing this afternoon our last presenter for the session, Mr Graeme Scoberg, former principal of Swan Hill Specialist School. All evidence taken at this hearing 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. Thanks again, Graeme. We would like to hand over to you for your presentation.

Mr SCOBERG — Thanks for inviting me to provide information to the committee about educational services for students with autism spectrum disorder provided by the Department of Education and Training. Since July 2015 I have been a senior education improvement leader for the north-west Victoria region. In this role I support a network of schools known as Southern Mallee, which covers the Swan Hill, Gannawarra and Buloke LGAs, and that support includes school improvement advice as well as organisational and administrative advice.

Previously I was principal of Swan Hill Specialist School from 2004 to 2015. The Swan Hill Specialist School provides specialist education for students ranging in age from 5 to 18 with mild to severe intellectual disability and associated multiple disabilities of students with autism.

The school embraced its initiative of student wellbeing and engagement and provides a modified curriculum for individual needs. It has always been very inclusive. That was the aim of the school. There have been swimming programs and bike ed. programs, which all students participate in. There is a camping program. Every student each year participates in at least one camping activity.

There is a music program, and the school participates in the local state school extravaganza each year. It has a whole-school performance which it runs every three to four years. From memory I think the last one was three years ago, which was *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*. Every student participated in that production. I will just note that the main speaking roles are mainly with students with autism.

The school also links itself to the local community whenever and as best as it can. It has a strong partnership with the local secondary college around VET provision, so a number of students sometimes participate in classes at the college, mainly around automotive. There has been retail and business. It depends on the needs of the students. There is a hospitality class which runs every year, and that service, paid for, is provided by the college.

There is a community farm garden in which the secondary college, plus MacKillop college, the local independent school, involve themselves with VCAL activities in partnership with the students from the Swan Hill Specialist School.

The school has approximately 100 to 110 students. That has been fairly consistent over the last several years. Of that number, usually 30 to 40 per cent of the students are diagnosed with autism, or if not diagnosed, they are certainly on the spectrum. Under the eligibility criteria they need to be PSD funded to be able to attend the school. Having said that, though, there are functional placements. Are you aware of what a functional placement is? So there may be one functional placement, there may be zero or there may be four, depending on the year.

I will mention therapies because a number of families have spoken about that today. It has always been difficult, as parents have said, to access therapy provision in the Swan Hill area. The school has a strong relationship with Swan Hill District Health. When they have a full complement of allied health, the school can source those practitioners on a case-by-case, pay-as-you-go basis. That has been useful. However, if you need specialised assistance, that is often not what is available through Swan Hill District Health. The nearest provider of that is out of Bendigo. Scope is more than willing to provide the service to the Swan Hill area, but it is very expensive. The school sees the benefit, though, and so pays for that, again on an hourly basis; travel has to be factored into that as well, so it is double the cost over one day.

I mentioned there linking to other services. As to what the school was able to do around the provision of the sensory OT, some parents were prepared to use their HWCA funds when Scope were visiting, so whilst the school paid for one day, the HWCA funding of several families would be utilised for other days, so that minimised the travel costs. Also with the SSS budget, when it was managed by the local group of schools, they

were also able to piggyback in on that sensory OT — the sensory OT was able to visit local schools and was able to provide assessment for several students with autism — which supported those schools.

The school has been an Autism Connect provider for I think about four years now. Autism Connect provides a level of funding that the school can use to support mainstream schools that may have students with autism who are on the spectrum, and the school can provide a service to build the capacity of staff at that school. What we have found is that quite a number of schools have taken up that opportunity, and when I was principal we were able to service areas deep into the Mallee, such as Woomelang, Sea Lake, Quambatook and then down the Murray towards Leitchville.

I know that within the past 18 months that service provision has grown even further. They are probably oversubscribed now because a lot more schools are keen to be involved with it, and the school continues to do a great job in providing that service to mainstream schools.

There is Autism Connect, but also a number of schools will regularly make contact with the school for advice around a particular child and strategies that might be useful for that particular classroom teacher, and the school is always willing to provide support in that capacity.

Transition was mentioned before. The size of Swan Hill makes it difficult to provide a number of pathway options. There is TAFE, there is Task Force and there is Murray Human Services, but beyond that there are not many more options. By that I mean if you are in Bendigo or Wodonga, there are several providers that you can have a look at and decide what might be best for your child. Those opportunities are not here. I am aware of some families in the past who have moved from Swan Hill for their child's benefit once they have left school. They wanted to provide the best opportunities, which meant leaving the local area.

The school has been involved with school-wide positive behaviour support, as have a number of local mainstream schools. There have been online learning modules provided to support that rollout across the schools and for the specialist school in particular.

Several years ago there was a pilot program, again for the establishment of satellite units, and the specialist school established a satellite unit at Kerang Primary School. There was an immediate benefit to the staff at Kerang Primary School because they were able to see how specialist staff were able to deal with students who had some challenging behaviours. They were able to observe that practice and the teacher who was working out of the Kerang unit, which was operating one day a week, was also able then to make visits to other classrooms at Kerang Primary School and offer advice.

A by-product of that at that time was that Gannawarra shire provided a key worker for supporting families who have a child with a disability, and it is known as MyTime. So MyTime were able to link in with the satellite unit and the school was able to provide some support around that, which meant that MyTime would make visits to the specialist school once or twice a year. We have found this could help them see what was being provided.

Whilst that did not mean that those families would attend the specialist school, it was able to provide them with some thoughts about what questions they could ask if they were going to attend mainstream schools in Kerang, such as if the PECS program is available in their local mainstream school. If not, then the specialist school was there to provide support for the mainstream school around that implementation.

The school has always accessed consultancy support where and when available. Again, that is at a cost, involving bringing them up to a rural area. The approach has always been around positive behaviour. The school is currently using Dan Petro around functional behaviour analysis. Dan visits there a couple of times each year and provides advice and support to the staff at the school. Undoubtedly the issue of rurality is distance.

I should have mentioned at the start there that the feeder schools to Swan Hill Specialist School are within a radius of 100–130 kilometres from Swan Hill. It moves into New South Wales. It is virtually any bus that runs towards Swan Hill. If students can get on that bus, they can attend the school. There was a pilot program from the department for specialist schools — it might have been three years ago now — where a bus was provided to the school and the school could decide where best that bus route would run. There was more flexibility around how you could manage that run. At the moment, with the specialist schools transport unit, it is a contracted bus run. It is fairly strict around where it goes. If you need to make changes, that might take up to six months.

The benefit I saw when the school had more control over the bus run was that they could decide where the bus was going to run, and it only needed to be a phone call to log that there was going to be a change of bus route because there was an extra student who was 5 kilometres away. Yes, that meant that the bus was only funded on a notional amount of money, so the school would then need to pay for the additional 5, 10 or 15 kilometres of petrol it might cost. However, that allowed flexibility for the school to use it for what best suited the needs of families.

In my current role what I have noticed in the past 18 months is that under the Learning Places initiative there is additional support that is available in the Mallee area to support schools. Apart from myself, there is a manager of health and wellbeing who services the Mallee area. When I am aware of anything that might be happening at a school where they might need additional support, I can refer the school to that person, who can provide on-ground support for that school around a student, usually with autism, and look at how they can best provide strategies to support that student. Sometimes it is around having a stronger student support group functioning and other times it is around maybe referring them to Autism Connect or referring to other schools that have got practices which are working quite well.

The region also provides support with facilities. I am aware of the mother who was here who spoke initially — at Woorinen primary school. The department was aware and the school made a submission — they were able to put in a key pass door at the front entrance so the child was not at risk of absconding out through the open front doors.

The inclusive schools grants. Two have been successful in the Mallee area over the past couple of years — actually, it might be four now. One of them was a mainstream school in the northern Mallee area. That school has a high number of students with autism — unfunded students. The school was successful in obtaining funding to establish a sensory room at the school, which meets the needs of those students.

Ms McLEISH — Is that primary or secondary?

Mr SCOBURG — Primary. And the Swan Hill Specialist School was successful in a grant. They are in the process at the moment of upgrading their middle years yard to meet the sensory needs of the students. That is probably everything that I wanted to cover.

I will just mention specialist schools' capability to be centres of excellence. I think that is something that specialist schools would look forward to — that opportunity. They are often at the forefront of changes that are happening in the education sector, and by that I mean that there have been having individual learning plans for a number of years and they have had to individualise learning to suit the needs of maybe four or five different students within a classroom. I think that has been more of a focus in mainstream schools over recent years. Some of the schools that have linked themselves well to the practices that are happening in specialist schools are the ones that are now best placed to deal with students with autism or with additional needs within their mainstream environment.

The CHAIR — Thanks, Graeme. Are any of the staff at the Swan Hill Specialist School trained specifically in autism? Have any of them done the autism course that is run through Melbourne Uni?

Mr SCOBURG — Most staff have a special education qualification.

The CHAIR — So a grad dip in special ed.?

Mr SCOBURG — Grad dip. Some have a masters of education in special ed. Some completed the course through Western Autistic School. There has been a varying — —

The CHAIR — I have a question around the PSD funding as well — —

Mr SCOBURG — If I can just make a comment there, though. La Trobe Uni in Bendigo always had special ed. as part of their core subjects, which is no longer happening. So that is probably something to take note of.

The CHAIR — Yes. My late husband actually did that course; I am familiar with it. The program for students with disabilities — as you know, working in the department — has been reviewed and there have been some changes made around all of that, particularly in relation to teacher training. Do you have a view on whether access to that program has improved, particularly for students with ASD?

Mr SCOBURG — Under the code of conduct I cannot express a personal opinion.

The CHAIR — No, I know. It is very disappointing, isn't it? We have had this several times; we are getting used to it!

Mr SCOBURG — I think that the more training that you can be exposed to has to be of benefit.

The CHAIR — I guess what I am asking is: have you seen an increase in the number parents applying on behalf of their children for the PSD?

Mr SCOBURG — Have I seen an increase?

The CHAIR — Do you think there were more students applying, particularly those with ASD?

Mr SCOBURG — My experience would be, as principal of a specialist school, that we have always had around 30 to 40 per cent of students who were eligible to be funded through the PSD under autism. So I am not sure if there has been an increase there, but certainly it seems that there are more students who are diagnosed with autism in mainstream schools who are not eligible for funding.

The CHAIR — Okay, it is interesting. So on your positive behaviour support framework within the school, I think a school in my electorate does the same program so we are quite familiar because we have been briefed by them on that. There are a number of specialist schools running that program now, and I think it appears to be quite successful. Also with Autism Connect, as you would be aware, other specialist schools are also doing that, and like you said, I think the demand is increasing, but we are not actually meeting that demand to get the autism specialists out into the mainstream schools for the training. I am saying we are aware of those programs and the success of those programs.

I do not really have any other questions because we have spoken to quite a number of principals and staff from specialist schools across the region, and pretty much you are all telling us the same thing. It is working in some places; there are gaps where it is not working. Clearly in our rural and regional areas a child with ASD has challenges in relation to transport, and you mentioned the bus pilot program that was running a couple of years ago. That would work, I think, really well for specialist schools, that route determination by a specialist school, particularly if you have children in outlying areas. So it might be something that the committee can look at. Christine, do you have any questions?

Ms COUZENS — No, I think they have all been covered, except I just wanted to ask about the parent support at the school. Was there any and how was that conducted?

Mr SCOBURG — There is a parents club, which is very active. Parents clubs are driven by usually one or two passionate people. The specialist setting was fortunate that there were several passionate people so they were always very active in fundraising, and I am talking here of \$20 000 to \$25 000 a year that they were raising for the school. Like all parents, when that money was raised, they wanted that spent the next year, not to be put away for several years time.

Ms COUZENS — Were they supporting each other in terms of their own children and what happened — you know, the family issues and things?

Mr SCOBURG — Absolutely. Yes, and they became a strong, collegiate network for other families whose child may not have been at a specialist school, but they were also able to support that family in mainstream schools if that need arose. There have been attempts over a number of years, and I mention my time in Gannawarra. That was strong for a couple of years and then interest waned from families. They get busy. As Ann indicated, she could not attend because it was during a school day and she needed to be a working mother. There was an autism group that Swan Hill Rural City Council set up maybe about five or six years ago, and again it started off with four or five families but over one or two years it dropped off again.

People lead such busy lives now. As some of these families have indicated, if you have a child with a disability, particularly autism, even if the meeting is during the day, okay, that is fine because the child is at school, but it does not suit the working mothers. If it is after school, is there extended family who can then look after your child while you go off and attend a meeting? Maybe not. So there are a lot of challenges, and that is not just in rural areas, about trying to set up support groups.

The CHAIR — Do you have before or after-school care at Swan Hill Specialist School?

Mr SCOBURG — When the active after-school program was running, which was a federally funded program, that ran two nights a week I think it was. One of the leading factors there was that the school buses left at 3.15 in the afternoon, so if your child lived in Kerang, how did your child then get home if he or she participated in that program after school? You then had to drive 120 kilometres to pick up your child, so that meant it was mainly limited to Swan Hill kids as the parent then had to come and pick up their child. Swan Hill Rural City Council has a program that runs out of Swan Hill Primary School, and they do provide additional support for up to the age of I think 13 or maybe 12, and they will provide funding support for that program if your child has got a disability.

Ms McLEISH — Can you tell me what is the status of MyTime at the moment?

Mr SCOBURG — It is not operating because the numbers declined.

Ms McLEISH — Yes, the interest waned. Graeme, you mentioned you started at the specialist school in 2004 and you said that there has been consistently about 100–110 students for the last number of years, of which about 30 to 40 per cent were on the spectrum. Was the percentage the same back in 2004?

Mr SCOBURG — In 2004 I think there were 40 students there then. It went from 40 to roundabout 100 by 2008 roughly, and then it has remained around that since then. I would only be guessing, but there would have been around one-third with autism for all that time.

Ms McLEISH — Not terribly different. I just wanted to ask about the satellite unit. You said you had one at Kerang primary. Is that the only one?

Mr SCOBURG — Yes

Ms McLEISH — Were there plans for more or did that not quite kick off, because it sounds as though it could be — —

Mr SCOBURG — It did not kick off. It has actually gone into recess this year because there was only going to be one student who was interested. One of the challenges we found was that the specialist setting in Swan Hill has an indoor therapy pool, it has access to music programs and phys. ed. programs et cetera. Families would say, 'Hmm, I'd like my child to be based here in Kerang; however, then they won't be able to access all of those services'. So we only started off initially one day a week hoping it would expand beyond that, but it did not. Up until the end of last year I think there were still five students there, but one student might have transitioned to secondary school and then another one moved from the area so it just became unviable. The idea was to expand it out; however, it did not.

Ms McLEISH — You have got too good a service here.

Mr SCOBURG — Yes, but they do operate in Melbourne, and they are all different models. What works in the local context — —

The CHAIR — It is a unique sort of approach, but there might be a better way of structuring it so that there is more interest.

Mr SCOBURG — Yes, and one of the other limiting factors was if your child attended Kerang primary, okay, great — you might be part of this satellite unit. If your child attended Kerang South, then they would say, 'Oh, well, I'm at Kerang South for four days. Do I really want to send them to a different school on the other day?'. It is weighing up what is best for their child.

The CHAIR — Yes, and one day a week is probably not going to be enough.

Mr SCOBURG — Yes.

The CHAIR — Thank you so much, Graeme. I have no more questions. We much appreciate your attendance here today.

Mr SCOBURG — Thank you.

Witness withdrew.