

TRANSCRIPT

LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY LEGAL AND SOCIAL ISSUES COMMITTEE

Inquiry into Early Childhood Engagement of CALD Communities

Melbourne—Monday, 28 October 2019

MEMBERS

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Mr James Newbury—Deputy Chair

Ms Christine Couzens

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Mr Bill Tilley

WITNESSES

Ms Deb Tsorbaris, Chief Executive Officer, and

Ms Judi Gray, Early Years Practice Lead, Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare.

The CHAIR: Good afternoon, welcome. I declare open the public hearings for the Legal and Social Issues Committee's Inquiry into Early Childhood Engagement of Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Communities. At this stage all phones should be turned to silent.

I welcome you. Can I get you to state your names, starting with Deb?

Ms TSORBARIS: Thank you. My name is Deb Tsorbaris. I am the CEO of the Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare.

Ms GRAY: Judi Gray, Early Years Practice Lead at the Centre for Excellence in Child Welfare.

The CHAIR: Thank you. All evidence taken by this Committee is protected by parliamentary privilege. Therefore you are protected against any action for you say here today, but if you go outside and repeat the same things, including on social media, those comments may not be protected by this privilege.

All evidence given today is to be recorded by Hansard, to my right. You will be provided with a proof version of the transcript for you to check as soon as it is available. Verified transcripts, PowerPoint presentations and handouts will be placed on the Committee's website as soon as possible.

I now invite you to provide a brief—up to 10 minutes—opening statement to the Committee, which will be followed by questions from the Committee. Welcome.

Ms TSORBARIS: Thank you so much for inviting us here today. I will obviously make some opening remarks and then I am going to hand to Judi, who is our expert. First of all, I would like to acknowledge that we are on Aboriginal land and acknowledge elders in the room and elders from other cultures who are here today.

So thank you, we are the peak body that represents the interests of vulnerable children, families and young people and carers in Victoria. We are about 110 years old, so the organisation has been at this game for a long time.

Ms COUZENS: Looking good for 100-and-something years.

Ms TSORBARIS: And so we are steeped in history of addressing issues for vulnerable children here in Victoria with the early days of our work, where some of the well-known families in Victoria started my organisation with the view that something needed to change, and we continue in that tradition.

Obviously we are not going to go through the submission, but I want to make a few points. On a personal level I came here with my family about 40 years ago. I was young. I obviously came from an English-speaking country—I came from the UK—and I remember with some trepidation how difficult that was, so I want to acknowledge that and also that I married into a Greek Macedonian family here in Melbourne.

So whilst I am going to talk a little bit about the work that we are doing with our members, I want to acknowledge those that have gone before me and those that will come after me in terms of coming and living in this country, because it is not always easy.

We have a lot of members; we have about 150 members and about 200 individual and student members, so quite a cross-section of people across this state in terms of their difficulties and the difficulties of the families that they work with every day—and also some of the good work, and I will get Judi to talk about some incredible work that is going on in our community. There is a lot happening in our sector, with a very high level of understanding of the importance of using and sharing evidence and evidence-informed practice. Many of our members work with CALD families every day. Our submission reflects what they are telling us both hinders and enables the engagement of our CALD families here in Victoria.

From our submission I would like the opportunity to highlight a couple of points. We have only given you a few recommendations; we thought we would keep it simple. But one thing we will say is that any approach to improving engagement needs to be integrated across government, and these things are not easy but over time do become easier—not piecemeal and particularly in our growth corridors. The importance of seamless, holistic approaches cannot be underestimated in helping all families navigate very complex service systems. Families and children cannot be divided up into little pieces, and often they need more than one thing when they are coming into our services.

Our members have asked for more systematic and integrated use of datasets across early years services, such as maternal and child health, kindergarten and child and family services, to enable accurate and ongoing monitoring of migration patterns for planning purposes. Local and state governments need to work together to share and collect data to inform this planning and strategic approaches to service delivery.

Our members have stressed the importance of having culturally responsive organisations and a skilled workforce that can provide culturally safe places for families to come along and attend. This is reflected in the centre’s child and family services four-year industry plan, which prioritises the implementation of a:

... state-wide strategy to embed competency in cultural safety and respect for diversity in every organisation working with children, young people and families.

Not to put too fine a point on this, a sense of belonging—who you are, your identity—is both an early intervention and a solution in itself, and we must always remember that. Children need to always be supported about where they belong.

The centre has recently developed a sector-wide workforce capability framework that identifies some of the capabilities needed to engage in cross-cultural and inclusive ways of being. The framework recognises the need for ongoing professional development and an organisation-wide approach to embedding cultural safety.

Our members have shared examples of culturally responsive organisations engaging better with CALD families by providing soft entry points to services through referral pathways to universal or mainstream services. One such example the centre has been working on over the past two years is with the Brimbank-Melton Child FIRST alliance to better engage with CALD families through their 2017–18 learning system grants. We have received about \$300 000 from the State Government to distribute these grants, and they are very powerful for local communities when they get these grants. One of the aims of one project was to test an early intervention community-based approach to actively reach these families in partnership with targeted universal services, so bringing them together. The project showed that:

Engaging CALD families requires strong community outreach, and the presence of translators or culturally competent family workers.

Our members have also highlighted the need for a pool of bicultural workers to work alongside other professionals in areas of high migrant population growth to help make CALD families feel welcome and safe. These workers could be provided on a short-term basis as needed and need to receive culturally sensitive supervision. Bicultural workers often have lived experience of the settlement journey, and this is very powerful and critical. They understand the challenges that might prevent families from engaging with early childhood services and are able to link families into services. The centre supports this call from our members to increase the number of skilled and qualified bicultural workers embedded in our integrated family services. And I digress slightly by saying I know this Inquiry is focused on 0 to 8-year-olds, but we have a very serious problem in our youth justice system and in our out-of-home-care system where these types of early intervention responses are going to be critical if we are going to prevent children from coming into care or ending up in our corrections services. So this part of the equation is beyond critical.

Finally, the centre manages OPEN, which stands for our Outcomes, Practice and Evidence Network, which provides a perfect vehicle for capturing evidence-informed practices and programs across the state for all universal and child and family services’ providers. While we have not specifically mentioned OPEN in our submission—and I am sure all of the people presenting to you today find something else that they want to talk to you about—I would like to draw the Committee’s attention to this existing vehicle for sharing good practice in relation to engagement of CALD families in early childhood services. With continued support for this

initiative the centre can showcase what works and why, with particular cohorts of CALD communities and families. Through OPEN we can support more consistent and culturally appropriate approaches and disseminate those to families so they become more understood. I am very happy to expand on how we could assist with this.

Thank you again for the opportunity to share a few words with you here today. This is a big subject area, the tip of the iceberg. We come off the back, I am sure, of presentations from our colleagues at VICSEG, ECCV and a range of other organisations that we partner with every day. So thank you very much.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much. Judi, would you like to continue?

Ms GRAY: I am interested in answering your questions.

The CHAIR: Oh, questions? Yes, we are happy to proceed to questions. Thank you very much for your presentation and all the work that you do. Just one question from me and that is in relation to, I suppose, we have heard a lot about how difficult it is to navigate the system. Put on top a language barrier, put on top interpreter services and then add on not understanding where to go and where to connect. How do we better navigate the system? Because at the moment we have heard that it just continues to be a real problem. Some are doing it better than others, so how do we address this?

Ms TSORBARIS: I will start, but I think Judi has got some great ideas. She is the expert. At the end of the day part of what we really need is—this is a mainstream issue now, as you would have heard over and over again. Really all of our services need to lift to ensure both that these families use their services but also actually support those families to get the right services. I am not sure, I will be honest and say that not everybody sees this as a mainstream issue. I think that really we need some fairly significant behaviour change.

We recently did some work, and I have done quite a lot of work, in the Aboriginal children space. That is now seen as much more of a mainstream issue and for some reason this has been skipped over, and actually we need to get back to basics and see that this navigation is at the core.

Judi, you might want to suggest some of the things that you were talking to me about that are really innovative.

Ms GRAY: Well, I use many examples of projects and I guess that is where we are trying to move from projects to a systematic approach. Projects with the Pacifica families that I have worked with in Brimbank who were not using early years services because they did not feel culturally safe in those services. I was meeting with and working with the service providers and that community together over a six-month period, because that is how long it needs to build the trust of the community. Because they were upset that when they arrived at maternal and child health, maybe with bigger than our standard of BMIs for babies, they were given negative messages so they just did not come back.

There are just many examples where we worked with the nurses, who were very keen to do something about it but did not actually understand what they needed to do differently. So it is not that people are not interested in the issue. They really need to put down their expertise hat for a minute and say, 'We're going to understand the culture and understand the cultural norms and be willing to work with a strengths-based approach with that'. It was suggested that we might look at the maternal and child health index for New Zealand for their ages and stages visits, but management of maternal and child health just said, 'no, we must use the Victorian standards'. So immediately the Pacifica community are thinking—we are global citizens, couldn't they be a bit more flexible.

So there are lots of examples like that where services will say they are really trying, and I have seen how much they do. It is the same with the South Sudanese families that I have worked with. Again, they are appearing, as Deb says, in the juvenile justice data in numbers that are a real concern and when you look at the engagement with their young children, we did not get it right then. So it is putting down our assumptions and putting down previous ideas and actually saying to the community, 'Can you lead us through some ways that you think will improve the future for your children?', and start with that as the open question and 'We'll walk with you on that journey'. We need to acknowledge the incredible support they get from each other, which supported playgroups and those community-led activities provide. So if there was lots of flexibility around funding for them to say, 'Let's get lots of mums together and kids and talk about how we can make things better for our kids' future'.

Ms TSORBARIS: It is really community-led work.

Ms GRAY: Community-led work.

Ms TSORBARIS: It is both early intervention and empowering, and actually it often comes up with practical and affordable solutions that do not cost a lot of money. But the hubs—

Ms GRAY: Yes, so the community hub work is the other part of the work that I have been involved with significantly across the north and the west. That work was started with Best Start and then with Communities for Children expanding the support for that funding. That work showed up very quickly in terms of evidence that migrant families were much more likely to come to those activities. With the community hubs I can remember an education department official coming to a hub activity in a very disadvantaged area in Broadmeadows and there were, like, 200 families there. He said, ‘I thought these families weren’t interested in what their kids were doing’. He had assumptions that the families had too many other needs to be coming up to a school activity. But they were all there because the message was, ‘How can we do better for our kids?’. The activities were all based on their priorities. That is where we saw huge interest in parent-child English classes.

So part of what the hub does, as you would be aware, is use the government funding that is already there for much better, more flexible, responsive use. The parent-child English is a really good example of that. The 500 hours of Federal Government funding does not get taken up fully because we need a model where children are also part of the approach. What is a major concern for me is why have we not seen that young children under five could be in an English-enriching environment themselves, because their brains are probably working a whole lot more actively than their parents. So immediately you get an approach which is the same as the supported playgroups, where you are working with the child and the family together. You get lots of English practice, and the kids go off to school having been exposed to English, but not having been sent down to a childcare centre a suburb away and having lots of very difficult separation issues that can potentially be harmful.

The community hub model is designed around saying to the community, ‘How would you like access to government resources in a way where everyone is welcome, everyone is included, there is no criteria and you prioritise what you would like to do at this hub?’. The learning for me and government people in these hubs is that all the families get on board with it. It does not matter if they are Anglo families that have been living in Broadmeadows for many generations, the sense of welcome is very palpable, and everyone is included and everyone says, ‘Can I hold your baby for you while you have to manage your two-year-old’. So just the extent of the welcome is far beyond what a lot of our mainstream general service system provides. Those people who lead the community development in the hub become iconic people, because what happens there is that community members will know a vulnerable family member and say, ‘Let’s talk to the hub person, because she’ll be able to navigate with you’.

So once they start working well, those hub leaders have 100 requests every week—‘We know a family, we know a neighbour. We know someone who is having trouble with their kids’. One of the most common issues is migrant women not being able to have any life outside the home. So hubs and supported playgroups have been terrific navigators. The hubs are just not available around Victoria, and it would be wonderful to see that expansion.

Ms COUZENS: Thank you both very much for coming today and sharing your expertise and stories. We really appreciate it, so thank you. You talked about the community hubs. We went and visited one—it was a community hub, wasn’t it?—in Shepparton last week, and it looked quite amazing. They had families going in there. They had English classes held in a room. So they are, by all accounts, quite valuable to communities, and they are working. I do not have one in my community, but maybe one day.

But I think what we have learned very clearly is the value of playgroups, in particular for CALD communities, and just how valuable they are in just about every community we have been to so far, I think. We are also going to be rolling out three-year-old kinder—or have started to. One of the questions that I have, which I have asked previous presenters as well, is: do you see a role for playgroups and three-year-old kinder or do you think three-year-old kinder is the way to go and we should leave playgroups out of it? What is your—

Ms TSORBARIS: Look, I think if we step back from this a little bit, they both have a role, but we have just got to make sure that they are community led, because actually there are still families who will not use either, and—apart from not trusting—their life does not allow them to be able to find the time to do that, especially if their life is in crisis. Both of those are quite structured, so we are looking at ways where we are advising government about linking things up a lot more so it makes it much easier for families to use both of those programs.

I think it is horses for courses. I think some families are much more comfortable with a supported playgroup because it is a bit more informal, whereas three-year-old kinder is a bit more formal. And it really depends on the circumstances of the family. But look, I would have to say I think over time—probably long after I have retired—we will see a lot of these things merge, particularly depending on where they end up. Some of the really interesting ways to think about are putting three-year-old kinder in schools. I think we will see a merging of a lot of these functions, depending on what the community needs. I think you are right to raise that question because I think, over time, we will see change.

Ms COUZENS: And do you think that we should be looking at those being multicultural specific—whether they are playgroups or kindergartens?

Ms TSORBARIS: Absolutely, dependent on what the community wants. Over time, as communities change, you will see those change too. My children went to the Turkish community childcare centre in Flemington because that is where I wanted them to go. You set things up in a community because that is what the community wants and it is very culturally sensitive, but over time that will merge with another one. I think the thing is that we need to get more sensitive about what a community needs at that time, that will engage families in something that nothing else will. The problem is we set things up and we struggle to then move through a change process. But absolutely, I think that particularly for newer communities, or where there may be particular pockets of issues, this is the way to do it. This is the way to sort of engage, get change and create leaders, because we want to create community leaders, don't we, out of these sorts of constructs? So absolutely.

Some of the issues that we deal with every day are we have seen a doubling of the numbers of kids coming into care in the last five years. At the moment we have got about 11 000 children in care, some of those from a range of CALD backgrounds. If we do not address something there are going to be 26 000 of those children by about 2026. Supported playgroups, early years support, hubs, more culturally specific family services, more Child FIRST—all of these will prevent that from happening, and so they are very sound investments. But there is always a limited bucket of money, isn't there? We are all aware that everything we are asking for requires resources as well.

Ms COUZENS: Yes. And do you think that local government plays a critical role in providing children's services and that there needs to be a more consistent delivery of children's services, particularly for CALD communities? There seems to be those that do it really well, those that do it okay and then those that do not do it at all or do it really badly. So do you see that that is, I suppose, a significant opportunity in Victoria given we have lots of local governments? It is about that consistent provision of services.

Ms TSORBARIS: Yes, absolutely. I think the thing is, though, that there will be occasions where that is not the right thing to do. I think it is just about having an open mind to that where you might have a pretty active community that might be able to do this themselves. I must say I love structure, but I do see really strong examples of community-led, and I have to say it is very powerful and cheap. My colleague here talked about some of the hub work, which is supported with volunteers, and we need to keep that in mind. But I certainly think where you have got local governments that are in the space, well trusted—absolutely. Also they are very good at planning. We do need data and we need some level of consistency, but if those local governments are able to properly—and I mean properly—support cultural leadership, that would be the test for me. Because this is not just about setting something up that is like Centrelink, because it does not work. We are seeing a lot of Aboriginal-led work going on that is starting to provide results. We see brilliant leadership from CALD communities. So for me it is about how you get both. That is not always easy, really, because that is about people.

Ms COUZENS: I think from what I am hearing there needs to be a very significant shift towards local government and the role they play. I know in my community they control all the children's services, pretty

much. Nobody else gets a look in. So I think there are significant things that we can do to change that. I think I am interested in your take on the rural and regional issues that communities face as well in terms of getting access to those CALD services.

Ms GRAY: This is very dependent on their partnerships with CALD organisations. So you will see the local governments that do partnerships well, and particularly that is where VICSEG and ECCV-type partnering has really shown up in the way the local government has implemented programs. I know in our consultation for this Inquiry, and the VCOSS consultations Gateway Community health in Wodonga presented. They have a couple of ethnic organisations in the area. They have this monthly community event that the ethnic organisations and local government and community health are key players and all contribute to a big lunch. They negotiate around ‘What are families’ needs?’ and ‘How’s the system going to better respond?’ This gets talked through informally at a big community lunch. They have over 100 people coming once a month. So in rural areas I have seen it work quite well. There are certainly some rural areas that may not have local ethnic organisations, but it is still, using the resources they have got, making them visible and bringing the conversations together. But I would like to also make the point that sometimes people get caught up, in their planning in local governments and others, with that sort of ‘We want everything to be inclusive for everyone’ and worrying about having culturally specific activities. I guess basically what I have learned through working—and Brimbank and Hume council has been leading the way in this, and Hume—You need a mix of both, absolutely. We always need to get parents onto a pathway that takes them out of that social isolation, and that might mean they need an ethnic-specific activity to get them started. But usually you will find—where it comes to the duration or how long these programs are going. If they are going for a year or two years then, as Deb said, they need to be flexible to morph into a broader group. ‘Oh, can we bring our friends who aren’t Turkish?’ or ‘My neighbour is very isolated and she’s not Turkish, but can she come?’. So after that initial trust-building work you then start to rejig it. Or you say to families, ‘We’ve had a specific Iraqi-focused playgroup funding for this year, and next two years the Iranian families are going to have that funding’, to enable them to get on that first step.

But ultimately they all can then use this significant multicultural activity that is offered, so I think it is very important, in terms of the evidence base that I have seen—that you need a mix of both (culturally specific and multicultural). Sometimes people worry that these communities are going to stay just within their cultural group if you offer supported playgroups for that cultural group. We have not seen any evidence of that at all. Over five years those families start to really make lots of community connections and start to feel active in their communities. When they see their children coming into school it is amazing how the principals say ‘The children are so much more ready for school’ because their families have been able to bridge from just being in small cultural group activities into lots of bigger neighbourhood activities where everyone is welcomed.

Ms TSORBARIS: In terms of rural and regional Victoria I think that our view would be that they do not always get their fair share of resources, to be honest. If there is a new funding round, they will get a fraction of the resource, whereas we do still seem to plough a lot of resources into metropolitan Melbourne. But having said that, some of the partnerships that they develop, by their very nature, have to be quite profound and are quite targeted because of the migration coming in waves. I think we could learn a bit from our growth corridors and regional partners about how they seem to stretch their dollar further.

From the colleagues that I work with in rural and regional Victoria, some of the bigger issues that some of them face are concerns about ParentsNext and some income support issues for families. Again, the hub stuff really helps with that. I would have to say our rural and regional colleagues are doing some really interesting things that we should really think about how to replicate, because they seem to be able to make the dollar go much further.

Ms COUZENS: Yes, they are innovative.

Ms TSORBARIS: And they are travelling such incredible distances and actually dealing with all sorts of issues like drought and a range of other things that they need additional support for, that we have to sort of navigate. They are fantastic organisations actually.

Ms COUZENS: You mentioned the workforce earlier. One of the things that you would think would be a huge advantage and reflect the community that we live in is having people from multicultural communities actually working in early childhood—well not just early childhood but across the board, but in this particular

case. What are your thoughts on that, and are you or your organisation pushing that to Government in particular to get those people into positions?

Ms TSORBARIS: Absolutely.

Ms COUZENS: Or into training, at least.

Ms TSORBARIS: From our point of view it is sort of the gold. I mean, if you can recruit people from emerging cultures with a whole range of more global experience who perhaps, it is absolutely the thing to do. But again, I think it comes back to how you penetrate those communities to be able to have people make those connections, so it goes both ways. There are enormous opportunities now, given that there is a whole range of new workforces that are being developed, to have a much more targeted approach around the early years educators.

Ms COUZENS: But are we targeting that enough?

Ms TSORBARIS: Look, I am not sure. I think Judi touched on this. You sort of have to start where you have got to start, which is right at the local level, to be able to know where you can target, and I think there is not always a deep appreciation of where CALD families are, who they are, what they are looking for, what their aspirations are, in order to target those groups. So we really do need to do a lot more. And the other thing to remember is with some of the new workforces it is great work—I mean, my son is a graduate earning virtually nothing because he has got to learn—but some of these roles are quite low paid, and depending on the community. The CALD community, have got different aspirations for their children than working in a lower paid entry-level job. We have to respect that too. But we should be having community meetings, the ones that Judi described, to really have that discussion about what are they looking for for entry-level jobs for their children and work through that. Because the families—the parents—play a huge role in what those children will do. It is not just about the children on their own. I think we probably have to go back to some early thinking about it. It is not just going to happen by advertising and a general recruitment effort in fairly embedded communities.

Ms GRAY: And there is that worry in some workforces that the workers need to be more supported, which I think is important.

Ms TSORBARIS: In a more Anglo organisation, definitely.

Ms GRAY: Yes. So one of the things that a pool of bicultural workers and particular supervision arrangements for them can do is to be that bridge. With mainstream services supervision, often these workers will say, they would not be able to talk to their actual manager about how they are treated. They are quite sensitive issues about the meaning that they give to the interactions, and they might have another perspective, so that culturally responsive supervision is needed. When you have that, then you will get terrific take-up for recruitment for jobs, and we hope that three-year-old kinder will recruit lots of bilingual bicultural staff, but they will not be as effective unless they have good cultural supervision as well. I think we have to just ensure that. Our family services workers in Brimbank and Hume have really recruited quite a substantial number of CALD workers to the family services work at the professional level, so that they maintain that connection to the communities that they are working with. It is amazing how that has brought in so many more families, who normally would not go to a family services organisation at all. So it is happening. There is also that group of what I call para-professional bicultural workers who work in the community hubs and in the playgroups, who are just focusing on engagement and inclusion. So I think there are two different strands of the workforce—

Ms TSORBARIS: Very different roles.

Ms GRAY: that's what we are talking about, professional and para-professional roles

Mr TAK: Perhaps to just carry on, do you think that the culturally diverse communities are aware of the benefit of engaging with early childhood education?

Ms GRAY: I am happy to answer that. When they come to Australia they get introduced through contact with services to the role of the mother as an educator of her child and the importance of those everyday

interactions about learning. It is not only promoting the benefits of going to formal programs, but even more impactful can be those mothers learning that they can have an influence on their child's learning at home going forward. So I think it is both of those things. But once they learn about our system, if they can afford to they are going in large numbers. Then the kinder teachers and programs need to feel confident in supporting those families.

Ms TSORBARIS: There are quite a lot of structures that draw families in pretty quickly. Whether it is understood or it becomes part of what they are drawn into is another thing. The early primary years are also really interesting, because that is a very structured environment for parents and they are very quickly drawn into reading to their child. But whether they understand from the outset is another thing. Mind you, with all of the advertising that is going on around the early years educators, particularly the imagery, that might force some communities to start people thinking a little bit earlier.

Mr TAK: Yes. I am a parent myself—of a three- and a five-year-old. But then my parents somehow rely on them more.

Ms TSORBARIS: That is a really good point, because in fact some families might choose to have their children cared for by grandparents and not put them into any supported playgroups or early years services, and then it does become a matter of how do you have an exchange with those grandparents. It might be useful for them to go along to these groups. That is very good point, but that is a tougher one.

Ms GRAY: Grandparents have really shown up looking after little ones at the community hubs, because of the extent of the welcome for all. But the other one is we have heard some great examples with the shopping centre-supported playgroups. They are an example of something that if that was expanded it must be the cheapest value-for-money government program there is. At playgroups in shopping centres there are so many grandparents who are struggling with little toddlers—who are hard work—and love having someone to talk to and someone to engage with.

Ms TSORBARIS: They help sustain grandparents—perhaps in your situation and your parents—if there is some additional support for them outside of the home where they can go and socialise with other grandparents. Grandparents are a big form of care now. We are talking a lot about parents, but grandparents are an enormous form of care.

Mr TAK: This is just a commentary, not a question or anything. At language school on Saturdays I have seen that many of the young kids were taken to the language school on Saturday or Sunday by their grandparent. After the grandchildren are in class, they have a group of grandparents who are the carers having coffee and tea. Maybe the language school is also a good place to engage with the grandparents to be aware of the benefit of early years.

Ms TSORBARIS: That is a great suggestion. But I think you just have to think about where people are congregating rather than us set up a system that looks nice and neat. Again we are having to shift our service system to after hours and weekends because people go to work and do other things with their life other than sitting around waiting for us to help them. That is a very good suggestion.

Ms GRAY: That flexibility is the theme. If you have systems, and it will be the case with three-year-old kindergarten, we need that flexibility for the place-based decisions. For some families the supported playgroups are going to be really important, and for some the idea that they have a break from their kids in three-year-old Kindergarten is more important. For some who do not want to separate, they can have some choice. But it is really, I think, important for us not to say it has to be one or the other.

Ms TSORBARIS: I think the separation for some parents is really too difficult, given their background, and so that is where the supported playgroups come in, because they have been through things that we could never imagine.

The CHAIR: Just a brief question. Your submission suggests that funding is needed to provide speech and language assessments in first language to support early intervention for cognitive development and school readiness. Can you just briefly expand on what is required?

Ms GRAY: Yes. Speech pathologists and early childhood educators raise this issue quite a bit: that there is no point in assessing a child in English, particularly a two- or three- or four-year-old. Then the system gets locked up with a referral for them when they do not really know how fluent they are in their first language. So once again it is one of those issues of efficient use of resources. If you had bilingual and bicultural workers available from a pool and a kinder teacher was able to say, 'Can I ask somebody to come in? You'll probably need to spend a little bit of time with the child, not 5 minutes, but get to know this child a little bit over a morning and then get a reading on their fluency in their first language'. That would then make a huge difference to what is planned for that child. And it is just such a pity that, again, our system is not flexible enough to get on top of that one very early on, because many of these families could get government resources a lot earlier on if that issue was better understood.

Ms TSORBARIS: It is also really telling. I mean, if a child is incredibly fluent in their first language, that tells you just how bright that child is. But we tend to assess them based on how much English they might know. I think attitudinally you have got to question our bias. That is a terrible bias.

Mr TAK: Because you have touched on that, I would just like to continue on. In my electorate I visit primary schools, and many of the parents have grown up here, gone overseas—Greeks—and then returned with young children, and you find that the young children are very fluent in Greek but not in English. And then it is tough, I think.

Ms TSORBARIS: It is really tough. But ultimately, I mean, if you pick up Judi's point about assessing them in their first language, you will get a huge sense of how capable that child is and they will pick up English pretty quickly anyway. But also we will end up, if we are careful and if we plan this, with an enormous bilingual community. But what we do is we preference English. Now, I do not actually have another language, but in fact what we actually want to do is grow our bilingual population, which is incredibly valuable for this country and us in a global context. But also we know that those kids will pick up English. We will figure out how smart they are very quickly when we look at assessing them on their first language. So I just think, again, we need to think a bit differently. It is hard to get people to think that way, though.

Ms GRAY: And can I just add, the kindergarten system usually is very aware of the importance of the strength of bilingualism, but as soon as those families start primary school, often the primary schools are not interested and do not particularly highlight the other languages that the child speaks. Parents will often raise that as a concern.

Ms TSORBARIS: And it goes to your point about: how will we grow a bilingual workforce? Where will it come from? Well, we are probably not exactly supporting the development of it right now, and as the world changes we will need more and more people who can speak multiple languages. So we should be thinking about these young children now.

The CHAIR: Okay. We will conclude on that note. Thank you so much for your presentation and your submission on behalf of the Committee. It has been absolutely valuable. Your submission will now become part of our final deliberations, and the Committee will table its report next year with some strong recommendations. You can keep up to date on the Committee's website. But again I take this opportunity to thank you for taking the time out and all the good work that you do.

Ms TSORBARIS: Thank you for your questions. We will go back and write those things up.

Ms GRAY: Can I give you this card? It is about our open learning portal, which is where we promote the good practice around engagement with families. So it is a very well recognised system that we have got.

The CHAIR: Thanks again.

Witnesses withdrew.