

TRANSCRIPT

LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY ECONOMY AND INFRASTRUCTURE COMMITTEE

Inquiry into sustainable employment for disadvantaged jobseekers

Warragul—Wednesday, 11 December 2019

MEMBERS

Mr John Eren—Chair

Mr Gary Blackwood—Deputy Chair

Ms Juliana Addison

Ms Sarah Connolly

Mr Brad Rowswell

Ms Steph Ryan

Ms Kat Theophanous

WITNESSES

Mr Rod Dunlop, Manager, West Gippsland Trade Training Alliance;

Ms Sue De Silva, Coordinator, and

Liam, student, Warragul & District Specialist School; and

Jarrold, student, Marist-Sion College.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much for being here today. The evidence that you are providing is protected by parliamentary privilege, so anything you say will not be used against you; but if you go outside and say some of those things, then that privilege may not be afforded to you. Hansard is recording, and the transcripts will be providing to you for your proof, so then you can confirm whether it is correct or not. If you just want to start off with your presentation, then we will jump in accordingly and ask questions as we go along.

Mr DUNLOP: Sure. We are going to try and keep it tight so you actually get plenty of time to ask questions. Can I just do a couple of introductions first?

The CHAIR: Yes.

Mr DUNLOP: When Gary said, 'Would you be interested in talking about a couple of programs?', I said, 'We can tell you anything we like, I guess', but then we just thought of the fact that we have got a couple of students here. Liam is here from Warragul specialist development school and Jarrod is here from Marist-Sion College, each to talk about just how they find the programs that they are involved in. Sue is here from the Warragul & District Special Development School, and she can talk about how she sees the programs that we run adding value to our local community.

I will move fairly quickly. I do not know about you guys, but I am a bit of a visual learner, so I have made a little package of bits and pieces of information for you as we go through to try and make it a bit easier, and that will allow me to talk a little bit quicker but later on to refer back to particular items.

The first thing I just want to give you a tiny bit of background on is that we are going to talk about two programs. Education loves to use acronyms—we like to shorten things down—so we call them TPP and STP. What that actually means is Trade Pathways Program and Special Trade Pathways Program. They are two similar programs but catering for different cohorts of students who in some ways have been disadvantaged in terms of pathways and employment. Where do they come from? You can probably see that on my form there it has got 'West Gippsland Trade Training Alliance, Manager'. So if you get that folder that is being passed around, I will just get you to refer to the back, just for a sec. On the bottom, right at the bottom there, you can see nine schools' names, so Warragul Regional College, Drouin, Marist, St Paul's, Chairo Christian School et cetera. So it is a unique partnership we have formed with nine schools, all in the Baw Baw Shire. Those principals had the vision and the courage to actually decide to work together rather than take a million dollars and run when it was offered by the Commonwealth. They actually said, 'Let's pool it together. We think we'll enhance the outcomes for students'. So they had the courage and wisdom to do that.

As a consequence of them working together, we were able to purchase the site which is just over behind the Warragul Leisure Centre. It was owned by AGA, Apprenticeships Group Australia, who are one of the largest training providers in the country. As a consequence of that being owned by us, we then subsequently had TAFE Gippsland decide to come in as a tenant and FGM Consultants come in as a tenant—they do a lot of meat industry training et cetera. We have also got another tenant; the Victorian Skills Commissioner has an office on our site. So we have got a pretty unique partnership.

We purchased the site; we have spent about \$6 million on that site. But we have also got two other sites. We bought some horticulture facilities up at Community College Gippsland, which is in Korumburra Road, so it is about a kilometre and a half away. We have also got a training restaurant called Food 4 Thought over in Drouin, and it teaches students hospitality, front of house, back of house. All that is detailed on a brochure. There is a brochure inside there. I guess you guys get so much to read anyway, but it is a really detailed brochure about our vision, what we are hoping to try and achieve et cetera. So that is the group where this program has come from.

A few years ago, going back about five years ago, a couple of the principals just said, 'We've got a real problem with our Year 9 kids in the sense that there's just that demand for more hands-on learning for those students. You know, the core curriculum we're providing at the moment is not catering for them'. So they basically threw it at us and said, 'Can we find a program that might better cater for their needs?'. What happened out of that discussion—and all the schools were unanimous in terms of saying they thought the need was there—was we looked at a program and so five years ago we ended up with a program of 64 students from

seven partner schools. Students come in from seven of our partner schools—and you can see those partner schools on the back there—and we have a program that is delivered by three of our what we call RTOs, our training organisations, so TAFE Gippsland, CCG and Apprenticeships Group Australia.

There has been strong demand for that program, so it has now grown to 80 students from 64. There is also pressure for us to expand that program further. The only trouble is we are running out of space. So there are good problems and bad problems; that is a good problem. We have got predominantly boys in the program, but out of the 80 currently we have got 12 girls who participate in our program. We have a waiting list. It is not a right to be in this program, it is a privilege, and that has really been a big significant attitude in terms of student take-up and our expectations of them in the program. Jarrod is one of our students in that program and he will talk in a minute, because I promised not to talk for too long.

Students have the opportunity to rotate through eight possible courses—you know, pathway options for themselves—throughout the year. You can see that they are listed there. They include carpentry, plumbing, electrical, auto, engineering, health, hair and beauty, community care—which is around aged care, child care—and rural studies. Three of those programs are offered at CCG; the rest are offered at Baw Baw Skills Centre. We have been able to use the money that we got from the Commonwealth to actually cater well for those programs.

The model is really flexible. Schools can use their places. They purchase the places and they can use them to the best advantage for the students. Different schools use them differently. So, for example, Marist-Sion College use those places and probably rotate through their 14 spots—they might rotate up to 20 students through those spots throughout the year—whereas other schools, such as Drouin Secondary College, will have a core of kids who will actually rotate through. In any term a school will have a minimum choice of four courses available for their cohort of students. We think it gives them flexibility and allows schools to respond to the needs of their students.

We collect feedback. In my little bundle of papers I have given you, if you go to page 2—I have put a little number in the top right-hand corner—

The CHAIR: You are very organised.

Mr DUNLOP: We seek feedback. We do that for a range of reasons. The instructors actually love to hear what the kids are thinking, but also I think the students feel a bit empowered, too, that they can actually make suggestions on how to improve the program. What we have been able to do I have given you just a sample of there. These are not necessarily the best results we have had for the year, but you can actually go through and see that we ask questions like: ‘How do you rate the course that you are doing?’; ‘Do you think the facilities are good?’; ‘How do you rate your teacher or instructor?’; ‘Is the Trade Pathways Program what you expected it to be?’; ‘How do you rate the technology and equipment?’; ‘Is it appropriate to your learning?’; and, ‘Is the course providing you with skill sets for the future?’. Now our overall rating, as you can see at the top there, varies from subject to subject. That can be the length the teacher has been in the program and how skilled they are, and we support and train those. But the fact that the overall rating is 8.6 from predominantly adolescent males says that we are probably hitting the mark fairly well.

The other feedback we actually know is that there is a strong pathway there for VETiS. One of the things I have been concerned about for a while is the number of kids who start VETiS and drop out of vocational education and training. That is because they have made bad choices. We are finding now that our dropout rate is much, much lower because kids are actually making better choices. This young fella will tell you what he is doing next year in a minute, but the fact that he has had a term doing carpentry, plumbing, electrical and engineering and then goes, ‘I know of those ones which I want to do’—they are actually making better choices. So we are getting higher retention rates and we are not having that wastage of funds. We have a student start, does it for 10 weeks, 13, 14 weeks, and then says, ‘No, this is not for me’. Does it mean kids still do not drop out? No. But we are taking away one of those major things, and that is their making poor choices.

Hopefully that gives you a bit of an overview of the program. We just thought Jarrod might like to talk about what he has liked about it. He is from one of our seven feeder schools. So, Jarrod, do you want to just talk to them? And they might like to ask you questions, too.

JARROD: Hi, I am Jarrod. I attend Marist-Sion College, Warragul. I attended three terms of the Trade Pathways Program this year. What I thought of the program is that the program really helps young people decide what career or trade pathway they want to pursue in the future. The Trade Pathways Program is based at the Baw Baw Skills Centre in Warragul, as you have heard. It is a great facility there, and it has all the tools that we need to learn. I am 15 years old and I am already having to make life decisions about what I want to do in the future, and the Trade Pathways Program really makes it a lot easier to decide. It was a bit scary. I am more of a hands-on learner so I knew that I wanted to do a trade, but I did not know which one I was most interested in. But after trying three different trades I knew that carpentry was for me, and if it was not for the Trade Pathways Program, I probably would not have been able to come to this conclusion. They are really great facilities.

The Trade Pathways Program is about helping people decide what they want to do with their life. The Trades Pathways Program made a really scary, hard decision an easier one. It also helps students develop skills, which in each trade they try, which can be useful in the future, even if you do not pursue it. The Trade Pathways Program teaches us skills—not only hands-on skills, the skills we need to complete our desired trade, but also skills like independence. At the Trade Pathways Program there are no bells, so at the end of break we need to be responsible for our own actions and we need to keep track of time so we return to work on time. This is a great skill to learn, because on the day when we are employed our employer is not going to be happy if we rock up to work late. That is all I have to say.

The CHAIR: Jarrod, can I just ask: I know my dad, who is now deceased, was a fitter and turner and he sent me to a tech school so I could be a fitter and turner; is your family associated with carpentry? Is your dad or mum—

JARROD: My dad was a builder, yes—not anymore though, but he was.

The CHAIR: Is that where you have seen it and had an interest, or did he coach you into it?

JARROD: He was never a carpenter while I have been alive.

The CHAIR: Right. Okay.

JARROD: I do not know.

The CHAIR: You just like construction and working with your hands.

JARROD: Yes, I just did it there and I really enjoyed it.

The CHAIR: That is awesome.

Ms CONNOLLY: Can I ask you, Jarrod, did your teachers help guide you? Who at the school helped guide you into this?

JARROD: My careers teacher, Michael Beecham, was really supportive and useful in what we wanted to do. There the teachers are really useful, because my carpentry teacher is a carpenter so he is what we want to become. He has gone through what we are going through and he really makes life easier.

Ms CONNOLLY: So you have finished, you have done three terms. What are you going to do next year? Have you sort of made—

JARROD: I am doing a Certificate I in carpentry back at TAFE.

Ms CONNOLLY: And you feel really good about your choice?

JARROD: Yes.

Ms CONNOLLY: That is excellent. Very good.

Ms RYAN: Can I ask you a couple of questions?

Mr DUNLOP: Sure. Absolutely.

Ms RYAN: Firstly, I was just wondering, in terms of the course offering, how you landed on those particular subjects to offer. Was that a match with what industry needs locally? Secondly, I know a lot of trades and VET in schools coordinators that I have spoken to have had real difficulty in finding qualified teachers, particularly in country Victoria and particularly around being able to find people like your instructor, Jarrod, in carpentry who are actually working in the industry but who also hold the qualifications to be able to teach. Has that been a challenge at all for you here in Gippsland, and if it has, is there anything the State Government can do to make that system more flexible in order to get the right people into trade training, particularly in the country?

Mr DUNLOP: Good question. Initially our funding was about \$11.5 million, which the principals chose to use collectively rather than independently, which has happened throughout the rest of Gippsland, sadly. We were funded on the basis of: what are the skills shortage areas? So we got funded for hospitality, carpentry, plumbing, electrical—those trades that we have talked about. What we wanted to do was create a situation where kids were going to real jobs. Sometimes we create false hopes for students, and nobody wins in the end doing that. So we knew that we had real jobs there and there was real demand locally. The area is growing quite quickly—as you drive through, you guys who do not know the area will see that. So we actually targeted the areas where there were skill shortages. So we have got a restaurant over at Drouin which caters for the hospitality, the horticulture at CCG and the rest of the programs at the skills centre.

When we chose to expand the program we did it in two ways. Initially we started off with four trades and we just rotated through, and then people said, ‘Well, what else can we add in?’. So we went back to the careers teachers and said, ‘What messages are you getting?’. We sounded them out, we talked to our partners and we talked to industry. I have got a couple of connections through my role with the Local Business Advisory Board, and we actually then expanded into community care. We knew that there were real jobs there in community care, aged care and child care and hair and beauty. We have got continuous demand there. We actually then brought in engineering as a variation from electrical. So we expanded in two ways: the choice within and actually the number of blocks and the number of students we take. Jarrod should be pretty confident that when he completes his carpentry course, which he will—and he will do really well—he is going to have jobs here locally that he can go to. So that is the first thing.

The second thing is teachers—getting qualified teachers et cetera. My job is that I manage the site for the schools. I am employed by the schools. Our partners are responsible for getting those programs, but because we are planning ahead we always by the middle of the year say, ‘This is what we are looking to run next year’, expanding our programs. So we have got a six-month period of actually preparing for those additional subjects or blocks that we might add in. So I think, yes, we have done that.

What can they do? I think maybe there are some incentives for people to move locally—to come out and employ locally—but we are doing pretty well. At the moment, as you can see there, the kids are rating the instructors they have got fairly highly, so it has not been as big a problem. Having taught education right throughout Gippsland over my time, it is certainly much harder in Bairnsdale than it is in Warragul.

The CHAIR: Before we get onto the next question, did Liam want to say a couple of things?

Mr DUNLOP: He is going to talk in a minute.

The CHAIR: Okay.

Mr DUNLOP: These guys are going to talk in a minute. Can we take a second just to have a look?

The CHAIR: Yes.

Mr DUNLOP: You might look at that question and say, ‘Is Trade Pathways what you expected it to be?’. That is one of the questions that we ask the kids, and consistently it has been the lowest score we have been getting. So what we have been trying to do is actually prepare some video material that careers teachers can have, parents can have, and this has been prepared by one of our parents who has actually had a kid go through the program. We have just got a short clip that captures a little bit about what we are on about with this program, and we are also going to do the same thing for VETiS and for special pathways. So we thought, if you

have a look at the facility we have got and see the kids at work—and it is only about 2½ minutes—then we will talk specifically about the special pathways program. Are you happy with that?

The CHAIR: Yes.

Visual presentation.

Mr DUNLOP: That gives you an overview. The rural aspect was at CCG. The students actually have to move between sites; the students have to get themselves to the sites, wherever they are, and we have got kids travelling a fair distance to do that.

Out of our Trade Pathways Program, one of our partners is Warragul Specialist School, and one of our principals, Matt Hyde, said to me, ‘What are you doing for us?’. There is a school principals group, so the nine principals meet once a term and work really positively together and share best practice. The main part of the meeting is talking about how things are going, so they get this sort of information, data and suggestions and all that sort of stuff and take it on board. They were basically saying, ‘That’s fine, but what about, maybe, kids with special needs?’. He said, ‘What about coming up with a model that might cater for their needs?’. So we did a trial just with Warragul Specialist School for six months in the second half of the year, predominantly around carpentry, and then we tried plumbing, and out of those we then put up a proposal saying, ‘Let’s have a go at a Special Trade Pathways Program’. That is now in its third year.

We initially started off with two groups, and they had a semester-length program. We did a review, and now we have got four groups of 12 students. They do a term in each trade rather than a semester, because the feedback we got from the students, their instructors and their support people was that the term length was much better than the semester length for the program. We have now got seven schools involved. We have got four of our mainstream schools—Warragul, Drouin, Marist-Sion College and Trafalgar High School—and they have maybe groups of two or three students involved in the program. And then we have got our local specialist school, Warragul Specialist School, which has 14 students in the program. Officer send down 10 students from Officer Specialist School, and we have students coming from Moe, from Baringa, coming down. They have got 10 students in the program. They do similar rotations. You have picked up how we do Trade Pathways. They have carpentry, automotive, plumbing and rural studies, so again the students have got to get used to the idea of moving to another site. The students also, from Baringa, for example, have to make their way down, so they learn how to use the train and read the timetables. What time have they got to leave to get here? They are accompanied for the first couple of weeks, and then they gradually build their independence.

I have put in the package—this one is numbered number 3—that we talk about the core part of the program. We are trying to build kids’ work and life skills in an adult learning environment. One of the by-products we reckon happens is their literacy and numeracy skills. You might have seen that when kids are measuring and setting things out and sketching and drawing it particularly improves their capacity to work independently. On page 3 we have got a bit of an overview of how the program has developed. We have got a sample course in terms of the sorts of activities the students do. But what happens is, if there is a more capable group, those students are extended; we do not cap it.

Again—can I go back to the question that Steph asked me—the teachers are telling us that their favourite groups are the TPP and the STP groups to teach. The kids are really engaged, switched on and really enthusiastic about learning, so they are the easiest programs for us to fill.

On the next page, on pages 5 and 6, I have just got some samples there about, you know, I talk about practical skills. For automotive what might that be? And then for employability skills what might they be, and what do we look at there? And we actually talk about students developing those skills, consolidating those skills and then those skills are established. So the kids are on a pathway and they can do the program for two years. So we have got both of those. Probably the thing is we focus both on practical employability skills, and as you can see, they get a record of accomplishment. Now, Sue always gets me to come over and do a presentation with the kids over at Warragul school, but different schools use those differently. But again, the partners actually help us develop those records of accomplishment.

So how about now we just let Sue and Liam tell us a bit about what they think. Do you want to go first, buddy? Are you happy to go first?

LIAM: Yes.

Mr DUNLOP: Liam wanted to put down some notes, just like Jarrod did, to make sure he did not forget what he wanted to say. So you want to start now?

Ms De SILVA: Okay, so I am going to ask Liam some questions and he is going to answer, and you can ask him some questions if you like. So, Liam, how long have you been doing Baw Baw Skills for?

LIAM: Well, I started last year but it did not work out for me. I was finding it hard to concentrate and stay on task. And then I started again this year and I developed so many skills.

Ms De SILVA: What skills are those, Liam?

LIAM: I do automotive and carpentry, how to get along with others, how to work in a team and how to work really hard.

Ms De SILVA: And I know you have really liked the automotive, so tell us more about the automotive course.

LIAM: Automotive is helping me accomplish my goals of one day working in a garage, and I can put my skills on a résumé. I have pulled engines apart and put them back together. I have done tyre pressure, and I have used a tension wrench.

Ms De SILVA: So how has a special trades pathway helped other students at our school?

LIAM: Well, there is Troy. He is in a wheelchair, and the instructor has helped him with how to undo wheel nuts. And then we have Denzel, who has a disability. He works really hard in carpentry and needs lots of help. We have Bridget. She has autism and does not say much. She loves rural studies.

Ms De SILVA: What other things can you say about Baw Baw Skills, Liam?

LIAM: It is great for kids to accomplish their goals in carpentry, automotive or plumbing and electricity so maybe they can put that on their résumé and it will help them get a job and have a future in being what they want instead of going down the wrong path.

Mr BLACKWOOD: Well done, mate.

The CHAIR: Well done. Awesome. Can I ask you something?

LIAM: Yes.

The CHAIR: When I had a car when I was younger I used to change the oil and the oil filter and the fuel filter and all of that. Cars have changed now. They are very high-tech. What made you get into wanting to work on automotive, and what is your favourite car?

LIAM: Well, I like the VLs and the VPs. I like my Holdens. The reason why I chose automotive is because me and my brother used to work on cars all the time. We would just take them down to the track and stuff, so that is why it inspired me to go and do it.

The CHAIR: That is wonderful. Well done.

Ms De SILVA: As Liam said, he started at Baw Baw Skills last year but just had a lot of issues—can I say, Liam?—a lot of behavioural issues at school. But Baw Baw Skills have really enhanced our programs within the secondary school, and he is now one of our top students at Baw Baw Skills. Still mucks up a bit at school, though—

LIAM: Yes.

Ms De SILVA: But we can actually see—and as we were saying, we are talking about a pathway for our kids with special needs—they could move on to VET if they are quite capable like Liam. We are getting Liam at quite a young age, and it is just wonderful for this program to be supporting our school.

Ms CONNOLLY: Liam, I have got a question for you. I am just wondering how old you are.

LIAM: I am 16.

Ms CONNOLLY: You are 16—wow. And pulling apart cars and doing all the things I never learned how to do. That is incredible.

LIAM: Well, it is one special thing to do in your week.

Ms CONNOLLY: Yes. My father said it was probably the thing you should learn before you learn how to drive—change the tyres and the things like that.

The CHAIR: I drive a Commodore now, and I heard yesterday that the Commodore is not going to be made anymore. That is sad, isn't it?

LIAM: Well, we have got to bring back all the Holdens.

Mr BLACKWOOD: Good work.

LIAM: Well, I have got a Kingswood at home.

Ms De SILVA: Yes, your mum drives a Kingswood into school.

LIAM: Yes, she has a HZ, so that is down at my stepdad's bro's.

Mr DUNLOP: Sue was going to actually give you some other perspectives. Have we got enough time, just a couple of minutes for Sue? Is that okay?

The CHAIR: Sure.

Ms De SILVA: So in your pack you have got the transition pathway. I just want to reiterate where Baw Baw Skills fits into our program. At the Warragul Special School our statement of purpose is that we actually have to get our students ready to be functioning adults and to develop their employability skills. Employability does not just mean, 'Get a job 9 to 5'; it is like finding interests, getting hobbies, volunteering. So Baw Baw Skills meets all of those criteria. If you look at the employability skills, even though Liam is learning automotive, he is communicating with other people and he is having to work with other students from other schools, which can be hard, so sometimes that can raise a few issues, can't it, Rod?

So it is also networking, and I talk to the kids about it. You get to meet these kids in other places, get to know Rod, see people around Warragul district. They have got to use their initiative. They have got to plan. They have got to self-manage. So it is all those employability skills that are getting them ready for post-school life. And for these students it is difficult. It is not just like it is for any other students; it is very difficult with intellectual disabilities, autism. Their parents are very concerned about them for when they do leave school. Baw Baw Skills becomes a pathway for our students, so it fits really nicely into our program.

Mr DUNLOP: I was just going to sum up with two things. One is that we think our programs are transferable, and we know other places that have copied them. We have probably got a slightly different financial set-up to most others because of again the wisdom of our leaders at the time, who actually bought the site off AGA, Apprenticeships Group Australia, and actually charged them rent—they stayed on as tenants. So we are unlike a lot of programs. We are self-funding in lots of ways and are able to support the programs we put in, so that makes us a little bit unique. They are being copied down in the Latrobe Valley now and certainly in a couple of other places around the state. We think the work we have done is of value to other areas because it is not just about West Gippsland. It is a really good model. The strength of the partnership is the level of trust between the partners. So instead of AGA and TAFE competing, we have a little bit of that still but the majority of it is what works best for the site and what works best for our students, and that is definitely the attitude of the

principal. So I think that makes it a bit special, and again I am not sure whether that is as easy to transport elsewhere, but it is a really good model.

And one of the other good problems that we have got now is that we are running out of space. We can do more programs, but the difficulty we have got with apprentices and school-based apprenticeships going—they are VETiS programs a couple of days a week—we are just chockas. We are full. And again there are good problems and bad problems; that is a good problem.

The CHAIR: Fantastic. Thank you so much for coming in. We appreciate it.

Ms CONNOLLY: That is a really nice way to end off, really, with this being our last one, isn't it?

The CHAIR: Very good, actually.

Ms CONNOLLY: A really wonderful, positive story.

Committee adjourned.