

TRANSCRIPT

LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY LEGAL AND SOCIAL ISSUES COMMITTEE

Inquiry into Early Childhood Engagement of CALD Communities

Bendigo—Wednesday, 23 October 2019

MEMBERS

Ms Natalie Suleyman—Chair

Mr James Newbury—Deputy Chair

Ms Christine Couzens

Ms Emma Kealy

Ms Michaela Settle

Mr Meng Heang Tak

Mr Bill Tilley

WITNESSES

Ms Belinda Schultz, Early Years Manager,

Ms Janelle Wanden, Early Years Advisor,

Ms Beckie Parkinson, Educational Leader/Teacher, and

Ms Glenys Brereton, Nominated Supervisor/Teacher, Shine Bright EYM.

The CHAIR: Good afternoon. I declare open the public hearing for the Legal and Social Issues Committee's Inquiry into early childhood engagement of culturally and linguistically diverse communities. I welcome the numerous presenters: Early Years Manager, Belinda; we have got Janelle, Early Years Advisor; Beckie, Educational Leader/Teacher; and Glenys, Nominated Supervisor/Teacher, from Shine Bright EYM. All evidence taken by this Committee is protected by parliamentary privilege; therefore you are protected against any action for what you say here today. But if you go outside and repeat the same things, including on social media, these comments may not be protected by privilege. All evidence given today is recorded by Hansard. 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, 5- to 10-minute opening statement to the Committee, which will be followed by questions from Committee members. Thank you.

Ms PARKINSON: So just what we submitted—I will read it out first. As educators at Helm Street Kindergarten in Kangaroo Flat we respect the cultural and linguistic diversity in our community by working with the families to develop close and trusting relationships between home and kinder in order to establish a sense of belonging at our preschool for both the children and their families. We print the online enrolment forms for many of our families who do not have access to technology and take time to sit with the families as often as needed to support them to work through the information together. Often we also will act as a scribe for families who are still learning English as their second language. We access translators when possible and when required. We have found that difficult, and sometimes use the translators from the local primary schools who they are using as well. We have a food share program, so we provide free food to all of our families through this program: fresh food and tinned goods, which we find a lot of our families are using regularly.

We embed cultural materials within the program and explore different resources to try and remain respectful and inclusive of all the cultures that we have at our kindergarten. We encourage the children to teach us how to speak in their first language so we can show respect to the diverse cultures and show genuine interest and consistency between home and school. If the children are speaking their language, we will get them to tell us what they are saying and repeat it back, so we have a little bit of an understanding of their language. We also support cultural differences with special celebrations or familiar foods that the children might use.

Ms BRERETON: I think, as we have indicated, that submission was very brief on those things. If we actually extend a lot of those points, one of the things that we work really closely on—and I am sure all Shine Bright preschools try to do the same thing—is to develop those relationships with families and, through developing the relationships, respect for their culture, and we try to support them as much as we can. We are aware that in our area accessing lots of things in different languages has been quite difficult, and we have sort of tried to do what we can. We have found one of the best things that we have done is build a good relationship with one of the schools—that way we are accessing some interpreters. But the other thing that we find really important is relationships, so for families to work with us to develop the relationships and then move on to the school—and it is the same person they are dealing with—has been really important.

Ms PARKINSON: We work with a transition program where we will go with the families to the schools. We do it with all of our families, and we will have meetings to ensure that they can move over to a new environment with as much support as possible.

Ms SCHULTZ: I think it is worthwhile—the reason why we asked Helm Street to share is because they have the highest number of children and families in our Bendigo region and out of our 28 preschools. We manage 28 preschools across Loddon and Campaspe and Bendigo, and Glenys and Beckie were happy to come

in. They have done some really amazing work with the art therapy program. I think we should perhaps talk about that. Ray, if we are off-track here or anything, just let us know, okay?

Ms PARKINSON: We have been working on a transition pilot program for three years. Our funding has dipped out, so it is sort of sitting at the moment, but we are still working very closely with our most local school. It has entailed working more consistently with the school. So rather than just touching base with them at the end of the year and just doing a handover, so to speak, we are speaking to the schools for the whole year, particularly with different cultures and children from vulnerable families so that we can ensure that they get the support they need to move across.

Ms BRERETON: I think part of that too was that with the school we try and get that connection going, not just at the end of the year but as we go along. They provide an experience where the children in our community go and see that this is what a school is like. And then we also have their interaction coming down to the preschool. So we have sort of worked on it all year. Part of that has been the art therapy program, which came out of the close link with them. We all did a Bastow course together, which was around developing a transition program. Out of that, with the school, we sat down and worked out what was really important for the families in our area, and that was that some of the children are vulnerable and have trauma, so we looked at how we could improve their school experience. And we decided an art therapy program would work.

Ms PARKINSON: So the school funded part and Shine Bright supported us to fund the other part. So for the last six months of the year—semester 2—we have the art therapist work with a group of our children. She did work with letting other children come in and out, but it was mostly for the children transferring to the actual school—maybe eight to 10 children—and she worked with them for the whole second half of the year and then transitioned over with them for the first semester of the following year. So they had a familiar face with them for a whole 12 months so they were not just pulled out of us and put into the school environment.

And it is working very well. The school is actually able to get funding a little bit easier than we have. The art therapist who was working with us also works for the department in a role, so they actually are able to access her through the department for a full day a week whereas, because our funding has lapsed, we have actually had to stop for this year. So we are hoping to get some more money and see if we can keep that going.

Ms BRERETON: And that also involved families as well; she met with parents and talked about things that they were anxious about with the transition. And then also, when they went to the school, it was another familiar face and she also would have supported them meeting the welfare person at the school. So it was something that worked really well for families to do that transition.

And part of that was also some families who did not have English as their first language. So then we were able to use the same interpreter that the family was going to be using at the school. So it was really nice that it was not constant for these families, having to retell their story and having to meet new people. Because we found, with our experience with vulnerable families it is so important to keep some links going and some familiarity.

We are probably lucky in that we sit in what we call a hub. We have community health and early intervention programs situated beside us, and we also share the building with MCH nurses as well. So our families that wish to choose those services can actually use a lot of the services, and we found that certainly helped with families who need support with language. It is not retelling their story every time; someone will support them across to preschool, and that has made a big difference with them just feeling like they are part of the community, because I think that is the other thing that we have tried really hard to create.

Ms PARKINSON: I think the Karen community is quite strong where we are, and that is definitely a very strong support network that has come about with many families moving into the same area. So the school has those really strong links and has many families that know each other, which works really well.

There are always the other cultures that come in that we are finding it is more difficult to access, as we said, interpreters for or anything like that. We did access an ELLA program, which was a language program, but none of the languages that they have support any of our families. Currently we have got Nepalese, Filipino, Chinese, Indian—speaking two different Indian dialects—and Karen families, as well as our Indigenous. The Karen language, Punjabi, Tagalog and Nepalese, none of those are supported with the ELLA app. I did email

them recently, particularly about the Karen language, and they said they are not going to be bringing that language in. So that is something we thought we could access to be able to help support families and children, but that is not even something we can do. So we have tried a few different ways to support families but quite often come up against the walls, particularly in regional Victoria. I think you would be able to access more things if you were in Melbourne. Glenys has worked in Melbourne earlier in her career and she says it was much easier down there to access support for all the different cultures that we are now having come in to Bendigo.

Ms BRERETON: And I guess the other thing too is we find that often we might have only one family speaking that one language, so they do not even have the support of a network of people around as well. So that has also been quite difficult for families. The other thing I think around some of that support is around the enrolment forms. Often that process we find quite tricky. Shine Bright as a management group need to make sure the enrolment forms meet all the regulations. Doing that is quite a lengthy process, and we often find that that is the area that a lot of our families really struggle with because it does require quite a good knowledge of language.

Ms PARKINSON: And to be able to read and understand English.

Ms SCHULTZ: Even recently we have reduced that because of that very requirement and made it much simpler so that more detail can be done with the kinder staff, who hopefully have got more of a relationship. And they can start to build that relationship rather than central enrolment building that relationship. It is much reduced but even still for these families it would be a challenging space.

Ms PARKINSON: It is promoted to do online forms more, but we find we are giving more printed enrolment forms out to families so we can support them.

Ms SCHULTZ: It is good if there are key workers or people in the community that can support them, because to do it on the tablet is much easier. Sometimes there might be children who can do the translation and they can help sometimes—older, school-aged children—but if it is your first time and you are doing it, it would be quite difficult. We have done it that way so we can be a bit more flexible, and hopefully it will be easier, but we still acknowledge that there are issues with that. I think that is about all, really, that we would like to say.

The CHAIR: Excellent. Thank you for your presentation and sharing your experiences in the sector. My first question is in relation to your submission, which talks about assistance with enrolment and helping families a little bit more when it comes to navigating the system as well. We have heard today that it is extremely difficult to navigate the system. Can you just elaborate a little bit more about the current enrolment process and what some of the barriers are that are facing CALD families?

Ms SCHULTZ: I will start—jump in if you like. In the past our enrolment form was extremely lengthy. It would have been 12 or 14 pages—lots and lots of information—but it was what was required for a child to be enrolled at the kinder. The initial thinking was that if we get the families to fill in all the detail beforehand, then that just transfers straight over to the kinder, making it much easier for the local kindergarten teachers. However, we were aware that this was a barrier for lots of people, not just CALD families but lots of people, and so we refined it back and brought it right back to the very minimum of what we could offer.

I guess the hardest thing is really just being aware that when your child is four kinder is available to you. We work closely with maternal and child health nurses and they help to promote supported playgroups in different networks throughout the community and also early intervention workers. Wherever we can we have people try to promote kindergarten.

Now the form is online, however, so it can also be printed. There is support in our office; they can come in. Loddon Mallee Preschool Association do central enrolment for all of Bendigo. You can come in and there are staff in there who can support families to enrol. Most of the time there are two people on the counter in there, and we have got private areas where they can take them and help them to fill in the form in the actual office. We do have access to, and are aware of, translation services on the phone too.

Ms PARKINSON: We find that a lot of our families are either without transport from where we are or are uncomfortable to walk into a space like Shine Bright or LMPA and that is why we find a lot of people come to

us for enrolments. So we will sit and do the form with them. We will scan and send the form into central enrolments. But I think the other barrier, and Glenys and I were talking about it—

Ms SCHULTZ: Sorry, Bec; in lots of ways that is a really good thing because then they are starting the relationship with the kinder. That is actually really good; that is what we want.

Ms PARKINSON: And we encourage that.

Ms SCHULTZ: So that is good from that perspective.

Ms PARKINSON: But we have had many families come in recently that are going to a child care centre, for example, and their enrolment is at the time; it is on the day that everything gets done. I think families are finding it quite confusing that they enrol through us and put the paperwork in, then they have to wait for a letter of offer—and they cannot necessarily read the letter of offer—and then they have to know that they have to sign it and send it back. So it is quite a lengthy process other than just the enrolment forms and I think that is also another wall that seems to be coming up for a lot of families.

Ms SCHULTZ: For us here in Bendigo we do a central enrolment process so families do not have to go and enrol at multiple kinders. That has been something that has been in place for a very long time.

The CHAIR: Just a follow-up question. Do you think that the current service is easily available to CALD communities? We have heard some of the challenges. Do you think it is easy to access the information and the service for families of non-English-speaking backgrounds?

Ms SCHULTZ: Often they will come in and there will be groups of people, and if the people that are involved with that community are aware, then it is not difficult at all. If there is isolation, it would be extremely difficult.

Ms BRERETON: And I think from our perspective we work with a lot of really vulnerable families, so I think that is another sector of our community that it is difficult for, regardless—not just people that do not have—

Ms PARKINSON: Not just the CALD families.

Ms BRERETON: Yes, not just the CALD families. That is something that we are quite aware of in our community, and everyone is trying to communicate that—as Belinda said before—with all the other organisations because the more we do that, the more people we have out in the community who are aware of the services. We are hoping that that will make it easier for vulnerable families to actually access our services.

Ms SCHULTZ: The other challenging thing is that not all the families are able to read their language, so that has been a little bit challenging too.

Ms PARKINSON: That is the thing. We talked about doing a translated application form for families, but like Belinda said, many of them would not be able to read that form either. So you come up with a few walls there with best ways to help, so that is why we try and work through it with them, one to one.

Ms COUZENS: Thank you all very much for coming along today; we appreciate your time. You talked about having activities for CALD communities within kindergarten. Can you elaborate a bit on what sort of activities?

Ms PARKINSON: Do you mean like an education program at the kinder?

Ms COUZENS: Yes.

Ms PARKINSON: When we have interview times with our families or even just casual chats at the beginning and start of the day we invite them to come in and share our food, or if they want, to come in and share their dress. I know someone in one of our families has offered to come in with a dress and some food from the Indian culture. We have Karen families; we tried to bring in some music. So we are always working on different ways. I think we have got three Karen families and we asked them this time around, 'Are there any

songs that the children really like to sing that we can incorporate?'. Mostly their church songs are a lot of what they sing, so they will say, 'Oh, that might not be appropriate'. And we bring in, say, in the play area in the home corner different dress-ups. We have got some saris and all the different nationalities of dolls and we have got different foods and chopsticks. We try and use the ones that are relevant to the cultures that we have within the kinder at the time. Resources can be hard to purchase sometimes because of our limited funding, but we try. We also go to a lot of op shops and those sorts of places to try and find things in there as well.

Ms BRERETON: But I think the main thing that we found through our philosophy and knowing our community is to really develop those relationships so they feel comfortable enough to be involved in our program, because that is one of the things that we see can be a barrier sometimes: people sort of would see you as the teacher or the kinder—you know, you hand your child over and that is it. We work really hard to change that to say, 'We value everybody that's coming in'. We were really lucky that the Foodshare has been a really lovely way for people to get a feeling that this is their space: this is out here and you can take whatever you like out of the box. It has been really nice because it is a real variety of food.

Ms PARKINSON: Yes, we had a really big tin of tomatoes—you know, a massive tin of tomatoes—and a couple of them were like, 'Oh, how are we going to get rid of that?'. But a couple of our families, I think one was an Indian family, were like, 'Oh, this is awesome! Can I take that?', and I was like, 'Of course you can'. So, you know, things that we may not think are something that we would use—everything is getting used in different ways, and also they are sharing what the family's cooking with it, and the children are sharing. With playdough, one of the little girls the other day was making something. I said, 'What are you making?' and she said, 'Making roti bread'. She was showing me how her mum makes it. The other children were getting the rollers and going, 'We'll roll it flat', and she goes, 'No, no. We use our fingers'. So those sorts of things come into it all the time—having the children share what they eat at home or what sort of songs they sing. The henna has come in a lot this year; the children are coming in with that. So we just try our hardest to pay attention to what the children are interested in.

Ms SCHULTZ: It is part of our framework that we have—the *Victorian Early Years Learning and Development Framework*. There are components of that that specify that we need to be working with families and building relationships and finding out and sharing culture and all those sorts of things, so that is a really great thing. That is across all the services. As I am sure you are aware, some services do things better than others.

Ms COUZENS: Yes, I am very aware of that.

Ms SCHULTZ: Yes, and we are not perfect by any means.

Ms COUZENS: Earlier in your presentation you briefly mentioned around children suffering from trauma. I am really interested to know how you deal with that and whether you actually have any particular expertise that you bring in to support you with those children that are suffering from trauma.

Ms SCHULTZ: It is interesting that you bring that up; you are from Geelong.

Ms BRERETON: We have done lots of PD just because we felt that is really important.

Ms PARKINSON: And we have a really high percentage of children who suffer from vulnerability and trauma at our centre, so we have probably got more children with trauma than not.

Ms SCHULTZ: And we have had for years.

Ms PARKINSON: So we work very, very hard with that. We have a very flexible program. We run indoor-outdoor so the children do not feel like they are confined to a space. We are very flexible with our group times. We do small groups quite often. Someone might have one child with them who does not cope with being with a big group, and the other person might have six. We are very lucky also that we quite often have at least two additional assistants because of the behavioural issues that we quite often end up with.

Ms SCHULTZ: The ratios are much lower.

Ms PARKINSON: Our ratio would be 1 to 11 with the two staff usually, but we are actually more like 1 to 5.

Ms COUZENS: Right.

Ms PARKINSON: We try very hard to keep that because these children need it.

Ms SCHULTZ: Every year we try a different model and try something different to work, and this year I think we have just about hit the jackpot.

Ms BRERETON: Yes, it is much, much better.

Ms PARKINSON: We have kept our numbers low. We have gone from groups of 30 and 40, where we had a lot of staff across, and this year we have got two groups of 22 and one of 18.

Ms SCHULTZ: We should talk about that. I think that is useful so you can get our learnings. Last year we went with a bigger group of children and more staff because we thought that could be okay. But it just turned out that there were too many people to have relationships with. The home base sort of was compromised a little bit, so we thought we would try something different this time.

Ms PARKINSON: We are doing a similar model. Last year we had the 44 children across two classrooms and two yards, but they were all interconnected. There were two teachers and two assistants and then the additional staff that we required. This year we are still doing the 22 and 22, or 22 and 18, with the two classrooms and two yards, but we have got the gate closed. As the year has progressed and the children have progressed, we now open the gate—sometimes for a couple of hours, sometimes we only do an hour, depending on how everybody is functioning. That is working really well because we have the flexibility to say yes or no, depending on how the children are feeling that day.

Ms BRERETON: Because of the trauma issues, it is very much about flexibility. All our staff have done lots of PD through Shine Bright about the specific needs of the children in our community, and a lot of that is around trying to do as much support as we can, which also was why we looked at the art therapy and worked hard to do that, because we found that we did need a bit more support. Shine Bright have also been really supportive for staff as well, because we are also finding that we need a lot of that support.

Ms PARKINSON: We have just engaged a new pilot program of art therapy for us.

Ms COUZENS: Right, fantastic.

Ms PARKINSON: We are only two sessions in. It is more about giving us strategies and reflection on how to deal with what we see and what we hear from the children and families.

Ms SCHULTZ: It is tricky because we used to have the EAP program, which is more reactive versus this more proactive approach, so we are giving that a go.

Ms COUZENS: Yes, that is great.

Ms BRERETON: We are very lucky.

Ms COUZENS: Just on what you have said, do you believe you have enough access to resources dealing with kids that have experienced trauma, or have you had to battle along—it sounds like it—and work on your own learnings over the years to make this work?

Ms SCHULTZ: Yes, the funding is tricky. Can I just go back to that. These guys have been dealing with this for a very long time, year after year. Some centres have a little bit and then not for a year they have a group and then a little bit more, whereas this has been consistent at this service because of the associated demographic of where it is.

We have discovered organisationally that when staff come across these children, and it is particular combinations of children that are vulnerable, if they have not had any training, it was just, 'Oh, my gosh'—like,

really, really, very difficult. There were lots of issues with actually getting staff to the service and keeping them there and having sick leave and all sorts of things. This year at the start of the year we actually ran a conference day, where we had someone come in and speak to our whole organisation about trauma and just that different lens to look through and about the reasons and things for it, and I just think that was really, really great. Even for those people who have not had access to that yet or do not know what this is going to look like when it comes to them, when it comes, they will be like, 'Now, hang on a minute', and they can talk about that.

From the perspective of getting the extra help to keep the ratios low, because often at this service too they have lots of early start kinder children, in recent years we have probably been only getting the kindergarten inclusion support program funding. That is what we have used to get additional workers in the space, but sometimes we do not have the diagnoses for that.

Ms PARKINSON: Quite often we do not know what is coming until it is there.

Ms COUZENS: I can imagine.

Ms SCHULTZ: Yes, so we are very lucky in our space at Shine Bright. We have been able to support—even if we have not had the KIS packages—to put in the additional staffing until we can get a KIS package. Sometimes it does not come, but because we do our budgeting more globally, we are able to provide the need where it is required. But if we were a standalone service, there would be all sorts of challenges. So that is the benefit of being part of a larger cluster.

Ms BRERETON: But it is very hard in applying for funding just for trauma because it is not recognised on its own as a reason.

Ms PARKINSON: We are lucky that that criteria does fit under 'Safety to self and others'. That is where we always go for, because it is generally about the safety of the other children or the safety of themselves. I think we are quite well known within the people who process things as well—this is something that we do understand, we do work with it every year and we need it. We very rarely do not get it. I know other services sometimes do not, but we have definitely worked very hard with Shine Bright as well as with—

Ms SCHULTZ: Just to try and embed it, so that every year we start off the year with extra people all lined up, ready to go. Because it is too much.

Ms PARKINSON: I do not even know if this is appropriate, but Glenys and I have had a conversation numerous times about the Early Start packages and having them be available to CALD families, because we have many children coming in that we think would really benefit from them, but they do not tick any of those boxes, and that means that they are really missing out on that extra year. I do not know if that is something that is within your realm, but I am putting that out there.

Ms COUZENS: Well, we can note it.

Ms SCHULTZ: It is exciting with the three-year-old kinder coming in.

Ms COUZENS: Yes, and that will make a huge difference for a lot of kids. But it is not going to solve the world's problems.

Ms BRERETON: Sometimes that is just a little—

Ms PARKINSON: It is a really good point. For them to be included in that would be great.

Ms BRERETON: Yes, because sometimes we look at it and we go, 'Well, they don't tick that box'. However, that year of kinder would be so valuable for them.

Ms PARKINSON: Especially with regard to language.

Ms BRERETON: Yes, absolutely. And as we have just talked about too, we have just been looking at and trying to do a bit more research around intergenerational trauma.

Ms PARKINSON: Yes, this is something that has come up this year. That is something we do not have a lot of knowledge of. We understand trauma and vulnerability and have done Bridges out of Poverty and all of those things, but that generational trauma is something that we do not know a lot about, and we are definitely acknowledging that that is within our CALD families.

Ms COUZENS: And there is a lot more research happening right across the world around that trauma, yes.

Ms PARKINSON: The other thing that is something that is difficult for families to access that we just thought we would point out is that we have currently got a young Karen girl who is going to be doing a second year with us, and with the cultural differences and the language differences, we are trying to figure out if she actually has a delay or if it is just the language barrier. Over time we have been speaking to her parents and talking about it, and I have just referred her to have the preschool field worker come in. But the thing that we are coming up against is how we can actually find a service that can support her, if she does have a developmental delay, speaking a different language. That is something that has just come up recently as well, as this came up—it all came up at the same time. I would not know the best way I would be able to offer the services we offer everybody, and I do not think there is anything there that would be beneficial with regard to a family that does not speak English. She is also struggling to understand, I think, her own language as well as our language.

The CHAIR: That is important to record.

Ms PARKINSON: Definitely, yes.

Ms COUZENS: Thank you very much for that.

The CHAIR: Thank you. This concludes your submission. Thank you very much for taking the time to express your views and submit to this important Inquiry. You can stay up to date on the Committee's webpage. Your submission will come into consideration in our final report, delivered to Parliament in the new year.

Ms BRERETON: Thank you for having us.

Ms PARKINSON: Thank you.

Witnesses withdrew.