

TRANSCRIPT

LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL LEGAL AND SOCIAL ISSUES COMMITTEE

Inquiry into the State Education System in Victoria

Melbourne – Wednesday 8 May 2024

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WITNESS

Josie Howie, Principal, the Pavilion School.

The CHAIR: Welcome back to the Inquiry into the State Education System in Victoria. Joining us for our last session, this evening, is Josie Howie, Principal of the Pavilion School. Thank you very much for joining us, Josie.

Before I continue, I just want to read this information to you. All evidence taken is protected by parliamentary privilege as provided the *Constitution Act 1975* and further subject to the provisions of the Legislative Council standing orders. Therefore the information you provide 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. You will be provided with a proof version of the transcript following the hearing. The transcripts will ultimately be made public and posted on the committee website.

Just for recording purposes, could you please state your full name and the organisation you represent today.

Josie HOWIE: I am Josie Howie, and I am Principal at the Pavilion School.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Thank you for waiting around and for coming in to give a submission this afternoon. My name is Trung Luu. I am the Chair, and my deputy is Ryan Batchelor. I will quickly go through the committee before we proceed – Ms Bath down the end, Mr Puglielli, Mr McCracken, Mrs Deeming and also we have got Michael Galea on Zoom as well. He is hearing us. He will pop up down the track.

I know you actually have not provided a submission, so I invite you to open with any opening statement you want to make before we have any questions.

Josie HOWIE: I have an opening statement here.

The CHAIR: If you could, that would be great. Thank you.

Josie HOWIE: Get started?

The CHAIR: Yes, please.

Josie HOWIE: Hi, I am Josie Howie. I am here to share what I have learned from 25 years working alongside young people who have been excluded from the mainstream school system. I am the co-founder and Principal at the Pavilion School. The Pavilion is a flexible learning school in the state education system. We have got two campuses and 220 students. Our students are referred to us because their local high school has not been able to engage or support them based on their behaviour, high needs or their absence from school. We provide students with a flexible vocational year 12 certificate and a model that includes wellbeing support in every class, restorative practices and a focus on cultural safety. We have got 70 young people on our waitlist right now. These students are not engaged in school. Most flexible settings like ours in the state system are at capacity, and we have long waitlists. We lack the funding, resources and facilities we need to best support our students.

Today I am going to focus on the high rate of school disengagement in Victoria and in particular the kids that I work with who are most affected and what we can do about it. So why are so many students disengaging from school? Firstly, school disengagement is affecting all communities in Victoria. Schools serve communities and our communities are struggling. Every single community in Victoria is impacted right now by family and interpersonal violence, by mental illness and suicide, by drug and alcohol use. They are also impacted by financial stress and poverty and also of course the effects of COVID and the lockdowns and all the associated missed schooling. These are ongoing societal issues that affect everyone, and students bring this stress to school with them every day.

But student disengagement from school is compounded if you are a child that is involved in the youth legal system or you have been incarcerated. We know that incarceration leads to school disengagement. If you are a young person who lives with a mental illness, or if you have been removed from home and you live in the child protection system, or if you live with a disability, or if you or your family are homeless, or if you are way behind in your learning and you did not get access to literacy and numeracy foundational skills at primary school – these students have additional needs and trauma and are living with the impact of these traumas, and they bring this stress to school with them every day. Schools in the most part in our state system are not adequately set up to support this level of need.

Thirdly, it seems that schools are really not set up for all students. The school system is designed for the average student, the compliant, easier student, students who are pretty much on track with their learning and who have the key skills required to fully participate in learning. Plenty of students are doing okay in our current system; however, for those students more at risk, in school supports are very limited and there is little incentive for schools to retain these students and put in the extra resources required to engage them. Teachers and school staff are struggling to support challenging behaviours in class, and many are leaving the profession due to this stress. Many students report not feeling welcome or accepted at school and say they do not feel they can be themselves at school. This sense of exclusion and lack of belonging tends to most affect students that are queer, gender-diverse, neurodiverse, students of colour and Aboriginal students. Unfortunately, Aboriginal students continue to experience the highest level of exclusion and disengagement. This is the ongoing impact of government policies dating back to first colonisation, and this really needs to be addressed very urgently.

But what can we do? We need to urgently provide a full school resource standard to state schools. Resourcing schools properly is the key to making a real difference. We can resource every state school to provide an engagement hub where students get the support they need at school to stay at school, including getting learning support, social and emotional support, family and cultural support and support with challenging behaviours. We can develop whole-school trauma-informed programs and restorative and therapeutic programs for students, including developing non-punitive approaches to behaviour support. We can give schools more time, more space and resources to do the relational work that is needed to make students feel engaged and safe so that students can access the curriculum and the learning. We can learn from school programs that work, like the mental health practitioners in schools, the doctors in schools program and the primary welfare officer initiative. These work because they are real human resources, they are located in schools and they serve the students and families directly. The students need real live human supports, not bureaucratic interventions.

We could address the huge literacy and numeracy gaps by providing teacher assistance in every classroom where it is needed. Education support positions are easier to fill than teachers, and people can be recruited from the community, providing much-needed support to help kids stay engaged in learning. We need to listen to Aboriginal communities about how to improve schools for Aboriginal students. There has been a ton of work done through the Marrung strategy and the campfire conversations, where thousands of First Nations communities were consulted. We need to implement recommendations, and I welcome the funding in the new budget for Aboriginal self-determination and education. We can also implement the recommendations from the inquiries carried out by the Commission for Children and Young People into the educational needs for children in care and Aboriginal children in Victoria, and most recently, let us look at the *Let Us Learn* inquiry. Obviously these actions require resources and system changes, but schools are pivotal places in our community – they are places of learning, connection and healing – and any additional resources we put in would be an incredible investment in our future as a state.

Finally, we need to listen to teachers and other frontline services. We are all so stretched and under-resourced – this is why so many people are leaving the profession. There is so much goodwill in schools – so many teachers and support staff who want to make a difference – but I am afraid at the moment it feels like the goodwill is running out a bit. That is my statement. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Josie. I will open questions to the committee. Deputy, would you like to start?

Ryan BATCHELOR: Thanks, Chair. Thanks, Josie, for coming in.

Josie HOWIE: That is all right.

Ryan BATCHELOR: Do you think the issue of student disengagement, if that is the right word, from mainstream settings has gotten worse? How? And what do you think the drivers of that are or have been in recent years?

Josie HOWIE: I think some of those societal issues that are affecting all Victorians and particular communities more are really impacting because kids are in schools for lots of hours in a week and you do not just walk from a home environment into a school and dramatically change. You bring that need into schools. And if schools are not able to meet that need – so if we think about schools being places where you should be feeling safe and feeling connected and learning about all the different domains that you need to learn about in schools, there is a lot of work to do – and if you are not ready to learn because of all of those societal things that I spoke about, then it is a real challenge. I think we have seen an uptick in the distress that families and kids are experiencing. We can see that across all areas of the community, and I think it then puts more pressure on schools, being those places where kids are for like 25 hours a week, to do something about it. I think they are some of the key issues that I can tell you about.

I think schools have a huge responsibility and there are a huge amount of administrative responsibilities that fall onto schools that we can get really bogged down with, and we can forget about just being a safe, engaging, joyful place where kids can learn.

Ryan BATCHELOR: It is a really interesting point that has come up a couple times about not only what schools are meant to do but the breadth of tasks and activities that a principal, an AP and school leadership has got to do – they have got to be across everything. Do you think there is any way the system could help shift some of that load so that the principals, who are the educational leaders of the schools, could focus more on the educational and wellbeing leadership and less on the other stuff that takes up their time?

Josie HOWIE: I know Michael spoke about the differences in resourcing, and I am the principal of the school that he was talking about being at before, so it is a really interesting comparison. We do not have big administrative teams, so we do the administration ourselves. We do the facilities management ourselves. We can get tied up in the operational stuff of the school day to day, and a lot of our leadership team will, so we do not have that time and teachers do not have that time either to just think about fun – like making school engaging, thinking of something really creative and entertaining that you could do to make kids want to come back to school. So that stress is kind of contagious. It is like, 'We've got to get you through the curriculum, and we've got to hit all these targets,' where someone will come down on us if we have not filled out that portal or done that correctly or whatever. It takes a lot of the joy away from learning, and if that joy is not there, then kids do not want to come to school. Or if their needs are not being met, they do not want to come to school, because it is like, 'I can't get what I need there' or 'It's not fun enough'.

Ryan BATCHELOR: I understand. Thanks, Chair.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Ms Bath.

Melina BATH: Thank you. Thank you very much, Josie, for the work you do. I am interested in this: we heard up in Shepparton and we have heard from other teachers that sometimes they are in the firing line, that they are actually abused and potentially frequently – we have seen that in our submissions – or even physically abused as well. You have, if I can say, 200 high-risk students. How are the teachers? Do they leave? Are they the toughest of the tough because they hang in there or because they are altruistic and so caring? What I want to understand is, as we move in an ideal situation to a non-punitive approach: how is that risk borne by the teacher who still stays safe when there is an angry child?

Josie HOWIE: I think it is about approaching that child differently – if we have a way of working that is more accepting and nurturing and caring and actually meets that need. The behaviour is a communication tool for a child. Underneath that, there is a need. If we are addressing that need, then we are not going to see so much of the behaviour.

Melina BATH: So much of it.

Josie HOWIE: What we do is we do a lot more preventative work. We do a lot more relationship building, and really understanding that student as they come into the school, creating a lot of safety with that student. If we can understand and build a relationship with them and build a level of trust, then we are not going to see as

much increase in behaviour. If we can be really flexible and not feel like we have got to control and contain every swearword or anything, then they are going to feel a sense of agency. We just see the behaviour go down, just from the relational work that we do and the preventative work. It does not mean the behaviour does not still happen, but when it does we say, 'Oh, that looks like you need more help now. You can't go back into class tomorrow, but you are going to be working with us in a restorative or therapeutic program. We're going to work with you one to one, and we're going to actually address that underlying need rather than suspend you, put you over there, contain you and just leave you wondering what is going on.' So it is about addressing, I guess, the stress and the distress that kids are presenting with more. But you do need resources to do that, and you need the right staff to do it.

Melina BATH: That was going to be my question. Because it feels to me, if we pick another school with 200 students or whatever it is – a country school – you must be funded to a higher capacity than they are.

Josie HOWIE: No, I am funded just like a regular secondary school, so I just use that funding.

Melina BATH: How is your model working then? You have got these kids who are really struggling, and all schools have them, but you have a concentrated form. What are you doing with your funds then?

Josie HOWIE: We are changing things around, so students are coming for 3 to 5 hours a day, and we have staggered groupings. We have an outreach program. A lot of students that enrol with us have zero per cent attendance, so they might have gone two years not even being at school. We have a small team that would work on that, but it is really challenging. I guess we shift most of our funds into those human resources, which means we do not have as much to do all the adding value, additional things – or allied health professions – the things that we need, because we are putting those frontline teams in place.

Melina BATH: Thank you, I am very interested in this. I guess the other thing is – I am not trying to say that you have reduced expectations of your students, but they are coming in a lot more traumatised, so you have not got high-intensive year 12 studies, in that you are aiming to do physics or the like. Do you get what I am trying to say?

Josie HOWIE: Yes.

Melina BATH: So your level of expectation of their outcomes, from an academic point of view – you have softened all of that to cope with these traumatised students.

Josie HOWIE: Yes. So we offer the VCE VM as well, which is the vocational major. It is not a regular VCE.

Melina BATH: So there is no regular VCE.

Josie HOWIE: Yes. I mean, it is now considered regular VCE.

Melina BATH: Yes, sorry. It used to be – that is right.

Josie HOWIE: You know what I mean. It is a two-year certificate. It is different, and we would have some kids that are well engaged with that and some that are even doing university subjects and doing early entry. We have got a group of students that are doing that. The expectation about learning is very forefront, but I guess what we are doing is we are looking at who our school community is and we are starting from there. What we find is that over time they become more and more settled and then more and more interested in those learning outcomes. I think that is where schools struggle. They just need them to be there already and when they are not, it is like, 'How can we work on all of this?' That is why I am suggesting this engagement hub model within a school, because that could be a little safe place where students could be when they are in distress or when they have got a major issue that is bubbling away. It does not need to have a ginormous group of staff, but just a small group of staff that could actually get around that student. Most schools would have a wellbeing team, but they are very small and in big schools they are just not able to meet the needs of all the kids.

Melina BATH: Thanks, Chair. Thank you very much.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Ms Bath. Mr Puglielli.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Thank you, Chair. Thank you for coming in today. You mentioned in your spoken contribution the lack of facilities or lack of supports that you really need to fully meet the needs of students that you are working with. I am just hoping, could you expand a bit more on that situation for the committee?

Josie HOWIE: Is that just on facilities, did you say, or resourcing?

Aiv PUGLIELLI: It can extend to other issues as well – resourcing more broadly – but particularly facilities, as you mentioned. So if that is possible.

Josie HOWIE: Yes. We do have a number of different flexible settings in schools around Victoria. I think one of the things that we all have in common is that we are usually in some funny little building somewhere. At our Preston campus, we are in an old primary school, so that feels fantastic. It is a great space. But at our Epping campus, we are co-located within a Melbourne Polytechnic, and it is very small. We have got two tiny classrooms for 80 students, so it is not adequate. I think when you go around the states you will find that people are finding the goodwill of some commercial place that will give them a shopfront where they can run their programs from there.

I am really fortunate to be part of a review that went into complementary and alternative settings, and we are still in the process of that with the department of ed. I think that is fantastic because we are really trying to say, ‘What are we doing in this space, how do we do it well and how do we do something that is sustainable statewide?’ There are some fantastic ideas coming out of that, and I really welcome being a part of that and really looking at how we make those things more fair. When you look around all of them, everyone is funded slightly differently. There might have been, historically, things set up for one school but not for another, or ‘You get a building over there, but you’ve got to rent one over there.’ So I think there are differences.

If we want to have a really strong state school system, we have got to create universal access. If you happen to live near us in Preston, you can get access to the Pavilion School, but if you live in Sunbury, there is nothing really close by up there for you to go to in terms of flexible learning. Those kids or kids out of the Whittlesea growth corridor, when they are right out that way, parents out there and those 70 kids that are on our waitlist, where are they going if they cannot get into us? There are not a hell of a lot of other options, so that is an issue, and that is because we are not getting a higher level, specialist level of funding that we need.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Yes. That Epping co-located site that you mentioned, what has that meant for the students, that current situation that you have got there?

Josie HOWIE: It just means they have got less diversity of offering of subjects. We do not have access to a lot of the counselling. We have got one meeting room which doubles up as a counselling room and an everything room, and that is the only additional space that we have. What it means for those 80 students is that they come in and out more quickly. They come in for a 2-hour class and then they have just got to get out because the next class is going to come in. That is not ideal, and we really need a great facility for out that way.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Definitely. You also talked about the waitlists that you are experiencing and about that demand for what you provide to the community. Could you expand a bit more on that?

Josie HOWIE: Yes. I think you spoke about it with Michael and Kira a bit before, but there is a lot of demand for places in these types of schools. There is the independent sector, and big welfare organisations are setting up little schools around, but for the state schools that run like ours, there is just a huge demand, and that is to do with all of the disengagement we were talking about before. Parents and students are leaving the system. Then they are looking around, and because there are not enough of our kinds of settings around, they just line up at the next closest one and wait for there to be a vacancy for them to come in. And we do not want to keep on getting bigger and bigger. I do not want to get bigger. We have got 135 or so kids at Preston, and you do not want to go higher than that number because it gets hard to manage with the cohort that we have got.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Joe.

Joe McCracken: Thanks so much for the discussion so far. It has been interesting. I want to ask you about the challenges associated with attracting and retaining staff, particularly in your context. Can you talk to me a bit about that?

Josie Howie: We have not had trouble attracting staff. I think we differ from most schools in the mainstream sector. I think that is because we do something really specific and we have a really progressive model that I think people want to be a part of, and there is a lot of, like I said, goodwill because people want to make a difference in kids' lives. There are a lot of people that want to work in schools like ours, if they are set up well and run well. Retaining people over a long time is hard, because I do not have that, 'Oh, you've been here for five or 10 years, so I should be able to pay you more.' Well, I cannot, because my budget is so finite. Even if I have someone I would like to pay more or move up on the scale, I literally cannot offer it. So they will go into the independent sector, and that is hard. I can hold on to people for a certain amount of time.

I think the pressure on mainstream schools at the moment is so significant. We have got schools that are not able to run classes and get programs off the ground because they do not have the staff there, and I think that is really urgent. It is not as urgent a problem for me. But what it does to our school communities is that the pressure those schools are feeling puts pressure on the kids, and then the kids are disengaging because there is so much movement of teachers and there is no security in relationships between teachers and students in the mainstream sector. Well, there is – obviously there is incredible work happening in the mainstream sector, but overall we can see teachers bailing from that because it is just too much. Then you hear students talking about – you know, my kids are at a high school, and they will sometimes have multiple casual teachers. It is really disengaging for their learning to just have CRTs all the time. I really feel for principals in the mainstream sector because this is a real, live issue. I do not think it is about getting teachers from overseas. I think we have really got to look at what the teachers need and listen to what they are saying. Teachers do not make things up. We are very sensible kinds of people. Let us just actually listen to what the sector is saying. We need to reduce the amount of administrative load. We need to give them more time to plan and collaborate. There are things like that that we can do that would improve it.

Joe McCracken: On the point that you raised there about taking the administrative load away, I know a lot of schools get so frustrated when they want to go on an excursion because they have got to do 20 pages worth of risk assessments. I bet it is the bane of your existence sometimes.

Josie Howie: I have got some lead teachers, and it is more the bane of their life, but yes, it is true.

Joe McCracken: I am just trying to think about what some of those administrative burdens are that in some way, shape or form could be alleviated to ensure that teachers do have time to focus on the things that probably matter a bit more.

Josie Howie: When I talked before about having like a fuller administrative team, I have got 2.5 EFT positions across those 220 kids and 45 staff, and they are our admin positions, and so we would like probably at least two more admin positions if I had the budget for it, and they would be able to pick up some of the administrative load that I have and that the leadership team has, and you would have someone doing all the organisation around excursions and making sure everything was done properly. Teachers can do it, but it really does take a lot of time, and that stuff is increasing. Like the demands from – it is just through basic liability and stuff, the demands just go through the roof, and you think, 'How can we have to do any more of this?' It actually gets worse every year.

Joe McCracken: You become a professional form filler, essentially.

Moira Deeming: A coveted position. That will be the one thing we do out of this.

Josie Howie: Teachers would really, really appreciate that level of support.

Joe McCracken: My question is: is it something that we need less of in the system, or do we just need support to help deal with that in the system?

Josie Howie: We need both – we need less of it in the system, but the department would say it is really hard, because there is so much pressure on us as a department to do things properly and make sure we have got all of the legal things covered and whatever, so I totally understand that is a big bind that we are in as a

department. But we do need less of it, or it needs to be more sophisticated. We have got to make sure every single portal we sign up to and purchase works really well, because a lot of them do not and are not really up to scratch, and they would not cut it in a corporate sector. So that is a problem, probably another resourcing thing, but that is just simple – at least make them work so that I do not have to spend so much time trying to use a terrible interface that takes three times as long as it should.

Joe McCracken: Yes, okay. Thanks very much for that.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Joe. Moira.

Moira Deeming: Thank you. It sounds like you are doing an amazing job and a very difficult one. I think everyone has asked all the questions that I would have asked. The only other thing that I was curious about was – you started off by saying that basically this is downstream from communities suffering. It might be outside of scope, but have you got any suggestions for that one step backward as to how to support those communities and families, maybe even from a school level – like, backwards that way rather than forwards with the kids?

Josie Howie: That is a really good question. You spoke about it before with the previous two, that there is a lot of government money that goes into support agencies, and I think we need to just join up a lot more. So we could co-locate government services or council services much more with schools just so the accessibility is there.

Moira Deeming: Like for the whole family?

Josie Howie: Potentially, yes. It does not mean the school has to pay for those services.

Moira Deeming: No, of course not.

Josie Howie: It just means let us be really smart and let us mandate – from a whole-of-government level, let us do cross-departmental work more, let us have co-located services, and just say, ‘Okay, so you have got this community in your school, then you need someone from Centrelink here.’ Well, that is a federal one, but think of the state system.

Moira Deeming: But it is an example, yes.

Josie Howie: You need someone from family services based with you because you have got such a high level of need with your families. Can the senior government departmental people start thinking along those lines? It is like, ‘This is all state government money. Can we share that a bit more?’

Moira Deeming: So you could look at the school community, what their socio-economic status is. You could look at all that data, and then basically you could predict in some ways what they are more likely to need as a community.

Josie Howie: Yes. We know our school communities really well. We know demographically LGA to LGA what needs are prevalent. Some needs, like I said at the beginning, are across the whole – like, we need to think of whole of state. Others, let us just be smart – let us talk to principals; they know their communities really well. We gather a lot of data on our students, so let us use that well, and let us demand that services work from the school setting. The doctors in schools program is a good example of that. We have got a GP in our school. It is only one day a week, but that means that our kids are getting access to a GP, and it just easy for them.

Moira Deeming: Again, if we did all this, it would be that interface.

Josie Howie: Yes.

Moira Deeming: So we do not want to add more administrative burden.

Josie Howie: No, but this co-location and accessibility piece is really important, and I know there are really a lot of good ideas out there, but we have got to join up a bit more with other departments to make that work better.

Moira DEEMING: It should save money. Rationally, when you think about it, it should save money and it should reduce the administrative burden. So that is the goal. But yes, that is it. Thank you.

Josie HOWIE: And I think that is the other thing: let us tip the money into schools so that we do not have to pay so much at the other end. We are forking out God knows how much money through the justice system, so let us get around those kids at a much earlier age.

Moira DEEMING: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Moira. Michael, are you still on?

Michael GALEA: Yes. G'day. Thank you, Chair. Thank you very much for joining us. It has been a very interesting conversation to listen in to. I note that you have expressed that you would like to talk about the young people at your school who maybe have interactions with the youth justice system. I wonder if you would give some context for us around that and how Pavilion supports your students who go through that process?

Josie HOWIE: Thanks. Yes, we do have quite a number of students that are involved in the youth justice system. Some of them have experienced custody. We work really closely with the young person, their family and their care team or their youth justice worker, and we work a lot on trying to build the strength and the resources of that child in community. Obviously being at school is an incredibly protective thing for someone who is involved in youth justice, so that is a really protective factor.

What we would do is we would remove all the judgement around what they did. We do not focus on that. We focus on what they bring with them to school every day. What we have got when we do that is just regular kids. They all want to get an education. They do not want to necessarily be connected or behave in the ways that they might be in the community, so we have got to kind of remove that level of judgement and really address the needs that they present to us every day. The other thing is what we do when we put a child in custody is really traumatic for that young person, so what we aim to do at the Pavilion School is to remain in contact with that young person while they are in custody and remind them that there is hope for when they are released. We try and maintain a level of engagement and relationship with that young person, because that is really important. It can be really despairing to be locked up.

I think we really need to think as a society about what we are doing at the moment within that sector, because it can be just so damaging. There needs to be much more sophisticated talk in general about how we support young people who are so distressed that they are involved in some of the criminal activity that we see out there. It is really distressing for them, it is distressing for the community, and there is a lot of harm being caused that we need to get to the bottom of. So it is a whole-of-government thing, and I think for us it is about working with the family and the young person, maintaining regard for them and not discarding them and not falling into the trap of dehumanising them through saying, 'You are your behaviour, and you have done this terrible thing, so you have got to be punished.' It is about saying, 'You are still a child, you are still developing, you probably in many ways are a victim of circumstance in terms of what you have been exposed to as a child.' I guess we take a professional stand that is philosophically aligned that way. We are just remaining engaged with them for as long as we can and not excluding them because they are involved in youth justice or because of what they might be doing in the community. That can be challenging, but it does work well. And I think young people respond well to that ongoing care and love that you can provide to them, even though they might have done something significant in the community.

Michael GALEA: If I may just quickly ask – that is very interesting, thank you, particularly around how you said that you continue to work with them if they are incarcerated – what sort of results do you see from that? If you want to give a figure, what sort of proportion continue to engage with Pavilion through that process?

Josie HOWIE: They will stay engaged with us through the process, so we can catch up with them in person in prison and do a visit or we can meet with them in a Zoom call. There is always a very strong feeling from them that they want to get out and they want to come back to school they want to do really well. The reality of when you actually get released and how stressful it is to just get released and everybody is around you saying, 'You've got to go back to school and you've got to do –'. They will have a list of compliance that is very difficult for them to manage. So I think the challenge is the stress and the distress of getting out of custody and trying to just go back into the community as normal. I think anybody would find that really difficult, and kids

find that way more difficult than probably adults do. I do not know exactly what our success rate is, sorry, but we definitely are able to state that there are very few kids that we cannot continue with. It is usually because they outgrow us or they move on to something else. But we aim to stay with them for the long run, for as long as they like. Thanks.

Michael GALEA: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thanks, Michael. Thanks, Josie. I think it is great that your school model is working, with a waiting list of 70. To move forwards, I was wondering whether we should consider having a funding model different for your school than the rest of the mainstream. Going from that I just want to ask a couple of questions. Are all the students at your school from your catchment zone, or are they from outside as well?

Josie HOWIE: It is a bit of a mixture, because, like I said, we are the only school like this across a few LGAs. So we have kids coming from all across the northern region, although most of our kids are proximate to the school, because you have to be able to get to school, so it just becomes practical. But we have got kids that come from Sunbury to Preston every day. That is just an example of how far those kids have to travel. I was speaking to that mum the other day and she would love it if there was an offering like that in her local area, but there is not.

The CHAIR: So the 220 kids in your school are at high risk and are very, very challenging. That is the whole 220 or just a proportion?

Josie HOWIE: Yes. It depends how you define 'high risk'. I would say some. It does not mean every kid has full-on behavioural challenges –

The CHAIR: But to be referred to your school –

Josie HOWIE: but high needs. They have been referred to us because of that higher level of need and because the previous school has said, 'Look, we've tried everything we can, and we can't engage this kid.' So I would suggest that we know that as a system – so why aren't we getting a level of funding that would make it possible for us to do the work well?

The CHAIR: Do you have the data in relation to these kids' challenges? Are they from family violence or family abuse or incarceration, or are they from disabilities or mental wellbeing issues? Do you have data in relation to the percentages?

Josie HOWIE: We do. I do not have it off the top of my head but the thing that most of our families have in common is that they are mainly from low socio-economic backgrounds. That is something they all have in common. Then within those 220 families we have got families experiencing all sorts of things, from neurodiversity – you might have two working parents but you have got a kid with very high needs, and that is more rare. A lot of our parents do not work, or they might be single-parent homes. That financial hardship and pressure is really prevalent across all of our families.

The CHAIR: I know you mentioned that their experience and background brings anxiety and stress. Have any of these kids actually gone to your school and with your assistance and work actually gone back to their own mainstream?

Josie HOWIE: Very few, because our kids do not come to us from grade 6. They will go to high schools, often more than one high school, and then they will reach the end of the road and then they will come to us. So the idea of going back to mainstream is too damaging for them; most of them do not want to. I think in the 17 years since I started the school we might have had maybe five that have gone back to mainstream school. But mainly that relationship is broken and is not something they want. We can work with them over a number of years and finish off their education with us. So it is normally not in the kid's best interests, basically, to go back.

The CHAIR: It is not something you strive for, to assist them to overcome their stress and anxiety so they can make a choice whether they come back or not? You do not actually go to –

Josie HOWIE: The choice would always be there. It is just that with those 70 kids on the waitlist, if I am looking at those 70 kids and I think someone probably is going to be able to go back to mainstream, I will prioritise somebody else, because they are going to need our school more than that kid. Does that make sense?

The CHAIR: Yes, with the waitlist, because you have to. I am just thinking, going with your model, I just want to gauge how successful your model is, which enables you to assist those that have anxiety and less need, and they can actually work with your program. Actually it works and it is successful in enabling them to go back to the mainstream on their own choice.

Josie HOWIE: It does happen sometimes, and I think it more happens with kids that are highly anxious or might have a social anxiety that can be potentially overcome through a good relationship with us. It happens less for the kids that are higher risk and are battling more of those complexities in the community. Most of our kids come to us at an average age of probably 15 or 16, so we are really looking at that pathway into TAFE and further education and employment. It is much more common.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Josie. I think you have made a great success of your school. I think they do a great program. I think Melina wanted to ask one question to finish off.

Melina BATH: Thank you, and it will be brief. It is following up from Michael Galea's comment about your students going into incarceration for a period of time, and you keeping that hand on them, if you can. Is there a model of education that you could extend your school's education as an outreach into the youth justice system, or is there a model where there could be an educator in that system that you could coordinate with to try and keep the thread of education and hope for them?

Josie HOWIE: Yes, I mean, there is. There is a state school within that system, Parkville College, and that is who we liaise closely with. They have got a strong philosophy of engagement and support. They are a really key partner when a young person is incarcerated that we will work with closely. So that kind of already exists, so we would not think about tipping our school –

Melina BATH: Could it be strengthened, or is there any way it could be tweaked?

Josie HOWIE: I think it is the transitioning out where they need more support. This level of resourcing that is required – I spoke about how it is so hard for them coming out of custody, and it is such a challenging transition back into community. I think we want more supports for them, but not mandated supports – not the ones that they have to do, more like if I, for example, had more resources, I would have more of those outreach positions so that I could draw them back in and spend more time with them. If they do not turn up, I have got very limited resources to reach out and work out where they are and work out what they are battling with and get them back in, and we would love to be able to do that if we had a bit more funding.

Melina BATH: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Josie, for coming in. I think your contribution is valuable in relation to how successful your program is and how we look forward, so I commend what you are doing. Basically we want to be looking at your school funding-wise, compared to the normal schools, where there is 100 per cent flexible learning for the whole school, not just a small group. So that is something in particular for our consideration. Thank you very much for your time.

I would like to thank the panel and also the staff, and I would now like to bring this session to a close.

Committee adjourned.