

TRANSCRIPT

LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL LEGAL AND SOCIAL ISSUES COMMITTEE

Inquiry into the State Education System in Victoria

Bendigo – Tuesday 16 April 2024

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WITNESSES

Angela Tremain, Assistant Principal, Bendigo South East Secondary College; and

Isaac Farr,

Gretel Farr,

Jasmine Bieleny, and

Michelle Bieleny.

The CHAIR: Welcome back to the Legislative Council Legal and Social Issues Committee public hearing in its Inquiry into the State Education System in Victoria. With us today we have Jasmine. Welcome, Jasmine.

Before continuing, Jasmine, I want to introduce you to the committee panel: Deputy Chair Ryan Batchelor; Ms Rachel Payne; Ms Melina Bath; Mrs Moira Deeming; Mr Aiv Puglielli; and Dr Renee Heath. We also have Mr Joe McCracken on Zoom joining us. My name is Trung Luu. Welcome.

I will quickly read this before we continue and ask you questions. In relation to the submission today all evidence taken is protected by parliamentary privilege, as provided by the *Constitution Act 1975*, and further subject to the provisions of the Legislative Council standing orders. Therefore the information you provide to this hearing is protected by law. You are protected against any actions for what you say during this hearing, but if you go elsewhere and repeat the same things, those comments may not be protected by this privilege. Any deliberately false evidence or misleading of the committee may be considered a contempt of Parliament.

All evidence is being recorded, and you will be provided with a proof version of the transcript following the hearing. The transcript will ultimately be made public and placed on the committee website.

Would you like to state your full name and where you are from.

Jasmine BIELENY: I am Jasmine Bieleny, and I am from Virtual School Victoria.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Jasmine, for coming. Would you like to make any statement at all, any comments, before we start asking you questions – about yourself or what the school is all about?

Jasmine BIELENY: Virtual School Victoria is an online school program. I am doing year 11 there.

The CHAIR: Thank you. One at a time would the panel like to open with questions? Dr Heath?

Renee HEATH: Thank you so much for coming, first of all. You do online school, do you?

Jasmine BIELENY: Yes.

Renee HEATH: How long have you been doing that for?

Jasmine BIELENY: I started doing it this year, but I did a program through VSV last year as well.

Renee HEATH: Fantastic. What made you make the change? Were you at a regular school before that?

Jasmine BIELENY: Yes. I was just a normal student at full-time school and it just was not working for me, so I decided to switch.

Renee HEATH: What was it about it that you just felt was not working?

Jasmine BIELENY: The whole environment just was not for me, I do not think. It was not working well.

Renee HEATH: What effect was that having on you? Were you feeling stressed out or not keeping up with school?

Jasmine BIELENY: Just a lot of anxiety with it.

Renee HEATH: Okay. So you came, and you are doing online school now, which is awesome. How have you found the transition?

Jasmine BIELENY: I found that it works really well for me.

Renee HEATH: That is good. What subjects are you doing?

Jasmine BIELENY: English, legal, business and industry.

Renee HEATH: Wow. Are you going to go into the business sector? What are you hoping to do afterwards?

Jasmine BIELENY: Yes, I am hoping to do business.

Renee HEATH: Fabulous. That is fantastic. How does it work? Do you attend online lectures? Is it a bit like, potentially, university in that sense?

Jasmine BIELENY: Yes. They have got an online portal. The classes are based on there, and it has got all the content. Then we have got online classes as well to attend, and we have to submit our work every week.

Renee HEATH: Do you get to meet other people through it?

Jasmine BIELENY: Yes, in our online classes.

Renee HEATH: Have you made some friends through that experience?

Jasmine BIELENY: Yes, I have met a few people.

Renee HEATH: That is good. I have just a few more questions. So you were finding school I guess quite stressful and maybe not doing as well as you had hoped academically. Has some of that turned around?

Jasmine BIELENY: Definitely, yes.

Renee HEATH: That is good. I guess you are feeling more confident.

Jasmine BIELENY: Yes. For sure.

Renee HEATH: Good on you; that is awesome. And good luck with your business course. That is fabulous.

Jasmine BIELENY: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Dr Heath. Jasmine, just in relation to your education, what would you like to do when you finish? Where do you think you will end up?

Jasmine BIELENY: Probably the business pathway, I think.

The CHAIR: Fantastic. What would you like to see in relation to what you are learning at the moment remotely? What would you like to see to assist you with the program?

Jasmine BIELENY: Sorry, what was that?

The CHAIR: Would you like more resources or more teacher aid with the regional learning? What would you like to see?

Jasmine BIELENY: For me the Virtual School Victoria is really well set up, but I would like to see other kids like me being able to have the same opportunities.

The CHAIR: Fantastic. Thank you. Ms Bath.

Melina BATH: Was it an easy decision to cross over to Virtual School Victoria? Was it easy, or were you at your wits' end and you thought, 'I've got to do something'? Did you talk to your mum or dad about the decision?

Jasmine BIELENY: Yes, I talked to them, and they were supportive. Then we sort of talked to the school when I was at BSE at the time, and then I ended up at Virtual School Victoria. But the pathway to getting in was a little bit tricky, I guess.

Melina BATH: Okay. Could you just describe ‘tricky’ for us?

Jasmine BIELENY: Well, you sort of have to have a reason and go to a psychologist, or it depends on your reasoning, so like medical reasons and things like that.

Melina BATH: Okay. Can I make a guess and say you are a good student, you like learning.

Jasmine BIELENY: Yes.

Melina BATH: Therefore that interaction on the two-dimensional screen works for you. What do you think about other students – this is a hypothetical question – who could not see that pathway to virtual schools? What options would they have, do you think?

Jasmine BIELENY: I do not really think there would be much out there for them. It is really in Victoria just the virtual school.

Melina BATH: Fantastic. And favourite class?

Jasmine BIELENY: I like legal studies.

Melina BATH: Fabulous. We had a legal studies teacher who was teaching at Virtual Schools Victoria this morning, so that is pretty cool. I wonder if it is her. Okay. That was more than one.

The CHAIR: Ms Payne.

Rachel PAYNE: Thanks, Jasmine, for coming and speaking to us. I guess I would just like to understand a little better how it came about that you learned about this opportunity. Was it something that the school presented to you, the physical school that you used to attend, or was it something that you found information on on your own behalf and then decided to follow that pathway?

Jasmine BIELENY: After I was doing the part-time program at BSE, I found that there were some other students going through that program. So then this year instead of going to in-person school I decided to make the switch.

Rachel PAYNE: Good for you. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Ryan? Any questions?

Ryan BATCHELOR: Yes. Are any of your other friends that you went to school with previously also doing this virtual school? Or the flip side to that, where are the other kids in your virtual classroom from?

Jasmine BIELENY: They are from all over Victoria, but I am the only person that I know that goes to the school.

Ryan BATCHELOR: So from all over the state?

Jasmine BIELENY: Yes.

Ryan BATCHELOR: Are they from other regional areas? Are there any from Melbourne?

Jasmine BIELENY: Yes, all over Victoria.

Ryan BATCHELOR: All over Victoria. Okay. And how many in a class?

Jasmine BIELENY: It depends on the class, but some of them have up to 60 people in the meetings, so there is quite a lot.

Ryan BATCHELOR: Sorry, I am trying to think about what it is like to go to the school. What does it look like lesson by lesson or day to day?

Jasmine BIELENY: We have got our scheduled classes and a timetable. We have got our meetings that we join throughout the day, and some of it is self-regulated to keep up with it.

Ryan BATCHELOR: You check in with teachers and other students and then you go off and do work, and then you might have a subject, a class?

Jasmine BIELENY: Yes.

Ryan BATCHELOR: Okay. That variety works online?

Jasmine BIELENY: Yes, I like it.

Ryan BATCHELOR: You like it. Great. Does the technology work too? Sometimes Zoom never works, but the technology works?

Jasmine BIELENY: Yes.

Ryan BATCHELOR: Okay. Good. Thanks.

The CHAIR: Thank you. I did online learning, because through the army we held places nation wide. That is why we had online virtual learning, and during that learning we had sessions where we had to go away and do a report and come back. Do you have a similar thing with your classes as well, where you have assignments and you go away and you finish them and come back and report online?

Jasmine BIELENY: Yes. We get in touch with our teacher, and we get feedback and everything after we have completed the work online.

The CHAIR: Do you share in those online lessons all your reports? Your presentations are online as well?

Jasmine BIELENY: Yes, we do.

The CHAIR: Okay. Thank you. Moira.

Moira DEEMING: Thanks for coming in, Jasmine. I think you are incredibly well spoken. You sound like you have lots of hope for your future, and that is fantastic.

Jasmine BIELENY: Thank you.

Moira DEEMING: I am glad that this option was available to you. One of the criticisms that some people level at anyone doing any kind of schooling outside of the traditional setting is that they will not be prepared to go into the workforce, they will not have those skills. I do not believe that at all, and I can see that that is the case from you already. But how would you respond to someone that had a worry about that?

Jasmine BIELENY: I would say that it works really well and that the current school system does not exactly advocate for everyone, so you can definitely be successful with it.

Moira DEEMING: Fantastic. And you have hope for your future? You are confident? You feel like you are going to be able to go forward with this with all the skills that you need to go out into the workforce?

Jasmine BIELENY: Yes, definitely.

Moira DEEMING: Fantastic. Good to hear. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Mr Puglielli.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Thanks for coming in today. I would just like to learn more about what a school day looks like for you. What is your timetable, and how do you spend your time? Could you describe for the committee what that looks like?

Jasmine BIELENY: Yes. Just like regular school, you will meet first of all in an online class, and then, for whichever class that is, you will get information on what to do for the week. Then during that period – say, like for an hour or 2 hours – you will do the completed work, and then you will go to the next meeting. Throughout the week if you need to catch up on anything, you will do that, and then at the end of the week you are to submit your work for the week.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Great. Do you find that in your work you try to keep between 9 to 5, or is it a bit more flexible than that? What does it look like for you?

Jasmine BIELENY: For me, it is school hours, so 9 to 3 probably, and then after school if you need to catch up on anything.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Great. Do you feel like you are doing well managing your time and keeping on top of tasks and everything?

Jasmine BIELENY: Yes.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: That is terrific. Thank you.

Jasmine BIELENY: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Mr McCracken, would you like to ask any questions? He is on Zoom.

Joe McCracken: Yes, I do. Thanks so much for attending, Jasmine. I used to be a teacher, and I had a few students do the virtual school stuff. I guess one of the things that many people say about it is that they find it difficult in some ways because of the lack of social interaction with other people. Have you experienced that?

Jasmine BIELENY: I do not really feel that, because in the online classes we have got a lot of interaction through those, and there is always meeting people outside of school as well.

Joe McCracken: Yes, that is fair enough. What do you think the biggest advantage of a virtual classroom is for you?

Jasmine BIELENY: It would probably be self-learning and, yes, just sort of –

Joe McCracken: Self-directed, yes. Okay. That is fair enough. I know you can sort of go at your own pace and do things. You have got more flexibility. Would that be a fair thing to say?

Jasmine BIELENY: Yes, flexibility – for sure.

Joe McCracken: Okay. That is cool. I guess in terms of preparing for assessments and those sorts of things, what support do you get using Virtual School Victoria? How do you go preparing for an assessment if there is one coming up, like a SAC or something like that?

Jasmine BIELENY: With our online classes we get to ask questions. We are always in touch with our teachers if we need, and they give us all the information we need in preparation for all the SACs and assessments.

Joe McCracken: Okay. So do you get like a big stack of things at the start of a week or is it drip-fed to you from week to week? I know some people can get it in the mail. How do you access the information? Is it all just online?

Jasmine BIELENY: Yes. It is from week to week, so we will have our online portal set up for the week's work.

Joe McCracken: Okay. That is cool. All right. Thanks very much. I have gone through all my questions.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Thank you, Joe. Thank you, Jasmine for coming in. I think the way you are learning is happening nationwide. It is being used by the Australian Defence Force for their office as well. I trained in that. Congratulations and all the best. I just want to ask one question. I think Joe touched on it in relation to preparation for exams and preparation for presentations. Do you liaise with the other students after

hours, during your sessions and after school hours? Do you actually go online and liaise with other students and work together?

Jasmine BIELENY: I am not sure if that is set up or not, but in our online classes we can communicate with each other.

The CHAIR: During school hours but not after school?

Jasmine BIELENY: We can email each other, but I am not sure if that is set up.

The CHAIR: Okay, thank you. Thank you very much for coming in. It is fantastic that you actually present other options. We are looking for recommendations in relation to opportunities for kids learning with a different approach to the education system. Thank you so much for coming in. Is there anything else you want to add, for our committee, about your experience or what you would like to see?

Jasmine BIELENY: I think that is everything.

The CHAIR: Thank you.

Renee HEATH: I just do not know if this is within the standing orders – are you Mum?

Michelle BIELENY: Yes, Michelle.

Renee HEATH: Lovely to meet you, Michelle. Am I allowed to ask how she has found the transition? Is that all right? I just wanted to know how you found the change with Jasmine and what you have seen.

Michelle BIELENY: It has been amazing. My husband and I were a little bit reluctant, especially in year 10. We immediately thought, like everybody does, 'Is it going to be detrimental for her future? Is it going to affect her socially? Is she going to be disadvantaged on a social level?' But we really just listened to Jas and trusted that she knew what was best for her. She was really, really struggling, and it was hard to watch as a parent. So we went to the school. We were lucky with her school that they were supportive and that they saw that it can really be a safety issue as well for some students. Jas was struggling in every area because she could not focus in class and it was affecting her health and wellbeing. By having that support, she just thrived. She started getting great results.

The social thing was a big thing for us. But the thing was that she was more social after going online, because being in that school environment and having that social anxiety, which a lot of kids do, she was so drained at the end of every day and she was not able to interact with anybody outside of school because she had nothing left. I used to say to her, 'Go do something. Ring your friends on the weekend.' She would say, 'I've just spent five days with them. I'm exhausted.' Now she will go and catch up with her friends because she has not seen them all week and she is a lot more social now than she was, so it just goes to show that it is not always the case.

Renee HEATH: And you would recommend it to other parents?

Michelle BIELENY: I think it is an individual thing. I do not think it is for every child, but more and more I think it could really benefit. I do not think high school is the real world. A lot of kids really struggle in that environment. I kept saying to Jas, 'It's not like this in the real world. People don't act like this in the real world. This is just high school and it is a hard time for everybody.' There is a lot of distraction and there is a lot of behaviour that is unacceptable in the real world, so it does not suit all children who are maybe a little bit sensitive to that or have those sorts of social issues. I highly recommend it for kids that are struggling.

Renee HEATH: Thank you, Michelle. Thank you, Chair.

The CHAIR: Thank you so much for coming in. We have Isaac coming up as well. Thank you for coming in.

Jasmine BIELENY: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Welcome, Isaac. Thanks for coming. I will quickly introduce us. I am Trung, and these are my Deputy Chair Ryan, Rachel, Melina, Moira, Aiv and Renee. We have also got Joe on Zoom as well. Thanks for coming in.

I will just quickly read this to you, and then we will ask you a few questions. This is for all witnesses who come in. All evidence taken is protected by parliamentary privilege as provided by the *Constitution Act 1975* and further subject to the provisions of the Legislative Council standing orders. Therefore the information you provide to this hearing is protected by law. You are protected against actions for anything you say during this hearing, but if you go elsewhere and repeat the same things, those comments may not be protected by this privilege. Any deliberately false evidence or misleading of the committee may be considered a contempt of Parliament.

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Would you like to state your full name and where you are from.

Isaac FARR: I am Isaac Farr, and I am from Victory Christian College.

The CHAIR: Thanks, Isaac. Would you like to say something about your school and how you find it so far?

Isaac FARR: It is definitely a change from BSE. I find it fairly easy compared to last year in regard to just, like, overall environment and behaviour of the students.

The CHAIR: And the class – was it the same size class, or was it less students?

Isaac FARR: Yes, roughly the same size.

The CHAIR: And do you feel more relaxed when you go to class now?

Isaac FARR: Yes.

The CHAIR: I might ask the panel if they want to ask any questions as well, okay? Ryan, do you want to ask some questions?

Ryan BATCHELOR: Yes. What else is different about it? So you changed schools last year, is that right?

Isaac FARR: Just this year.

Ryan BATCHELOR: Sorry, this year. What else is different?

Isaac FARR: Obviously the different people and just like a different layout, but besides that – which would be obvious – there is not too much difference. In my opinion it feels still quite similar. The difference between a public school and a religious school is definitely something that I found interesting to attune to, but aside from that I did not really think there was too much difference between the two.

Ryan BATCHELOR: Are they about the same size?

Isaac FARR: No, BSE was maybe four times bigger. It is, like, 400 students to 1100 students.

Ryan BATCHELOR: But your classroom, the classes there are about the same size?

Isaac FARR: The classrooms are the same size, yes.

Ryan BATCHELOR: We know that you are in a different year now, but similar types of classes you go to – it feels pretty much similar?

Isaac FARR: Yes. The same sort of school day really, yes.

Ryan BATCHELOR: Are you happy with the move?

Isaac FARR: I would say so, yes. A lot happier than last year.

Ryan BATCHELOR: Yes. Change is always hard, so it is impressive that you have been able to do it. I might leave it there.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Moira.

Moira DEEMING: Can you take us through the decision to change schools?

Isaac FARR: Pardon?

Moira DEEMING: Like, why did you? What brought up the decision to change schools?

Isaac FARR: The whole year was probably just difficult to get through at BSE. For my parents it was quite obvious that we needed to change, but I was a bit reluctant because I am not very good at attuning to change. But by the end of the year we were all pretty firmly agreeing that we needed to go somewhere else. Just basically the whole experience about the school, and on top of that the wellbeing area – staff members of the school also recommended to do the same thing. So by the end of the year we ended up making the decision to change.

Moira DEEMING: Yes, and that is not a failure on behalf of a student. That often happens to lots of students, sometimes just a school environment with a particular cohort of kids, sometimes a set of teachers. It is a really good circuit breaker to start again at a new school sometimes. A lot of children do that, so I think that it is wonderful that you did that even though you were a bit scared, and I am glad it is going well for you.

The CHAIR: Aiv?

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Hi. Thank you for coming in today. What is your favourite part of going to school?

Isaac FARR: I think if it has a good environment, that is probably my favourite part about it because it allows it to be so much easier and more enjoyable to do things in it. If you have good people in your classroom, it can really elevate your experience.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: What is your favourite subject that you are studying at the moment?

Isaac FARR: My favourite subject is probably PE because I just like running around and playing games, but if we are talking academic type of stuff, I would probably say English, as I find it enjoyable to just write.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Do you think a lot of people in your class, particularly for English, have the same perspective?

Isaac FARR: Some. I mean, people obviously like different things. I would not think so.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: I guess everyone is different at the end of the day, but all in all, you enjoy going to school where you are now?

Isaac FARR: Yes.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: That is great to hear. Thank you for coming in.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Renee.

Renee HEATH: Thank you. It is so nice to meet you, Isaac. I am sorry, I did not hear – what is the name of your school?

Isaac FARR: Victory – VCC.

Renee HEATH: Victory Christian College – is it here?

Isaac FARR: Yes.

Renee HEATH: Okay, wonderful. For some reason I thought you were going to a virtual school, so I am glad that I have got my information right now. What school did you go to beforehand?

Isaac FARR: Beforehand, last year, we went to BSE for a year.

Renee HEATH: Okay. What was it about that that made it difficult? You said your parents – I assume this is Mum, is it? You mentioned that they noticed that something needed to change. What was that?

Isaac FARR: I think it was my general reaction to the behaviour of the other students, because they were very rowdy and misbehaving a lot, and I struggle with that because I want them to be able to use their time wisely so they can actually do good later on. But when they do not do that, it does make me annoyed.

Renee HEATH: This might or might not surprise you, but there was an article recently that said there were about 100 countries surveyed and Australia's classroom disruption was ranked 69 – it was so bad. Was that classroom chaos causing you stress? Was that the reason you thought, 'I just can't put up with this anymore'?

Isaac FARR: Yes, I reckon that is pretty accurate.

Renee HEATH: Do you think that you learn better in a calmer classroom?

Isaac FARR: Absolutely. The most comfortable environment I would be in is an environment where I can talk to people but not have people go crazy about it. I want it to just stay appropriate so we can focus really.

Renee HEATH: Yes, that is right. Could I ask, remembering back, what the worst thing that happened in a classroom was or the most stressful?

Isaac FARR: The worst thing in a classroom was probably towards the end of a year where one kid got angry because we were doing a class game and he was losing a lot, because he was generally not liked and they kind of targeted him and then he got angry about it and lashed out.

Renee HEATH: Wow. And when he lashed out, what did he do?

Isaac FARR: Attacked other kids in the classroom.

Renee HEATH: Wow. How did that make you feel?

Isaac FARR: To be honest, he was kind of small, so he was not too threatening, but if it was another person, then it would have been quite scary, I guess.

Renee HEATH: Yes, terrifying maybe.

Isaac FARR: Yes.

Renee HEATH: Yes. Good on you. How old are you now?

Isaac FARR: Pardon?

Renee HEATH: How old are you?

Isaac FARR: I am 14 now.

Renee HEATH: Fourteen. What are you hoping to do in the future?

Isaac FARR: I am not sure yet.

Renee HEATH: No stress if you do not know.

Isaac FARR: I will just see what the future brings and see if I want to do anything then, because I have no idea right now.

Renee HEATH: Do you mind if I ask your mum her reflections? Is that okay? Sorry, what is your name?

Gretel FARR: Gretel.

Renee HEATH: Gretel – so nice to meet you and well done on coming today. What have your reflections been in the change?

Gretel FARR: Look, it has been a really challenging time. We did actually apply to schools online, but we were rejected from there, so we did not have a school at all for the first few weeks. It has been a really challenging time. We engaged with BSE to say, ‘Look, we don’t think he can remain here.’ So we pulled him out in the hope that we would get him into the virtual schools, but they said, ‘Sorry’. Fortunately, within a day we actually got a call from a local school to say they did have a place, which originally they did not. So it was a very quick start to school; we started about a week late. But yes, it has been exceptionally challenging to get him to go to school. He is generally a student who has always been a very high achiever, and the challenge that he was explaining to us was just that he could not focus and that the teachers had to spend so much time just trying to moderate other kids that they would not hardly get any class time. Yes, he really struggled with that.

Renee HEATH: That is getting more common.

Gretel FARR: Yes.

Renee HEATH: Yes. There is one school I heard from, a school in my region, that just have to have a teacher walk up and down the corridors to keep everything safe, and that is just outrageous.

Gretel FARR: It unfortunately does not surprise me.

Renee HEATH: And it is not fair on students.

Isaac FARR: I would argue even if we did have something like that, it would still be very noisy and uncontrolled.

Gretel FARR: Yes. When Isaac was a kid in primary school, he used to hate school holidays because he loved school so much. So we actually saw an absolute reversal from a child who loved learning, loved school and loved everything about it to where we could not actually get out of bed in the morning to go.

Renee HEATH: Wow. I really hope you get that passion back, because you can do anything, honestly. And that sort of makes sense then, why there was a laugh between you two when I said, ‘I thought you were from a virtual school.’

Gretel FARR: We tried.

Renee HEATH: What grounds were you rejected on?

Gretel FARR: They just said he did not meet the criteria and did not go any further. We did have a letter, because we had been getting formal counselling for a mental healthcare plan for some time, and we also had the letter from the school, and that was all they provided. Whilst I was about to follow it up, we then got an opportunity locally, and I just thought, ‘I just need to take this because he needs to go to school.’

Renee HEATH: Yes.

Isaac FARR: But you have said that it was quite difficult to contact the school about getting the required information and stuff to apply.

Gretel FARR: Yes, it was not an easy process at all.

Isaac FARR: You were working for, like, two whole months just to get one email.

Gretel FARR: True. It was a pretty challenging process.

Renee HEATH: Then I wonder – you said that you still do not love school now, but you said you are happier than you were last year, and sorry if I have mixed your words up a little bit there – if there was the choice between this or the virtual school, which one would you prefer?

Isaac FARR: Definitely what I am doing now.

Renee HEATH: Good. I am so happy, and I hope you get that love for learning back. Good on you. Well done, Isaac. That alarm was telling me to shut up, so I will pass it on.

The CHAIR: Thank you. I personally think he is more advanced than an average student, so I feel I am glad he did not go to virtual school. I think you made the right decision, and I think you have found the right place. I think you are more advanced than normal kids at your age, personally, Isaac. Well done. I will quickly throw to the panel for some questions. Melina.

Melina BATH: Okay. Issac, if I can just ask Mum – Gretel, we are going to make recommendations to government. Clearly I feel like it has not been a choice that you wanted to make but one you felt compelled to make. What recommendations do you have to government from this committee, where we are talking about state education – you know, one or two recommendations – to better serve students so that they do not feel compelled to leave the state education system?

Gretel FARR: I think it is probably about having options. We felt that there were very few options for us where he was. Through COVID there was some ability to do some work from home and things, and I know for some children that works really well, but once that had finished and everyone had to get back, there were a lot of issues I think with kids' ability to cope and there were not any options. Everything was off the table. You had to be back in school. We tried to access all of the supports available, and they were doing the best they could, but what was going to work for Issac was just not available in the public system. We could not find it. I talked to so many different parents to understand what their experiences were at other schools to try and figure out how we were going to find the right place, and that was when we went down the online route originally. Then we tried to keep our options open, so we also tried for other schools, but we realised the public system was just not going to be able to cater. He was someone who loved school, and then I just could not get him to go.

Melina BATH: With no disrespect to VCC, it was a bit like 'Anything else but', in a sense.

Gretel FARR: Yes.

Melina BATH: Okay. So a recommendation: provide options.

Gretel FARR: Yes, options. And I had to do a lot of the work through my own networks. There was not really anything. I only found out from a friend that there was this virtual school online. Their child was also at BSE. They have since left and are in virtual school online now. I did not even know it existed, so I did not even think it was an option when we first realised there was a challenge.

Melina BATH: Thank you. Thanks, Chair.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Rachel.

Rachel PAYNE: No, it is okay.

The CHAIR: I think Joe has dropped out. I know you said you want to have the options. I personally think that is not Isaac's issue; I think it is the classroom and all those around him. Besides the options, is there any other thing that you would like to see? It is not the course. I think you are more advanced and you are not the issue; you are not the problem, Isaac. I think there are issues around the surroundings which may force you to make the choice to move. But should there be other options besides getting Isaac to move? Is there anything you would like to see us recommend for the education system?

Gretel FARR: I think one of the things which came up time and time again was that the school did not have the ability to manage the students. I guess the point of difference with where he is going now is: if they have three strikes, the kid is out, and the school can then refocus. But at a public school, where do they go? With some of the stuff that Isaac was telling me about I actually was quite afraid for his safety, and it is just not an environment you want to send your kid into. I actually do not know what the answer is, but there do not appear to be enough ways to actually manage the kids' behaviours that are disruptive and in some cases unsafe. Teachers are there to teach, they are actually not there to police the kids, so I can imagine there are a lot of challenges there.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Thank you so much for coming, Isaac. I think you have got a bright future. Keep up the good work that you do. You will do well. I know you are thinking of other people, but you are doing a great job, so all the best. Thanks for coming in and sharing your story. Thanks, Mum, very much. We have got one more person coming in.

Hi, Angela. Thanks for coming. Is it Tremain?

Angela TREMAIN: Tremain.

The CHAIR: Tremain, sorry. Welcome. I will quickly read through this and we will continue on.

Regarding all evidence taken, it is protected by parliamentary privilege as provided by the *Constitution Act 1975* and further subject to the provisions of the Legislative Council standing orders. Therefore the information provided during this hearing is protected by law. You are protected against any actions for what you say during this hearing, but if you go elsewhere and repeat the same things, those comments may not be protected by this privilege. Any deliberately false evidence or misleading of the committee may be considered a contempt of Parliament.

All evidence is being recorded, and you will be provided with a proof version of the transcript following the hearing. The transcript will ultimately be made public and posted on the committee website.

I think you heard all our names. Please state your name, and you can make a following opening statement, if you like.

Angela TREMAIN: My name is Angela Tremain. I am the Assistant Principal at a local school here in Bendigo which the two previous young people used to attend. I am sure you will probably gather more from asking questions, but my role in wellbeing probably for the last 10 years – even longer; since 2009 I have been working in wellbeing, when getting into education – and since COVID in particular has had a really strong focus on the wellbeing team within a school. For us, we are very lucky to have a social worker in every year level. We have a mental health practitioner. We have got a school nurse and diversity inclusion leaders. It is a very large team, and lots of schools have that now with the mental health funding that they get. However, prior to COVID we were able to focus on therapeutic supports within school. We were able to focus on financial hardship with parents, parenting programs and lots of different focuses for our social workers, which they were trained to do.

Since returning from COVID the main focus of the wellbeing team has been strongly on behaviour regulation of students, challenging behaviours and supporting teaching staff members with those challenging behaviours in the classrooms and helping the regulation of young people in class, lots and lots of parenting advice and linking parents into services in the community, because at the time they felt, coming out of COVID, that they did not necessarily have the same control. A lot of the time we hear those words, ‘I don’t have the control that I used to have with my young people.’ So I would say from a wellbeing point of view in the school our focus from the team has certainly changed since COVID to now working on those behaviour regulations but also, as with the two students who spoke before us, students who are just unable to come back to mainstream schooling. They are having a great deal of challenges – not school refusal. They are not naughty kids. They are not students whose behaviour is really challenging; they just do not have the capacity to step back onto a school ground.

Our school in particular for these two young people, when they talked about how big it is – a lot of Bendigo has open-class learning, open-plan learning, so there could be 75 to 100 students in one room. Coming back from COVID to that was very overwhelming. Even on a Webex you can see some other faces or you can block it completely, but coming back and sitting in an environment where there are 50, 75 or 100 students and multiple adults in a room was extremely confronting as well. I would say a lot of the work within the wellbeing team now has been: what are the options for these young people? How flexible can we be? We would find that with these young people in particular our social workers would be saying, ‘Well, let’s try to get in for an hour of a smaller class. Let’s try to get into something that you’re really loving – your legal studies class or something like that – and then for the next hour we might be able to sit with you in the wellbeing space,’ and trying to keep that exposure to the mainstream school happening. But that is social workers doing that; that is not a qualified teacher. So we are certainly seeing a massive change in the role of what our wellbeing staff are doing in schools since coming back from COVID.

The CHAIR: Thank you. I will start this off. So those two students previously were from your school?

Angela TREMAIN: Yes.

The CHAIR: Now, obviously you heard they had challenges and had to leave the school. I think both of them touched in relation to other kids. I think the second one touched on other kids' behaviours in classroom situations. It is fantastic that schools are having wellbeing and identifying the situation. Has anything been addressed in relation to – instead of assisting those individuals to move on or catering for them to move on to different schools, is anything being done to alleviate or mitigate the surroundings which caused the kids to move?

Angela TREMAIN: Yes, absolutely. I think, though, you are limited in what you can do. There is probably more than ever a lot of professional development that is being offered with challenging behaviours. That is not a part of the university degree when you are becoming an educator. There have been lots of conversations with universities to say, 'Is there something that we could offer for a semester in regard to trauma-informed practices?' They are becoming very popular within education degrees, but I know a lot of the work that they do is 'This is what trauma is. This is what happens with a young person when they experience trauma.' It is not necessarily 'This is how you work with it in the classroom,' and when you have got 25 young people or sometimes 75 young people sitting in front of you, how are you addressing every single student's behavioural needs and self-regulation and also getting across 70 minutes of curriculum content?

The CHAIR: Just on that – because we do recommendations after all these hearings – what would you like to see us recommend in relation to how to assist the school in that area? Because educators are not there to police the students, so what would you like to see or what recommendations would you like to hear?

Angela TREMAIN: Yes, absolutely. Within the training for education it would be fantastic were there a stronger focus on what trauma looks like in the sense of – a lot of our young people throughout COVID spent two years in some pretty horrible situations. They experienced a lot more domestic violence and a lot more financial hardship, with parents losing work. For the young people who were fortunate enough to have two adults in the house who continued working, they went for two years without having an adult in the house because those two people had to go and work. Our students now who are in grades 2 and 3 or grades 3 and 4 were at home for two years without the parenting, so even though they had fantastic experiences through COVID, we are finding now it is very challenging for them to come back, because they did not have those explicit instructions for two years. They did not have somebody setting those boundaries and routines. Because the parents did an amazing job saying, 'When I go to work, this is what you need to do, this is what you need to get through,' but realistically at a very young age they were making those decisions for themselves – 'If I don't want to open my computer, I'm not going to,' 'If I want to get onto a streaming service and watch Netflix for 5 hours, that's what I am going to do'. So now, coming back into the school system with educators saying, 'We need to do this work for 20 minutes, then we will do this and then we will get on to this,' the students are like, 'Hmm, I'd much prefer just to do this.' So there is a lot of that. I think with the experience of the young people having so much more independence at home it has been very tricky for them to come back and have those explicit instructions given to them during the school day.

The CHAIR: This leads on to my next question. I am just a bit curious – 75 to 100 kids per class. What class is that and how many teachers are actually doing the teaching during that class? Do you have ratios of teachers to students?

Angela TREMAIN: When they created the *Bendigo Education Plan* we had open space learning, and it is quite flexible in the sense that the school can use those spaces how they want to. But a traditional classroom right now would be nearly the size of a tennis court, and it is the same ratio of one teacher to 25 students, but you could have two classes in there, so 50 students and two teachers, or three classes, so 75 students and three teachers.

The CHAIR: And the outcome is the same in terms of the learning experience?

Angela TREMAIN: Yes, absolutely. I would not be able to go through the data in my head right now, but obviously they have kept going with that process. The interesting thing is that you can use it flexibly. We know that if a student is sitting in a year 8 class, not every student sitting in that class is at a year 8 level, so there is a lot more flexibility, with teachers being able to teach at a level younger than year 8 or advance some students or

extend some students within that classroom as well. So there is more flexibility. But also for one student whose behaviour is unacceptable, that is affecting 70 students instead of affecting 25 students.

The CHAIR: Just a last question before I pass it on. When you said it can be effective for different level students, how do they actually get selected or how do they actually get picked to go into those classes?

Angela TREMAIN: For any student in any class the teacher would be doing pretesting before a topic comes up, so they would have an understanding of the students' ability coming into whatever topic it is. With any class you walk into with 25 students there would be a mixed range of abilities and starting points for those young people. Coming back from COVID that is even greater, depending on how much learning those young people were doing in primary school – how much reading and writing they were doing, how much maths they were keeping up to date with.

I think what we have found also is the value of education has dropped since then because a person who went through two years of excelling and doing every single piece of work passed those two years of schooling, whether it was grade 6 or year 7. Some of our other students who did not open up their laptop – nobody failed. Everybody passed those two years. So the value of education coming back to that was really tricky for young people who say, 'Well, why do I have to sit and do work in my classroom now, because when I was at home during COVID I just did half an hour a day or I just listened to the ones that I wanted to listen to. I didn't actually hand in any assignments.'

The CHAIR: Were the marks less – did they drop – during those two years?

Angela TREMAIN: The results, certainly, depending on the work output of the young person. But the curriculum we tried to deliver the same; it was just in a different format. It was on Google Classroom or in an online format instead of face to face.

The CHAIR: Okay. I have five kids. Four went to virtual. The level of teaching on virtual was not the same. They had to do extra classes at home. So from personal experience I do not think that is quite right in relation to the outcome. But I think with the additional with virtual at home – mine ranged from two to six, and it took me several hours to get through each one.

Angela TREMAIN: Yes, and every school was certainly different. Some teachers would stay on for the whole 70 minutes of the class, and other teachers would set the explicit learning and then maybe stay on and answer any questions after that. But every school was different.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Deputy Chair.

Ryan BATCHELOR: Thanks, Chair. Thanks, Angela. Other than more walls, what do you think we need to do? I mean, this is reality that we are confronting; we cannot go back and change the pandemic. It occurred. Clearly lots of young people have been affected in different ways. You said that it appears there is more resourcing for mental health and wellbeing available now as a result of government investments. What do we need to do to try and address some of these behaviours? Because we have them, and there is some resourcing that has gone in. Is that the right sort of an approach? Are there other things we need to do? What more do we need to be doing?

Angela TREMAIN: I think the financial resourcing that went into mental health was correct in the sense that we knew coming back from that there was a six- to 12-month wait to get into a private psychologist or social worker face to face in Bendigo. Then that put a lot of pressure back on schools to be able to see those young people and their therapeutic needs, but again the people who had that experience in a school were taken off to work with the behaviour concerns or to try to get the students to school who were refusing. I think the financial capacity was there to try to engage different programs, but I would also not think that there is the amount of social workers and psychologists within the community. There is free university or reduced fees for teaching and nursing. However, for social work and psychology that did not happen.

I would also think it has been really tricky with staff retention in that with staff leaving the schooling environment we are now at the point where we are saying to third-year or fourth-year teachers in particular at university, 'You can have permission to teach earlier', which is fantastic, but these young people coming out of university getting permission to teach earlier are being put in a situation that was so challenging that all of those

experienced teachers were leaving. So I think we are setting ourselves up to fail, putting those young people in that situation with such challenging behaviours if at university we are not adding into the curriculum how to work with challenging behaviours, how to work with that young person in your classroom and still be able to focus on the teaching of every other individual in there.

Ryan BATCHELOR: How much do you think this can be resolved through additional mental health supports, wellbeing supports, and how much do you think it is classroom instruction related? How much is it about the way that teaching is done, about pedagogical methods of instruction, and how much do you think this is wellbeing supports in terms of solution?

Angela TREMAIN: I would say in regard to pedagogical approach, we really have to make sure every educator has an understanding of trauma informed, so being able to teach that class and have an understanding of what the experience is of every young person sitting in that class – what they have possibly been through through COVID or within their family situation – and how to best teach them for what they have been through. I would also think, though, that if we added more flexibility to schooling, we would not necessarily need to focus the wellbeing support where it is being focused, because these young people may not have had to leave the mainstream environment if we could have been more flexible with their learning.

Ryan BATCHELOR: What do you mean ‘more flexible’?

Angela TREMAIN: In the sense that when you go to a school you are enrolled full-time and you go to four classes a day. They got very used to, during COVID, that online learning and learning at a time that they wanted to. So the class might have been at 12 o’clock and they listened to the class instructions, but they were flexible to go and eat lunch or to go into the garden, whatever they wanted to, and then come back and do the work later. So to have some flexibility with our young people: ‘These are the classes that you are finding are not anxiety-provoking and that you feel safe to go into in a school setting.’ But then for these other classrooms that are quite anxiety-provoking for them or where they are not sitting in there getting any learning done, why can’t we offer flexibility in another space in the school or that that learning gets done at home for that young person? Because at the moment it seems like it is either mainstream or VSV, virtual school online. There is no crossover of what can be offered flexibly.

Ryan BATCHELOR: Great. Thanks, Chair.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Just before I pass on to the committee, is there a statement you brought along that you want to read?

Angela TREMAIN: I have got a couple: one from a student and one from a parent who are unable to come.

The CHAIR: Okay. Do you want to try and just read that to make sure that we capture that on the recording?

Angela TREMAIN: Yes. One is from a parent of a young person:

[QUOTE AWAITING VERIFICATION]

My child has been asked to share their experiences in their return to school after COVID. He is unable to express this time with you due to the trauma it has caused. He rarely speaks of this time, and as his mum, who has lived through this experience with him, I will share the hell that my son went through.

My son has always been an excellent, conscientious and respectful student, a student that teachers loved having in the classroom, a quiet student. COVID lockdowns showed him that he could learn in his own environment, a quiet environment with no distractions and an environment he did not have to mask how he really felt, and he was relaxed. He learned every day, and he showed up and participated in all remote learning classes. He was very self-motivated and happy.

When he finished grade 6 we thought we were set to start to step up and start 2021 in year 7. After a successful term 1, starting back after the school holidays, everything fell apart. The mask that he wore that he had had up for so long was too much, and the pressure gave way and he mentally collapsed. He became so overwhelmed his anxiety became too big for him and we needed help. This time was the most isolating and traumatic for him and affected the whole family.

Thinking that mainstream schooling was the only option, I tried almost every day for the next two terms to get my son to school. He would get in the car, we would drive to school and he would freeze. He wanted to go, but he just could not get out. Nothing worked. He had been pushed too far. We needed to step back and take time – time to heal, time to breathe – and find another way to educate him.

He is now doing his third year with VSV, Virtual School Victoria. It has saved us. He has learned in his own environment, at his own pace and in his own time. He is mentally better, and he has had time to become stronger. By the time I got on to the long waitlist of services to help us, he was in a place that he could not be reached. I was the only one he trusted, and I stood by him. Navigating through this as a parent was incredibly hard, and it is a horrible place to see your child reach rock bottom.

The CHAIR: Thank you.

Angela TREMAIN: Another one is from a young person who was really hoping to be here:

[QUOTE AWAITING VERIFICATION]

In 2019 I was in grade 6. I was my school performing arts captain and had one of my lead roles in a school musical. I was enrolled in high school at St Helena college in Melbourne based on a special selection process for their performing arts program. Things were going well. In 2020, year 7, I started at St Helena, was a part of the performing arts group, attending some excursions with the group, and was becoming to find my way. Then COVID lockdown started and I had to do school at home. I worked from home completing my tasks, and when the lockdowns continued I found it difficult to stay focused and stay on my work. I hated being on camera for my classes, for my mates and for the teacher to see. I'm an only child, and my mum and her partner were having problems. They separated during this time, and Mum and I moved out on our own. All of my cousins and grandparents were living in South Australia. We weren't allowed to leave Melbourne to go and see them, so it was just me and Mum. I started hating lockdowns and school from home. I started getting bullied at school online and found it difficult to work out how to make friends when we couldn't leave the house.

Mum was considered an essential worker, a teacher, who was required onsite at work to supervise the school with other students whose parents were essential workers. Mum tried to get me to come to work with her, but I refused to leave the house. Eventually I even struggled to leave my own room. I was lonely, and all I wanted was to have some friends and for things to be normal again. I started hating the way I looked and refused to be seen on my virtual classrooms if I did attend those lessons. I started taking antidepressants that year and continue to take them still today.

At the end of the year, when we were finally allowed back at school, I felt strange. I had no friends, and everyone else had seemed to have moved on already. People were talking about me and bullying me. I refused to go back to school. Mum had no choice but to find me a new school.

In 2021 I started Bundoora Secondary College. I had started at Bundoora Secondary College, had just started to make friends and we were put into lockdown again. I occasionally did some of my lessons but felt so disheartened. I just wanted to belong to a group of friends. The ones that I had made started talking about me in bad ways. Towards the end of the year I made a new friend who was older than me, and in 2022 I had a lot of friendship issues and bullying. I hated going to school, I had lots of days off and my one older friend was not there when I wanted to go.

This same year Mum and I moved to Bendigo with her new partner. I was excited. I had heard kids outside of Melbourne were nicer, and I couldn't wait to move out of Melbourne. I started term 3 at Weeroona College Bendigo. I made friends with some boys in my class, but the girls started being mean to me. I felt so alone and out of place I refused to go back for the rest of the year, and in 2023, the start of year 10, Mum moved me to Bendigo South East Secondary College, where she now works. I didn't want students to know my mum was a teacher there, so we kept it quiet. I started to make a group of friends, a big group of friends. Finally I was going to have the friends that I wanted to stay at school. But for some reason I don't understand the students started picking on me. They were mean, and I was told that I was annoying and loud. Some of the boys even started a rumour that went around the whole of year 10 that I had an STD. At this point I refused to go back to school, and this was in term 2.

Mum enrolled me to complete year 10 at Bendigo TAFE. I thought for sure things would seem better there because they seemed a lot more flexible. I completed term 3 but wasn't able to go full-time. I had a lot of days off. Being at school was hard. I had problems with teachers and with students. I couldn't sit in the same classroom with loud noises and people looking at me. I refused to go back, and so I negotiated that I could study from home for the rest of that term.

Currently, in 2024, I've moved to Bendigo secondary college to complete year 11. I'm doing a VCP, Victorian curriculum pathway certificate, not VCE. This program has only 2½ days of school each week. Our classroom is away from the rest of the school, so I don't have to see a lot of the other students. I go to my class but still have lots of days off. I'm currently trying to work out how to get an apprenticeship or a traineeship.

In December 2023 I was diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder. I can't help to think that if COVID hadn't happened and I was at school and didn't have all of these problems I might have been diagnosed sooner and got the help and support that I needed to work out how to make friends and stay at school. I might have still been acting and doing performing arts and had more options to me to do VCE. I might not feel so lonely and isolated and have friends.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Rachel, do you have any questions?

Rachel PAYNE: Hi, Angela. Thank you so much for coming and speaking with us and also sharing some of the student and parent stories. Just reflecting on some of the cases that you have referred to, it seems as though during the pandemic some people really flourished in that environment of online learning –

Angela TREMAIN: Absolutely.

Rachel PAYNE: and the less distraction model, whereas for other children it clearly had a huge impact on their social abilities and on how they were interacting with each other. How do you navigate that pathway

forward then for students? Is it more individual and case by case, or is that just not really an option when you have got hundreds of students that you are representing?

Angela TREMAIN: Yes, it is tricky to navigate it within a school system, and I guess we get to the point where we are helping parents navigate it outside of the school system. When coming back, there are short-term things that we can focus on in regard to: 'It's still a modified timetable. Let's have a look at what classes we can get to and have some positive experiences in those classrooms and then gradually build on that.'

Rachel PAYNE: And that flexibility, like you were referring to.

Angela TREMAIN: Yes. And once they get back into the environment and they see that it is working well, then some students do get gradually back up to full-time. But otherwise it has been quite tricky, and it is case by case, yes.

Rachel PAYNE: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Ms Bath.

Melina BATH: Thank you. I am quite distressed by all the information I am hearing but very thankful that you have brought it to our attention and you have given us a reality check. The anecdotal evidence and some of the submissions that we have heard, you are reiterating – one of those, which is probably the lesser one in one respect, that I wrote down was about the physical environment and open learning. It is a bit like it was a trend a while ago. If you were building a new school to support student learning and staff, would you build open learning spaces across the whole school?

Angela TREMAIN: I think it is very similar to mainstream and online. There are students who benefit from both. Because there is a great deal of flexibility, I would probably build more partitioned walls so that you could have the ability to have open-space learning, because there are great benefits to it, but also have the ability to shut it down to a class of 25 when that is needed.

Melina BATH: Give that flexibility rather than one paddock fits all.

Angela TREMAIN: One for everybody, yes.

Melina BATH: Sure. Clearly Victoria had class closures for a lot longer than the other states. I have been looking up the Royal Children's Hospital national child health poll – 2500 respondents, and over 50 per cent said that remote learning had an impact on their child's mental health in the negative, as opposed to about 26–27 per cent for the rest of Australia. How do we rebuild our children that have had that loss? Some it suited, but more not. I have got anecdotal evidence in my family circle, which I am not going to relate. But how do we rebuild that, and what recommendations do we need to make to government to rebuild those children's wellbeing, ability to learn, self-esteem and all of that?

Angela TREMAIN: I think we need to have a better individual look as to what works for the young people. We cannot just go back to 'COVID's finished now, and we'll all go back to this school setting.'

Melina BATH: 'Pick up your socks.'

Angela TREMAIN: Exactly, yes. We were so flexible with adults. During the two years of COVID we were very flexible in saying, 'If you can work from home, then you should work from home.' Then when everything stopped and we could go back to work, that flexibility remained for a great deal of businesses. A lot of the agencies and businesses we work with now will still say on their email tags, 'I'm working from home these days, and I'm working in the office the other days.' So there was a great deal of flexibility for adults, but I think we assumed that the kids would be resilient and just bounce back. We did not offer any flexibility for them. They were straight back into the old setting. Students, because of the independence, matured very quickly during those two years –

Melina BATH: Or they went backwards –

Angela TREMAIN: or they went backwards, absolutely.

Melina BATH: or went feral, for want of a nicer word.

Angela TREMAIN: I think we are not necessarily catering for either end of that. The students who did flourish might be needing things at an earlier age. We offer work experience once you turn 15. We have apprenticeships and traineeships and different things to engage you in your education, but maybe that needs to drop in age because some of those young people did mature a lot quicker because they became more independent, whereas for the others who went backwards in that time, we need to really focus on what is going to get them back into the classroom and to be flexible. Maybe it is a more flexible approach. Maybe it is only this amount of time on the school grounds or only being in a class of 25 because they are not coping well with bigger classes than that. I think it really depends on how those young people came out of COVID and what needs they have now. But they are certainly not all the same needs, so we cannot treat them the same.

Melina BATH: I have got loads of other questions, but time is short. Thanks, Chair.

The CHAIR: Aiv.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Thanks, Chair. Thank you for coming in today and for sharing everything that you have shared with us this afternoon. I might pick up on the point of flexibility. Earlier today I raised this question with another person coming before us around, particularly in the post-COVID restrictions era, assessment – the burden that is placed on teachers in terms of assessing their students, particularly getting into the high school years. Do you think we are assessing students in the right way? Do you think there is a better model we could be using for assessing students? Do you have any thoughts you would like to share?

Angela TREMAIN: Yes, that is a tricky one, and it depends on the curriculum that is being taught to them. Same as when you get to a university, we have our formative assessment stage as we are going through the learning for a topic. We have got our formative assessment, and teachers will choose, depending on the topic, how that is best assessed, and then our summative assessment at the end of every topic. Yes, that is a tricky question that would take a lot of time to answer.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: That is fair enough.

Angela TREMAIN: But I think, again, that is flexible, though. We all have universities degrees now that are being offered online, so the summative and the formative approaches that they are taking for those assessments are happening online. Virtual schools are doing the same thing. I think we also need to be creative in addressing how the assessments are fitting the way that we are teaching.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Okay. Do you think the systems we have in place right now for assessment are creative enough?

Angela TREMAIN: Probably not, but I think we could also revamp the curriculum to make it. The two years that our young people spent at home – I think the needs that they have and the way that they view the world is completely different to how we did 10 years ago. Is the curriculum that they are learning even what they need right now? Therefore the assessment will change depending on that too.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Thank you. Further on from that, addressing some of the behavioural challenges that have been talked about this afternoon – and I think you referenced earlier in your contribution in the post-restrictions era that change for students coming back into the classroom – do you think teachers are supported currently to deal with those behavioural challenges?

Angela TREMAIN: I think they are supported. Well, leadership are doing everything they can, but it is also what is within their capacity. I think there can never be enough professional development or information that comes through schools in regard to what is a challenging behaviour. But what is behind that challenging behaviour? A lot of the time as educators we are quick to very much deal with the consequences of the behaviour that we see and not look at what caused that behaviour in the first place. Because there is an underlying issue that we could be working on so the behaviour does not happen again, not just dealing with the consequence of the behaviour.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Thank you. Just further on from that, we heard earlier today about teacher overwork and the burden that has been placed on teachers, particularly returning to the classroom post restrictions. We heard

the word 'burnout' mentioned. What solutions do you think could be put in place to maybe address these concerns that have been faced by a lot of teachers across the community?

Angela TREMAIN: I think the burnout that we see or the teachers talking about having so much more to do outside of the classroom is because they are not getting that full 70 minutes or the full hour, whatever the length of their class time is, to be teaching. If there were more supports in class, whatever that looks like, for the rest of the things that are happening in a classroom, then those teachers would not have to be working outside of that classroom on what they should have been doing inside the classroom. They would have the time to put aside for that.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Is that more staff in terms of dealing with that extra work?

Angela TREMAIN: Yes, absolutely. But if it is not more staff in the sense of human bodies, then it is teaching educators what they need to know about that challenging behaviour and working with it in the classroom. It does not necessarily have to be people, but it is resourcing educators with what they need for those challenging behaviours.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Ms Heath.

Renee HEATH: Hello. Thank you so much. That was really great, and I think it shows a lot of bravery and integrity for you to come and talk about the challenges, not just talk about the achievements that the school is having, so thank you for that. You have spoken about professional development, and you started your remarks by talking about behaviour regulations. It is not taught at university how to manage classrooms. I thought it was very interesting what you said about how you might learn about trauma responses but not how to manage them within a classroom. Is that something that needs to be taught at university?

Angela TREMAIN: Absolutely. I could not tell you semester by semester everything that an education student is doing right now. I have had some experience at La Trobe in teaching a child and adolescent development elective to first- and second-year education students, so I know that there are things that they can access. However, having the first experience of challenging behaviour on placement is very overwhelming. Having experience of that in years 1 and 2 of university before you go out on a placement and having not just 'This is what could be causing the behaviour, but this is how you should respond to the behaviour' would be extremely important to know before you get out on placement and see it in real life.

Renee HEATH: Yes, absolutely. Do you think that the closing of schools then and that detrimental effect is going on still, and do you see an end in sight for that?

Angela TREMAIN: Yes, I think so. It really depends on what age the young people were during those two years, because obviously there are different things developmentally that were happening for those young people. I absolutely think that it is still going on, depending on what age they were, but there will be an end to it, definitely.

Renee HEATH: Yes. You also mentioned that during that time some of the students just worked so hard and were so diligent and they passed and then other children just did not even open their laptop and passed. Just to flesh that out a little bit, do you think that some students should fail?

Angela TREMAIN: Not necessarily, but I think it was extremely tricky for education and the people who were giving directions because our main focus at the start was to make sure these young people are safe, make sure that they are communicating, make sure that they are not isolated. So the focus really changed. It was not necessarily, 'We have got six weeks of algebra and we have got six weeks of measurement.' Because no-one had dealt with a worldwide pandemic before, our first focus was: get online and talk to these kids and make sure that they are okay. Having said that, the curriculum that they even were set or that they worked through was different to if they had have been in a school setting, because our focus for their health and wellbeing was so different.

Renee HEATH: That is an interesting statement, I guess, that the focus changed. This is a question that in the last lot of regional hearings I asked a lot, and I was shocked at the answer, and that was: what percentage of

a teacher's time is spent teaching and what percentage is spent doing those other things, like behaviour regulation or the social work side of things? Do you have an estimate of what percentage would be where?

Angela TREMAIN: I would say that only 50 per cent of the time is being spent teaching. The rest of it is certainly self-regulation, behaviour regulation, wellbeing, making sure that the students feel comfortable in those spaces. So that is completely different. I guess if teachers were leaving at an older age, before they were due to retire, it is probably a massive difference for them to how they have seen education, because when I went to school a lot of educators were trained in education because they had a great knowledge of a curriculum area and it was not necessarily behaviour challenges that they had had to work with. So they would be able to stand in front of a class and give out all of their incredible knowledge, and the students would soak that up without any concerns for behaviour. But now that has changed, so there is so much more time spent focused on other things than just the curriculum.

Renee HEATH: Sounds frustrating. Thank you so much. Thank you, Chair.

Angela TREMAIN: You are welcome.

The CHAIR: Thank you so much, Angela, for staying back. I know we have gone way past time. I think it is very important because education is of vital importance; it is our next generation's future. So thank you very much staying back and going for an extended time. I apologise to the committee; I know we have gone past your lunchtime. Thank you so much for your submissions that you made and to those who submitted. The contributions go a long way, because it is very easy for committees to recommend additional funds. We do need additional funds, but it is where we put the funds and what we recommend the funds go into that that is the important part, so thank you very much.

Committee adjourned.