

TRANSCRIPT

LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL LEGAL AND SOCIAL ISSUES COMMITTEE

Inquiry into the State Education System in Victoria

Bairnsdale – Tuesday 26 March 2024

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WITNESS

Jessica McManus, Teacher, Lakes Entrance Primary School.

The CHAIR: Welcome back to the Legal and Social Issues Committee Inquiry into the State Education System in Victoria. With us we now have Ms Jessica McManus from Lakes Entrance Primary School. Would you please introduce yourself and the organisation you are representing?

Jessica McMANUS: I would like to begin by acknowledging the traditional owners of the land we are gathered on today, the Gunnai/Kurnai people. I am very grateful to live where I live and grateful for the ongoing connection of our Indigenous community to the land. I would like to acknowledge the elders past and present and particularly those emerging leaders who we have the privilege of speaking about today. I would like to keep them in mind.

My name is Jessica McManus. I am coming to you today and I have requested to speak in my role as an educator at Lakes Entrance Primary School. We are about 45 minutes away from here, very lucky to be down on the Ninety Mile Beach.

The CHAIR: Just before I pass you to your opening statement, there is just some information that I need to provide you. All evidence taken is protected by parliamentary privilege as provided by the *Constitution Act 1975* and further subject to the provisions of the Legislative Council standing orders. Therefore any information you provide to this hearing is protected by law. You are protected against any action for what you say during this hearing, but if you go elsewhere and repeat the same thing, those comments may not be protected by this privilege. Any deliberately false evidence or misleading of the committee may be considered a contempt of Parliament.

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

There is no submission, so I would like to invite you to make an opening statement, please.

Jessica McMANUS: Thank you. I will read from my notes, if that is okay, because it keeps me on track. For roughly the last eight years I have worked at Lakes Entrance Primary School, a school which fluctuates between around 200 and 260 students. We currently have 20 per cent Indigenous enrolment, and this number is quite consistent for us. Our school is the closest primary school to Lake Tyers trust, which was one of the last mission statements in Victoria and is still large home to a large Indigenous community. The school SFOE is 0.65, which indicates we are grouped with some the most disadvantaged areas in the state.

To attend school at Lakes Entrance Primary School, parents pay no fees. There is no cost for camps and excursions, no cost for uniforms, no cost for swimming. My child is in grade 2, and the only expense I have had to pay for his schooling to this date is any fundraisers such as raffle tickets, and today it is school photos. Other expenses are funded creatively by the school through equity money and by the administration staff, who work tirelessly to support our families to access the camps and excursion funding and other initiatives offered by the government. This hard work ensures that every child has access to an equal level of education and engagement. Are you happy for me to go on?

The CHAIR: Yes, please.

Jessica McMANUS: That can be my introduction. Many of our students have experienced or been to exposed family or domestic violence, mental health issues and problematic drug or alcohol use. Currently there are huge challenges within our community around housing. At times we have had students and families who are homeless. Large numbers of our families currently reside in local caravan parks throughout the year. Many of our families do not have access to reliable transport. The cost of registration and petrol in the current climate means many families are without a car. A large proportion of our students would not have ever travelled out of the area. While this context deftly presents its challenges, it also means that it is incredibly rewarding to work within the community. The opportunity to support vulnerable students to connect in a positive way with education and their peers is something that I and my colleagues are very, very grateful for.

Before teaching at Lakes Entrance I spent some time working with the Smith Family as a Learning for Life coordinator, connecting families with support for education. Before this, the role that I am most grateful for was my time spent running the homework program for a group of 25 students from prep to year 10 at Lake Tyers Aboriginal Trust. To be fair, not much homework was done during this time, but the learning that did take place was of great importance to the kids and families and also the greatest professional development I ever could have undertaken. My parents were both primary school teachers in the local area, and from my early years I have spent a lot of time in and around schools.

The reason I have requested to speak today is because I feel it is important to share some perspectives from the local area for the families, the staff and the children. We are consistently battling a lack of support services in our area, which is directly impacting our families and young people, who make up some of the most disadvantaged in our state. Additionally, the lack of services is impacting the ability of educators to focus on the job they have been trained for. If we are truly striving to meet the needs of each individual to address the gap, deliver equity in education and build bridges out of poverty, I believe services must be directed at those who need them most. Additionally, a greater effort must be made to put services and supports in place from early education. If intervention can be provided in the early years, it will take the pressure off support services required later in life, effectively lessening the burden on the economy. Additionally, it will lighten the enormous load on educators, who are challenged each day to fill a range of roles they are not equipped to meet.

I have briefly mentioned the context I work in; however, I would like to revisit it. Currently we have a high number of out-of-home students. This is constantly fluctuating, and not all of these placements are stable and supportive. Last year I worked closely with a student and teacher as the student was removed from placement six times in six months. Each of these removals happened at school, with support workers arriving during the day to tell the student he would not be returning to his home that night. This had a significant impact on the student, the educator and all those who worked around him tirelessly to support him at school. The student I speak about has a significant trauma history, along with diagnoses of ADHD, conduct disorder, stress disorder and oppositional defiance disorder. He is funded under a category called 'severe behaviour disorder'. This student, like the majority of vulnerable students at our school, currently receives no therapeutic intervention outside of school. There is nothing suitable available and his carer does not have access to a car. As a school, we have organised for him to spend time at an Indigenous men's shed which our staff will accompany him to. He has a completely individualised timetable which is constantly being adjusted as we keep his safety and wellbeing as the focus. Each day we pick up in the morning, and we drop him home after school. Sometimes if he is not in a great place, he takes a walk with a support staff member, and often they will go fishing.

He was seeing a paediatrician 85 kilometres away in Sale via telehealth conference throughout last year. Although the distance is not ideal, this is the closest option for many of our families to access a paediatrician. Unfortunately, his doctor, along with a lot of other paediatricians in the area, left at the beginning of this year, and he has now been put on a waitlist of up to two years to see a paediatrician. His carer has been told that if she could afford to pay and she could get him to Melbourne, he could be in almost straightaway. However, this is not a sustainable option for her.

While his story is confronting, it is not uncommon in our area. The waitlist for paediatricians is excessive. To get through the first initial appointments leading up to a diagnosis could take over a year. Diagnosis for these students is crucial for schools to understanding their needs and for parents and carers to begin to learn what is required to support their child. As a school we can provide so many supports. However, bringing more paediatricians to our area so that our students can get the urgent support they need is not something we can control.

The CHAIR: If I could stop you there, because there are quite a few questions our committee would like to ask. We would love to have your input and your experience as well. Due to the time, can we limit questions to 4 minutes each, please. Michael, would you like to start?

Michael GALEA: Thank you, Chair. Hello, I am Michael Galea, Member for South-Eastern Metropolitan. There is so much I could ask you. Thank you for your opening statement, firstly. It was really quite informative.

Jessica McMANUS: Thank you.

Michael GALEA: Firstly, you just touched on early education as been critical in avoiding some of the issues that come through primary school – if we can address them in early education.

Jessica McMANUS: Yes.

Michael GALEA: The government, as you are probably aware, is rolling out free kinder, first for four-year-olds and now for three-year-olds. Once that is fully implemented, what sort of impact do you see that having on how these kids are supported?

Jessica McMANUS: It is hard for me to speak from an early childhood perspective given that I work in primary schools. Interestingly this year we have a large number of our students who have not attended any kinder or day care, which is surprising for us because we have not seen it as strongly in the past.

Michael GALEA: Interesting.

Jessica McMANUS: I am aware of all the government incentives, but I wonder how much they are reaching our areas, and what other barriers are in place for those families. It is really challenging to have a prep grade of 20 kids when three of them have not attended any day care or kinder – they are still adjusting to that time being away from their families. We are looking at getting a kinder on site, opening next year, so that will be a really exciting time for us as we can extend that continuation between the school and the kinder.

Michael GALEA: Work together with that onsite kinder.

Jessica McMANUS: Yes.

Michael GALEA: I know we often talk about the benefits in terms of the double drop-off, but that is probably the much more profound benefit, which is in terms of what you guys can actually do as primary educators working with those early educators as well.

Jessica McMANUS: Yes, definitely.

Michael GALEA: It would be quite interesting for us to explore some of those other barriers that you mentioned as well. You spoke about the time that you spent at the Lakes Tyers Trust as well and the background that that has given you, as well as that particular case study that you mentioned with a boy with severe behavioural issues. Specifically you mentioned that he was going to an Indigenous men's shed. You seem to be one of the most experienced educators I have met in this space certainly.

Jessica McMANUS: Thank you.

Michael GALEA: What do we need to be doing more of locally, regionally and statewide to support young Indigenous students and really close that gap in education?

Jessica McMANUS: Last year I attended a meeting, a roundtable meeting, run by VAEAI, and one of the overwhelming things that came out from families was that they want transparency and conversation. They do not want to have these nice surface-level conversations. Sometimes as educators I think we feel a bit of a barrier and we say the things we need to say, but they really want transparency in those conversations about how their child is going, about what we need from home and what we need to do as a school. I think the bottom line is as educators we are the ones that are being paid to educate these children, we are the ones that are being paid to build a place where these families and these children feel welcome coming to school, so we have got to adapt what we are doing. We have got to change. We have got to ensure that parents and families feel welcome coming into school – if that is changing our office structure, if that is making a different place for families to meet where they feel more comfortable. It is those high expectations relationships. It is utilising programs such as Stronger Smarter and all these evidence-backed programs that allow teachers to build some of that perspective, because coming into education we do not know what we do not know and we need an opportunity to build that. I think that is why I was so lucky.

Michael GALEA: Wonderful. Thank you. You mentioned the special circumstances around the equity situation at Lakes Entrance Primary. I was wondering what sort of specialists, if you have psychologists, nurses, GPs visiting?

Jessica McMANUS: No psychologists, no nurses, no GPs. We pay a speech pathologist from Melbourne to come down twice a term. It is quite expensive to have someone travel from Melbourne. Quite often she will bring an assistant with her. Two days a term we probably look at, at the beginning of the term and the end of the term. It is not enough. You know, for speech pathology to be effective these kids need, in the early years, to be seeing someone two or three times a week to have that ongoing intervention that really makes a difference.

We have tried to use the speech pathologist in a way that they can upskill our ES staff and our early years staff, but there are already so many pressures on those staff and so many things they are trying to juggle that that becomes really difficult. Last year we were able to engage a local speech pathologist who was coming in once a week, but unfortunately there is just not enough in the area. And it is more attractive I think at times for them to take on private work than it is to work in schools. So some kind of initiative for those people to come to the area – I am not sure how we get more paediatricians down here. That sort of policy is not the thing that I am trained in, but there must be a way.

I attended a care team meeting for a really vulnerable student last year, and there was an OT in the meeting. I was like, ‘Yes. We’ve got an OT. This is going to be brilliant.’ I was listening to the conversation and about 10 minutes in I said, ‘Oh, I’m sorry. Have you ever met the student?’ And he said, ‘Not yet, but I’m really hoping to.’ I said, ‘Oh, where are you dialling in from today?’ And he was from Melbourne. So the likelihood of him being able to meet the student – I find it hard to work online with specialists, and I can only imagine a child six or seven years old would feel the same.

We do have the SSS team, the Student Support Services, whose knowledge and expertise is invaluable, but given that we are in a rural area, often their staff turnover is high too. Sometimes they may have speech pathologists available. We can dial in and we can get advice, but I feel that they are just as stretched as we are and their availability to come out to the school and help us on the ground is just not there at the moment.

Michael GALEA: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Michael. Dr Heath.

Renee HEATH: Yes. Thank you so much for appearing here today.

Jessica McMANUS: No worries.

Renee HEATH: I have got a couple of questions. If I do not get through them in 4 minutes, I might provide them to you on notice, if that is all right.

Jessica McMANUS: Yes, no worries at all.

Renee HEATH: Thank you. First of all, do you believe that the Victorian government has invested enough into regional education?

Jessica McMANUS: I think that steps are being made. Again, I can only comment on what I know, and I do not want to speak outside of that because it is not my area. We are using the targeted financial incentive positions to attract more teachers when we are advertising roles. I feel like that is making a difference. But I think some of these battles that the families are up against are not as well exposed, because a lot of these families do not have the avenue to come and speak at something like this, or they do not have the confidence to come and speak at something like this, so a lot of these things just become the day to day of teaching and they are not highlighted as much.

Renee HEATH: You mentioned as well about the lack of support services. What support services are they that you believe you are lacking?

Jessica McMANUS: We have a large number of students from trauma backgrounds, and I could not even count on one hand the kids that are having intervention outside of school. These things do not just disappear and go away without intervention and support for these kids, so to be able to have access to an OT to do some sensory profiles and then educate the teachers on what they could be doing and to support the families to have speech pathologists in an ongoing way. You read online the positive outcomes from play therapy or intervention behaviour therapy that students have achieved, and I would just love for these kids to have access to that.

Renee HEATH: Because you do not have access to that, is that impacting on the teachers' ability to teach?

Jessica McMANUS: Yes, 100 per cent. Yes. I had more to go on with, but teachers are coming to school every day and attempting to get these kids to put a pen and paper in their hands and learn, and they cannot. You cannot begin to learn when you are dealing with these things from home that are so challenging. And as teachers, we do the best we can. We show up and we do the best we can. I feel, as a community as a whole I would say, that our educators and our school leaders have an incredible ability to build really strong relationships with these students and their families. It is possibly easier when you are in a small community, because you see them at the supermarket and you see them at the service station – I have met parents that say, 'Oh, your mum taught me,' and these things. But that is an incredible load on a teacher, and it is not something that we are trained for.

Renee HEATH: Yes. Is that what led you to become a specialist in literacy and numeracy?

Jessica McMANUS: I have a really strong interest in maths, and I have a really strong interest in wellbeing. In a regional area I find – I have found, anyway – that there are a lot more people that have the skills to focus on literacy, there are a lot more programs available, so I found myself in a numeracy role. I love maths and I have a really strong passion to support kids to also see their maths ability and see that they really are good mathematicians.

Renee HEATH: Do you have a suggestion for maybe a way that we could be doing mathematics better?

Jessica McMANUS: I have heaps of those. It is probably not the time now.

Melina BATH: But you can actually write in to us as well after today.

Jessica McMANUS: Yes.

Renee HEATH: That could be very, very helpful. I do not know if my 4 minutes is up.

The CHAIR: Another question.

Renee HEATH: Okay. You mentioned the child with a severe behaviour disorder.

Jessica McMANUS: Yes.

Renee HEATH: What help do you get for that? Does he get an integration aid, or is it left to the teacher to try to manage him along with everyone else?

Jessica McMANUS: Yes, that is like a funding level under the support services. We have not rolled over to the disability inclusion model yet, so he gets an allocation of funding based on his level. Probably our highest category of funding at Lakes Entrance Primary School is for severe behaviour. I feel that we are finding so many children with severe behaviour because all these things are not being addressed early on that would support them in an education setting. We use the money – part of it – to employ education support staff. It is very hard to find the right people to work with these students. If it goes well for a few days, that is great, but it can be incredibly draining, and it is hard not to take it personally. These children are so complex that even if I showed up every day and I did the exact right thing, things are not going to be perfect because of all the things going on underneath, and it is really hard not to take that personally as an educator. And things could be going really well for two weeks, and you go, 'Right, we've got everything in place. We're sailing along here,' and suddenly the wheels fall off due to something outside our control. So that ability to bounce back, to lean on your colleagues and talk about it and reflect on your practices and change what you are doing – it can be incredibly draining, but it is also incredibly, incredibly rewarding when it works.

Renee HEATH: It sounds like you are doing an outstanding job.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Ms Bath.

Melina BATH: Thank you. Thank you very much for being here today. We really appreciate it.

Jessica McMANUS: That is all right.

Melina BATH: Can I go back: you said that there are approximately 200 to 260 students at the school, and approximately 20 per cent of those are Indigenous children. Your student family occupation index is very low, at 0.65. Can you tell us how many of those students – so I am saying roughly 40; if my maths is right, 40 to 50 students –

Jessica McMANUS: Yes, 41.

Melina BATH: turn up daily? Forty would be enrolled. How many would turn up daily?

Jessica McMANUS: I think that at the moment we have two Indigenous students who are on our highest level of non-attendance, and that is a really complex position that family is in; they are moving in and out of a care arrangement. We are talking to the people that they are with every day, adjusting the timetable. We even get them in for 2 hours in the morning. The free uniform and all that sort of thing really helps. What we try to work on as a school is we cannot control a lot of these things, but once those kids are there –

Melina BATH: Come through the gate.

Jessica McMANUS: Yes. If they are through the gate, we have got to meet them where they are at. We have got to provide learning that is focused on their safety and their wellbeing. And by safety I am not talking about being worried that someone is going to physically hurt them. For these kids the threat of being made to stand up in front of a class and feel embarrassed, the threat of being made to feel shamed and the threat of not feeling culturally safe or having your identity built up within a community are the most important things.

Melina BATH: And your school is very aware of that is what you are saying.

Jessica McMANUS: Yes.

Melina BATH: So from that – I am just trying to get a quantum – are most of those 40 students, in round figures, coming to school daily?

Jessica McMANUS: Yes, through creative means – some of them we are picking up. Some of them – you know, ‘If you’re not there at the start of the day, it doesn’t matter. Get there when you can get there.’ We are working closely with our KESO whilst also not trying to make this the KESO’s job. It is our job as a school and it is our job as educators, but we can be guided by the KESO in how we have those conversations and how we support those families.

Melina BATH: If we are here to listen and understand and make recommendations to government on improving education, if there was a proactive measure that the education department could have to not only attract the students from Lake Tyers trust but other students, what would it be? What is a message back to government?

Jessica McMANUS: We need more Indigenous people in schools. I do not know how you do it, but triple the number of KESOs you have got. Find a way. We pay literacy specialists. I have got some statistics in here about how much we would pay a behaviour specialist to come for the day. These people are culturally the experts in our area, particularly in our area. Let us pay them to get them into schools.

Melina BATH: Put it on record. I will give you 30 seconds to put some of those things on record, please.

Jessica McMANUS: Sorry, I am asking – you want me to state the numbers?

Melina BATH: Yes. You had them prepared, so share them with us.

Jessica McMANUS: So we looked to engage a behaviour specialist. I contacted him last year. We talked about someone who would support our positive behaviour systems, all of this stuff. He had one day of availability in August, a Friday in August, so we locked him in – \$3500 for a day.

Melina BATH: And where did he come from, do you think?

Jessica McMANUS: He has been in the area, but he travels from down towards Melbourne. We are doing Berry Street training at the moment, which is absolutely invaluable, and we are doing that as a whole staff. I

cannot speak more highly about the need for trauma-informed practices in school. \$25,000 for four days of training for all of our staff – we must be paying our cultural experts the same.

Melina BATH: Thank you very much. I used to be a maths and science teacher back before this role, in the secondary system. You talked about some of the important maths lessons. Give us some direction. We are here to learn. What should we be doing, particularly in remote schools? I am calling wonderful Lakes Entrance a remote school.

Jessica McMANUS: No student is behind or ahead or in front or more capable. Some students are earlier in their learning based on where they are at, and some students are further along. Every student has the ability to develop at their pace, even those students with diagnoses and other challenges taking place. We have to meet them where they are at. Good mathematics teachers need a really, really robust understanding of where their students are at, and they must be able to provide learning at their point of need. I know that there is a push from the department at the moment to provide open-ended learning tasks, multiple entry and exit points. I have not found those to work in our setting, and we have engaged with professionals around this. We have not found it to work. Indigenous kids and low socio-economic kids need to be working with models –

Melina BATH: Explicit learning?

Jessica McMANUS: Explicit instruction at their point of need, so not to a whole class. They must be working with hands-on models and manipulatives, modelling what they know and building on that, and we need to see that transfer through into secondary schools.

Melina BATH: And building on their confidence I think is one of the keys.

Jessica McMANUS: Yes, so we as a school questioned, if we did explicit instructions really focused on number, how that would transfer through to our NAPLAN results when kids had to apply their maths understanding to those worded problems. My belief is kids do not learn how to solve worded problems by looking at, ‘How many ways can I arrange 25 apples?’ They build that knowledge by becoming confident mathematicians, by knowing that they have got the skills to go and solve problems, and we have really, really seen that come through in our NAPLAN results last year, in which in numeracy our 3s and 5s were higher than the state average.

Melina BATH: Can you provide some of that explicit instruction that your school is doing and adopting?

Jessica McMANUS: Yes, 100 per cent.

Melina BATH: Some of those techniques that we could see, would you provide that to us? Thank you.

Jessica McMANUS: And with the NAPLAN results.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Ms Bath. Dr Mansfield.

Sarah MANSFIELD: Thank you. Thank you so much for appearing today. I am really interested in understanding more about the impact of the broader issues that you have highlighted that are outside the school. What impact is that having on teachers and the school’s ability to attract and retain staff over the longer term?

Jessica McMANUS: I myself am obviously very, very passionate about working in this area, and I have already started my ongoing education because I know that I will not last in education. And it is not because I do not feel that education is the most powerful tool to change these outcomes for marginalised and disadvantaged kids, but it is because the model at the moment is not sustainable. If I am showing up to school each day, like many of my colleagues, and before school starts I am debriefing with a child about domestic violence that has taken place overnight, I am making calls to DFFH in a system that is not operating the best, we are not sure what that outcome will be, I am adjusting what I have done from yesterday to try and support a student with multiple diagnoses and I am supporting families, those that are doing it well will not last. Many of my colleagues that I speak to are feeling frustrated because they are putting in so much work, but these are not things that we are trained to address.

We can take on professional learning, and as a school we can provide that professional learning. But there are experts out there that can do this so well. This is their field and this is what they do, and we need to call on

them. We need their support. If we could have OTs in place, speech pathologists in place, behaviour observations that are done at the start of the year, we could put a behaviour support plan in place for children from the start of the year. That is a model of best practice that is informed by experts, and it is not guesswork. The other danger is, if we are coming from a place of really having the best intentions but without that training, we are at a huge risk of further traumatising these kids within an education setting.

Sarah MANSFIELD: You mentioned a couple of interventions that you think could help to start addressing that, around some allied health and other expert support embedded within the school from the get-go. Are there other interventions that you would like to see the government take? And considering it from the standpoint of a potential investment in education but maybe that is not directly within the school, what are some of the things in your community you think could make a big difference?

Jessica McMANUS: In an ideal world I would love to have a trauma team available in every school in our area, that would be unbelievable. But we were brainstorming for a family that had rung for help yesterday, and off the top of our head we could think of two therapeutic interventions individuals available in the area that we knew of, and they both charge roughly \$100 an hour. They are not accessible for our families. Our kids are coming to school with no food for lunch and we are feeding them, and there is no petrol in the car, so the parents do not have the access to these services. As a community I think that a lot is done and there are a lot of organisations working hard outside of the schools, but these services that would really help the kids to engage from day one at school would be massive.

Sarah MANSFIELD: You touched on this in your answers to Ms Bath's questions, but do you feel that there are sufficient culturally sensitive and appropriate services for First Nations students in the area?

Jessica McMANUS: In our area, I feel like we are really well supported through organisations such as GEGAC and LEAHA, our local Aboriginal organisations. We have worked really hard as a school and community to build a lot of connections – I can only speak from my experience at our school, I would not comment on what other schools are doing – and there are all these organisations working super hard to come in and offer support around the children. When we rang the men's shed to speak about the child I discussed, they were so ready to come in and help. We do not have the funds to pay these people. We do not have the money to pay that back in the way that it should be for their expertise.

Sarah MANSFIELD: Yes. In terms of how kids are progressing through primary school and where they end up at the end of their primary school journey, what are you seeing for the kids who are attending your school? Where are they going next, and where do they sit relative to other students across the state in terms of their educational outcomes?

Jessica McMANUS: We looked at this a bit last week as part of our school review, comparing our Indigenous data as a school to our non-Indigenous data, and while there was a slight drop, we were happy that it was really consistent between cohorts. As a primary school I think we have a lot more ability to build those really strong relationships with children. We are seeing the same children every day, they have got the same classroom teacher and we work incredibly hard. There is definitely a disconnect between the high school model that is in place and the primary school model. I have not taught at a high school, as much as I would love to, and I think that there is a huge difference in pedagogy: there are a lot of textbook examples on a board, and kids copying down that does not suit the wide variety of learners in our classroom. But if I focus on that and focus on what happens next, it can become disconnected and disjointed for me, so I have to just focus on what is in front of me and what I can do.

Sarah MANSFIELD: Yes, thanks.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Thank you, Dr Mansfield. My question to you, Jessica – I know you mentioned your parents were educators, and you being an educator and a specialist in mathematics as well; I think that is very important for your school to have specialists in the area. There are a couple of questions I want to ask. The first one I want to ask is, just reflecting back on your education and your parents being educators, and the current – I know you mentioned the results of your NAPLAN and the kids at your school, because there are specialists, are quite above the average. The curriculum at the moment, compared to what it has been in the past, what you went through, has this got more crowded, or is it at the right place?

Jessica McMANUS: I think it is difficult for me to comment on the past because obviously I was very privileged in the way that I was brought up and the support that I had in place. I was probably shielded a bit from the curriculum in the past. I would say that the curriculum has become more crowded as more things are introduced. However, there have been some really good introductions, like the acknowledgement of Indigenous languages in the curriculum and the resources that are available to build those.

The CHAIR: Now, just on that aspect, from a mathematics specialist, has the curriculum enabled you to do what you are meant to be doing in relation to teaching mathematics? Also, has it enabled those specialists in phonics and reading to do their part in your school?

Jessica McMANUS: Yes, I believe it has. I feel that the curriculum is a good representation of where we aim to get our students at. I am not really familiar with the high school curriculum, but at primary level, yes, I do feel that the curriculum is supportive and that it is developmental in its sequence, and it gives us something to build on.

The CHAIR: Okay, thank you. You also mentioned that teachers now are expected to do a lot more support for the students when they are coming to school, instead of educating them – how can that be addressed? What are your recommendations in relation to it? Instead of having an extra team coming to the school, what other –

Jessica McMANUS: It is hard for me to go beyond that, because if we had the occupational therapists and the speech pathologists – some of these underlying issues addressed by trained therapists – then we could know that those things are in place and those things are being addressed by the people that are best equipped to meet those, and we could focus more on the teaching and learning. Obviously that strong relationship with students and their families and that ongoing support are never going to go away. I think also having access to things like breakfast clubs, free uniforms – all that sort of stuff that takes away some of those barriers before a child comes to school. I know that in our obligations under human rights conventions, primary school should be compulsory and should be free at point of delivery for every child in Australia. I am not sure how much that is tokenistic, or is it genuinely happening across the board? Surely that should be our minimum starting point.

The CHAIR: Just before I pass on to Michael, I want to ask a few more questions. When you say it should be free across the board, with your school, looking at it at the moment: the students, both non-Indigenous and Indigenous cohort – are they paying extra than they are supposed to, or is it totally free?

Jessica McMANUS: There is no cost for education at all.

The CHAIR: In relation to primary school, there has been mention of additional stationery they had to buy –

Jessica McMANUS: Nothing – there is no –

The CHAIR: Both cohorts – both Indigenous and non-Indigenous?

Jessica McMANUS: All students – there is no cost at all. My child is non-Indigenous, and he is in grade 2, and the only thing I paid for is school photos. There is no cost. The swimming program is free, camps and excursions are free. Obviously, given our SFOE, we receive access to a high amount of equity funding, and we do use that because we see that particularly where our families are now within the current economic setting they do not have the money for these things. Even with that, two weeks ago I had a young girl in grade 3 and I said, ‘Oh, where were you yesterday? I missed you.’ And she goes, ‘I couldn’t find my shoes and I’ve only got one pair, so I couldn’t come to school.’ And I was like, ‘That’s okay. We’ll get you some shoes. I’ll see you tomorrow.’

The CHAIR: And you recommend that should be across the board for all primary school attendees?

Jessica McMANUS: Yes, for all students – all families should have access to that. We should not, as educators, be the ones to judge who deserves it and who does not. Yes.

The CHAIR: Yes. Michael.

Michael GALEA: That is actually a perfect segue to my question. It was going to be about that same thing. Is that something that has been a relatively recent initiative at the school, or has it been as long as you have been there – that equity funding?

Jessica McMANUS: It is only in the past two years. I feel like about four years ago we dropped school fees in the early years, as we saw we did have droughts. You could talk about those things in our area for a long time. There were huge droughts, with a number of farming families affected, and then we had the bushfires and then we had COVID.

Melina BATH: You have had a bad time.

Jessica McMANUS: We did, and some of our families were directly affected by those, so we saw it as a real need to drop those fees. Then once we did that we realised that it was a viable model and how much families really appreciate it. When we announced free uniforms, we had a lot of people going, ‘You know, they’ll just take advantage of it, and people will just come in and grab a new one every time they lose something.’ It has not happened at all. No-one has taken advantage of it. Families have been really grateful. The students have been really grateful.

We use Foodbank very creatively to order food boxes when we can and pass those on to families, and we do it in a way where we say, ‘Oh, we’ve gotten access to heaps of these, do you think you could just take them off our hands for us?’ so that families do not have to feel that shame. Quite often through Foodbank we will order 40 loaves of bread a fortnight and we will just give a loaf of bread to each family in the 3–4 to take home or each family in the 5–6 to take home. All those things take extra work, but it helps you to build a closer relationship with those families as well.

Michael GALEA: Thanks – a real difference. I really like the way that you frame that too – as ‘Can you help us get rid of this?’

Jessica McMANUS: Yes, and we ask that everyone takes one too. When we get a few we say, ‘Everyone take one. If you want to, give it to your neighbours or your grandma or whoever you think might eat the stuff in it.’

Michael GALEA: Fantastic.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Michael. Thank you, Jessica, for coming today. I think your evidence has actually brought a different perspective to some of the issues we have been concerned about. Like Ms Bath and Dr Heath mentioned, any additional information you have and possible evidence you want to submit, please submit it in. We will include it in our submission and our conclusions down the track. Thank you so much for coming in.

Jessica McMANUS: Thank you for your time. I really appreciate it.

The CHAIR: That brings this session to a close.

Witness withdrew.