

# TRANSCRIPT

## LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL LEGAL AND SOCIAL ISSUES COMMITTEE

### Inquiry into the State Education System in Victoria

Bairnsdale – Tuesday 26 March 2024

#### MEMBERS

Trung Luu – Chair

Ryan Batchelor – Deputy Chair

Michael Galea

Renee Heath

Joe McCracken

Rachel Payne

Aiv Puglielli

Lee Tarlamis

#### PARTICIPATING MEMBERS

Melina Bath

John Berger

Georgie Crozier

Moira Deeming

David Ettershank

Wendy Lovell

Sarah Mansfield

**WITNESS**

Matt Jenkins, President, Orbost Community College.

**The CHAIR:** Welcome back to the Legal and Social Issues Committee's public inquiry into the state of education in Victoria. In this session we have Matt Jenkins, President of the Orbost Community College P-12.

Before continuing I just want to introduce the committee to Matt. My name is Trung Luu; I am the Chair of the committee. To my left is Michael Galea; he is a Member for the South-Eastern Metropolitan Region. To my right is Ms Melina Bath, Member for Eastern Victoria, and Dr Renee Heath, Member for Eastern Victoria as well. Also with us we should have Dr Sarah Mansfield on Zoom, Member for Western Victoria.

Before I continue I just want to inform you that all evidence 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 us today is protected by law. You are protected against any actions for what you say during this hearing, but if you go elsewhere and repeat the same 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 for the committee and will be made public, and proof versions will be provided to you after this hearing.

I would just like to ask you to please state your name and the organisation you represent and if you could outline basically an opening statement.

**Matt JENKINS:** No worries. My name is Matt Jenkins. I am currently the President of the Orbost Community College, just elected again last week. My experience with the education system is basically through work. I have been on a lot of committees. I have been for the last 12, 13 years on school council with the Orbost Primary School, and for basically 11 of those I have been President. I have also been a fairly strong advocate on the merger out at Orbost, which I am more than happy to speak of later. Pretty much the four items that I have identified as hurdles for us are basically our retention and recruitment, our time-in-lieu and relief teachers, online training and the impacts on SRP with the way we deal with our VCE subjects. That is pretty much where my major issues are at the moment. But prior to our new school our biggest issue was our declining numbers in town. We actually looked at this about eight years ago, and we understood we could not support and probably still cannot support five primary schools in Orbost itself. We had the four state schools plus the Christian primary school. It was a big lead by a group of us to actually look at what further education would be appropriate for our town in 10-15 years time. That is where our merger went, and pretty much my dealing with the education department was from there. But previous to Orbost, I had basic working details with Culgoa when the school shut – I was the one-manner there, up in northern Victoria – as well as Robinvale when it merged at the P-12. I did not have a lot to do with that because it was already in motion, but I dealt with the aftermath with the community. But, yes, I am happy to answer anything you need.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you very much. Dr Heath, would you like to start asking your questions?

**Renee HEATH:** Yes. Thank you so much for coming in today. Do you believe that the Victorian government has invested enough into regional education?

**Matt JENKINS:** I think there could be an increase or a different way of managing the development. This would probably come into the financial impacts that I mentioned in my four dot points. We have a system where obviously rural high schools and secondary colleges, or P-12s, do not have a huge amount of numbers so we cannot offer a great deal of variety in subjects due to the fact of your SRPs and that. So a lot of students will start doing their VCE subjects in year 10 and year 11. By the time they hit year 12, because they obviously cannot do them all in year 12 or all in year 11, they become part-time students effectively, so your SRPs are actually affected by that. I find that a disadvantage.

**Renee HEATH:** What is SRP, sorry?

**Matt JENKINS:** The student funding – you get paid per student. Those students who have actually completed VCE subjects two years in advance might only be at school for four subjects instead of five, so it

does affect your funding in those aspects. That is a little bit of a disadvantage, because we are giving them the options but because we can only run those courses every second year it makes it very hard for the students, and obviously the funding will eventually come out. Those sorts of transitions back into the interagency and online type of learning. I really think that interagency learning is another big problem, because with those who study through Virtual School Victoria, if they are doing those courses, it affects our funding for the high school. So again, that is probably the biggest thing that I have identified sitting on the councils: 'Oh, hang on, we have got 80 students doing VCE, but we are only funded for 60 because 20 of them are doing virtual schools or other programs.' We have got to still run the school and support them because they are at school.

Like I said, I cannot complain with funding, because we have actually had a really good time – even Orbost Primary School and the transition over. Obviously, our budget is still being worked out because we have been open for only the one term. But I cannot complain with that because the funding has always been there and it has been acceptable, and we been very fortunate to have schools that had some money in reserve. So we have been able to use that through funding grants and a very proactive community to make sure that we could run at a loss of 50 grand to put a support teacher in or a support agency, because we had that money in reserve. We are, like I said, very fortunate with our communities in that aspect. So yes, overall, I cannot really complain, but I reckon it could be better adjusted in terms –

**Renee HEATH:** Yes. Okay. Thank you. You also spoke about time in lieu and relief teachers. I just want to hear a bit more of that. Is that they cannot claim their time in lieu or is it –

**Matt JENKINS:** No, what happens is, with the meetings and that, teachers get time in lieu, and they get sporadic use of that time in lieu. Of course we struggle to get teachers at the best of times – and nurses and police out in rural areas – so to find that relief teacher or someone to fill in for one or two days is extremely hard for us because they are already employed full-time, 90 per cent of the time. An option for that would be to take the time in lieu into their long service leave, for example.

**Renee HEATH:** Okay, yes.

**Matt JENKINS:** By doing that, rather than taking a small pocket here and a little bit there, it adds to their long service leave, so they take a larger pocket. Therefore it would be easier for us to get someone there for three months than for two or three days. Obviously that sort of leads on to the retention and recruitment part as well, which is that we have got no housing, effectively. If you want to work in Orbost you have either got to buy, which is not what a lot of people want to do for a few years, or you have got to live in Lakes Entrance and travel. It is a very, very big problem across the communities as a whole. Even with my work, I have got four vacancies I cannot fill because I have got no housing. Hospitals are in the same boat.

**Renee HEATH:** Are there teacher vacancies at the moment that you know of?

**Matt JENKINS:** I believe we have got two at Orbost Community –

**Renee HEATH:** Two vacancies?

**Matt JENKINS:** Yes, two full-time positions. I am not sure about Marlo, Newmerella – I think they are reasonable – and I do not have anything really to do with the Christian school. But, yes, housing would be probably a priority for some of these remote areas. Listening to Omeo, it is the exact same deal. Mallacoota will be in the same boat. I know there used to be three houses, I believe, the education department had in Orbost. They are a really good bonus and stepping stone, especially if you have got a long-term leave, to get someone in to experience it and become part of the community, and you have got more chance of retaining that person. Then eventually – I was lucky enough to get the police house. After two years we have gone, 'That's it, we're staying', and we purchased, so that was part of the recruitment plan for us. I am trying to do it again; but it is hard. But the education side of things is really, really hard.

**Renee HEATH:** Yes, we have heard that quite a lot, actually. And you are a police officer; is there any correlation that you have seen between the kids that really struggle at school and get behind and those that might end up offending?

**Matt JENKINS:** A little bit, but not a great deal. Orbost is a very lucky town, is probably the best way to put it. Even our kids that cause us problems – which will be riding on the streets or just being kids –

**Renee HEATH:** They are not terrible crimes.

**Matt JENKINS:** they are still going to school. There are only – I could probably count five kids that just do not go to school. But generally they have some sort of employment, and out of those five I reckon there are probably only two that just refuse to engage with anybody. It is a real advantage of that small town. It is very close-knit and really does look after its own. And like I said, you go into Orbost after school hours and every kid is wearing school uniform. They are proud of their schools, they are proud of their sporting clubs, and they all stick together and look after each other. So it is not a great deal. We do have a very low socio-economical part of our community, but again, they are still engaged, which is really good. Like I said, I can probably count five households at the most. What I am seeing now, though, is there is a lot of what I would say mainstream, normal workers that are starting to struggle, just day-to-day stuff, and that is usually because of their loans. There has been a little bit more activity around our food banks. Because the police station and all the services are together, we are seeing a lot more people that you would not expect to be relying on those services. We are seeing that quite high now. And that obviously can be shown into the schools too. When you are struggling to put food on the table you are not going to do the voluntary payments. And everything is just a tad more expensive in the bush. That is a real big issue we are seeing.

**Renee HEATH:** Yes. A bit of a crisis.

**Matt JENKINS:** But like I said, to see the kids still engaged at school is just a really good achievement out there.

**Renee HEATH:** Yes, fabulous. Thank you so much.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, Dr Heath. Ms Bath.

**Melina BATH:** Thank you. Thank you very much for being here, Matt. You cannot shut down a native timber industry where the whole town basically is dependent on that industry and not expect there to be pain, and I think that is probably what you are reflecting on there with that increase in food banks and people struggling to pay their bills because of that loss.

**Matt JENKINS:** Yes and no. A lot of our timber industry workers were very lucky to gain other employment, through the roads and other things.

**Melina BATH:** Interstate – having to go interstate.

**Matt JENKINS:** Yes, an hour up to Bendoc and things like that. We will not feel the full impact until probably after the financial year, when the money stops completely.

**Melina BATH:** Yes, sure.

**Matt JENKINS:** That is when we going to see how big of an impact it is going to be.

**Melina BATH:** Okay.

**Matt JENKINS:** Like I said, I am talking about people that are not related to the timber industry.

**Melina BATH:** In addition.

**Matt JENKINS:** Yes. In addition. But like I said, the majority of people I know through the timber industry have found alternate employment locally, which has been really, really good. Unfortunately, most of them do not have kids, which affects the –

**Melina BATH:** They are an older demographic, per se.

**Matt JENKINS:** More the older demographic, that is right. But yes, midyear is when I think the rural communities are really going to –

**Melina BATH:** That impact will start to bear fruit.

**Matt JENKINS:** Yes, bear fruit a lot more. It is more, like I said, just the general cost of living with the interest rate rises and that. A lot of people, while the interest rates were low, probably over-borrowed, looking at it from my eyes. I really do see there was over-borrowing when things were down and of course a couple of interest rate hikes has made things a lot tougher for them.

**Melina BATH:** Yes, cost of living. You are a very remote school, and you need bodies to come in and to be registered with the education department to get your funding. So let us walk through it. You go through the early education, from now P-12 with the amalgamation, and as you get to those upper year levels, I am sure the school still wants to provide diversity of courses and classes and options for students going forward. Just walk us through a little bit more of the virtual school program and how that is impacting on your school funding, and I guess in that, what would you like us to know? Because we are going to make recommendations to government. What would you like us to know?

**Matt JENKINS:** Effectively, like I said, to offer different classes. Kids have to do them online or travel, because we are such a small school.

**Melina BATH:** How many year 11 and 12 kids are there?

**Matt JENKINS:** I cannot think off the top of my head. I think it might be about 30 year 12s.

**Melina BATH:** So not a bad set.

**Matt JENKINS:** It is not a bad run. When a student is enrolled elsewhere, obviously they pay elsewhere and are funded there, whereas they are still taught and –

**Melina BATH:** They still physically walk into the school.

**Matt JENKINS:** They are still physically at this school.

**Melina BATH:** Sure.

**Matt JENKINS:** What happens is that you get a percentage of the time they are being taught at the school, not the fact that they are at school, so to speak. So that is where the indiscretion comes with financial disadvantage.

**Melina BATH:** And if you are going to end up with half of your kids doing online learning, you have still got to have the lights on and all the staff, cleaning, et cetera. You have still got to run the machine of the school.

**Matt JENKINS:** That is right. And the teachers will still tutor and they will still look after that student.

**Melina BATH:** So do we need a different model, Matt?

**Matt JENKINS:** I like the model, because it opens up further education, but –

**Melina BATH:** Absolutely. How can we support the model, I guess.

**Matt JENKINS:** I think what it is is more where the student is based probably should be funded, or a little bit more funded. It should not affect your SRP, so to speak. It is really hard because it is sort of taking money out of the school that is teaching and giving it to the other one, but ultimately more expense is probably where the student is.

**Melina BATH:** Yes. But a recognition of that value of the school that is providing that service.

**Matt JENKINS:** Value at the school – yes. Definitely. You look at that senior school – and like I said, that senior school without the virtual, just doing VCE subjects in year 10 because every second year that is the only time they might offer biology, let us say. If you happen to fall in that odd year, you cannot get biology until the next year, so you have got to give or take, and then you will have free classes. You know, to penalise a school for actually being adaptive and doing those classes earlier on – you know, it is a luxury in year 12 to actually have a free period every two or three days, but that is not the fault of the student or the school; they should not be penalised financially in relation to that. That student is still at that school, and they have done year 12 but

they just did that subject in year 10. So they are not part-time, they are actually still full-time because they did the extras down –

**Melina BATH:** So a remote funding model that supports the school, which is still supporting the students who are still doing year 11 and 12 VCE full-time – it is just that it is over a periodic period. Recognition –

**Matt JENKINS:** Yes.

**Melina BATH:** I am not trying to put in words, I am trying to understand.

**Matt JENKINS:** Yes. Well, that is right. Yes – a recognition that there is a different model that can be used but should not be financially dependent on how many classes that kid is doing if they have done the classes previously.

**Melina BATH:** With the remote hat on.

**Matt JENKINS:** Yes – a remote allowance.

**Melina BATH:** My time is limited and I have got loads of questions, but in terms of VCAL, because you would have seen students go through VCAL at Orbost, I am going to ask: in your opinion was that a successful model? And then the next question is: there is a new vocational major. VCAL has been absorbed back into VCE with a vocational major. I just imagine the kids in Orbost need those pathways. Do you know of any problems with the transition, or is it something you could take on notice for us?

**Matt JENKINS:** Yes. Not at the moment – I have not seen any issues with that transition. Kids generally just see that as a different name. They do not see it any differently.

**Melina BATH:** It is still taught?

**Matt JENKINS:** Yes, it is. I know there are four at the moment: one went into hospitality; another one is a motor mechanic; we have got a couple of welders, boilermakers. So that process is there. My son is adamant he is staying at Orbost, because he has already planned his transition to being a mechanic because he has seen it at the school. That is from my personal side, and his best mate is in the exact same boat. He is going, ‘Hang on, I can still go through to year 12, but I’m going to end up working as a boilermaker with my dad.’ They see that side of things. The hospital is now starting to get a little bit more involved as well, and I can see that growing to get kids moving that way. And our after-school care, they are now taking kids on as part of that VET program, that new program. So that is a huge bonus for a rural school.

**Melina BATH:** The school has been really responsive to the needs in the community, because they live right in that community.

**Matt JENKINS:** Yes. That is right. So yes, like I said, we are very lucky that we have got the teaching staff that have been there quite some time, that understand that move. It probably could be advanced –

**Melina BATH:** Chair, take it on notice, because my time has run out. Thank you, Chair. But in terms of that upper level of the teaching staff being there for a long time, surely some of them are going to be near retirement. That creates an understorey problem.

**Matt JENKINS:** Yes. And that is the other thing with rural areas – generally you have got the teachers that are higher on in their careers, so your long service leave and all that starts to come.

**Melina BATH:** They cost more.

**Matt JENKINS:** That is it. They cost more; that starts to come into play trying to find those additional teachers. One thing – well, we are actually sitting down talking about it. We had a student teacher out there. We would have loved to have been able to get him to have permission to teach for his final year. But again, that is where the tertiary education became a problem, because he had to be in Melbourne three days a week, whereas we could have had a student teacher who was doing well and would have filled one of our positions if he could have done it online. That is probably just another example of looking at something outside the box. But again, you are dealing with a different education department, but when we are screaming for teachers it would be a

good opportunity for rural areas if we could have student teachers come out and do the rest of their learning online while training on the job. It would make a huge difference for us.

**Melina BATH:** Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you. Michael Galea.

**Michael GALEA:** Thank you, Chair. Thanks for joining us this morning. It has just turned 12 o'clock, but I will say 'this morning', Mr Jenkins. Given the timeliness of what has just happened with the new Orbost Community College, how you have re-formed it as a new school out of – was it three schools?

**Matt JENKINS:** Yes.

**Michael GALEA:** So Orbost Primary, Orbost North Primary and the high school –

**Matt JENKINS:** High school.

**Michael GALEA:** have now become the whole community college. Given that started this year and that you are the president of the school council, I am wondering if you could give me some insight into how that process was managed by the school community and any particular challenges that you faced in bringing those three schools together and what you did to overcome them.

**Matt JENKINS:** In the beginning it was the four primary schools – Newmerella and Marlo – and basically we knew our numbers were declining. There had been talk about trying to do this – you talk to locals and it goes back 25 years – but there was no real drive. Our biggest hurdle was getting the four school councils together. Three of us were 100 per cent on board at the time; Newmerella wanted to remain separate. Again that comes down to the old country town versus town type of scenario, even though we are all one community. The initial discussions were to create one primary school. I was adamant it was not to have the name 'Orbost', 'Newmerella' or 'Snowy River district' or something similar to say that we were one community, not individual towns. Unfortunately, that is when Marlo got a new principal and a new school council and unfortunately dropped out, but we have looked and realised we were one step ahead with the timber industry – we knew that was going to be around the 26, 27 mark – and we have gone, 'Our numbers are going to greatly reduce.' So we as a school council really drove to keep pushing. In the long run the P-12 option was the only option we could take with just the two schools. Our biggest hurdle was just general change. We were very lucky at Orbost Primary – we borrowed the Omeo principal to come down, and she was a magnificent leader in change. Our biggest hurdle was actually just getting the teaching staff to understand that change because it was a huge thing. A lot of the teachers have got there straight out of school and have been there and their kids have gone through school, so it was a real big change.

**Michael GALEA:** So was it more difficult, do you think, for the teachers than for the students?

**Matt JENKINS:** For the primary teachers, yes. The secondary college –

**Michael GALEA:** Same site?

**Matt JENKINS:** Same site – it did not really matter. Another thing we are really blessed with is really resilient kids. After the bushfires they bounded back straightaway. They were just, 'Oh, yeah, we had fires.' COVID hit – that probably hurt them a little bit more, because they lost their social interaction. As soon as school was open, every kid was back at school. This new school, all they were excited about was, 'I'm going to school again with my brothers and sisters.' For the high school kids, one of their biggest thrills is they now have permanent contact with their primary school teachers. I really found that unique, to see the year 12 students excited to see their primary school teachers.

**Michael GALEA:** That is lovely, yes.

**Matt JENKINS:** That has worked really well. Like I said, that was the main background for our look at the merger – if our numbers are declining, we are going to lose really good teaching staff, and we do not want to have to effectively sack a teacher and send them elsewhere. We want to keep them in our communities and that was our major focus – keeping the teachers we have got, who are brilliant, and also securing something that was going to benefit the community years down the track. I would love to see it go to P-13 or K-13, and again,

using that model of tertiary education either online or with specialist teachers just here or there to support again that further education and keeping people back out in country.

**Michael GALEA:** In the community – that is very interesting. You mentioned attendance before. Which school council were you previously involved with?

**Matt JENKINS:** Orbost.

**Michael GALEA:** Orbost. And you said that after the bounce back from COVID it was near full attendance. We know that Victoria's attendance rates are higher than the national average, but we are obviously here to get the local perspective. How have you found attendance in this new school this year?

**Matt JENKINS:** The new school – again, really good. We have actually ended up with more students than we thought, and we were expecting some to branch out to the other primary schools. In fact we had the opposite, which was a good, positive sign. Our attendance is still fairly high. We have not had a lot of data because it is only one term, but every day you see kids there. It is not very often you are going, 'Oh, there's a few less,' and I am not hearing anything from the community about kids being missing all the time. Parents, and it is a good thing – you will see the sick leave. People are more inclined now if you have got a cold to stay home, which is a good and bad thing. Whereas for country people it was 'Suck it up, get on with it', now it is sort of changing a little bit. But like I said, generally day to day it is full attendance.

**Michael GALEA:** Thank you. And with an eye on the time – again, you are welcome to take this on notice – but I am curious to know: you mentioned the K–13, particularly that 13 side of it and providing those tertiary options locally. Obviously from Orbost even Bairnsdale is a long way – and we heard the good federal news about what is potentially happening in Bairnsdale – let alone to get to Churchill or Berwick or wherever else. How would you envisage that working, and does the school have I guess the space and the capacity to do that?

**Matt JENKINS:** The school definitely has the space up there. The school ground is a very large school ground. We are very fortunate in that aspect. And like I said, that would be a future look. We have just got to get over the change now and move, but again, it was always spoken about from the start – let us get the schools in one place. Originally the preference was an individual primary and individual secondary, and it was also designed to feed into the secondary college as well. So we had more feeding going up.

**Michael GALEA:** Are there other schools that do that successfully that you are aware of?

**Matt JENKINS:** I do not know, but I think Robinvale might have a tertiary or 13 onwards. I am pretty certain – well, they were driving towards that as well. Like I said, I can only see a benefit to it. Having that additional education out far east would be ideal.

**Michael GALEA:** A useful lever for us to follow. Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, Michael. Dr Mansfield.

**Sarah MANSFIELD:** Thank you. And thank you for appearing today. I am interested in understanding a bit more about the impact of reduced voluntary payments. What does the school typically use those voluntary payments to cover, and what happens when you have a drop-off in the number of payments being made?

**Matt JENKINS:** The voluntary payments will cover any additional funding, like let us say we want to increase our STEM capacity, then the school council will utilise some of that funding to purchase items. If we had excess in our budget, which usually came from that funding, it gave us an opportunity to actually subsidise school camps. It gave us opportunities to get uniforms for those who could not. It is a bit of a luxury to have in your budget. Our business managers are magnificent in being able to move stuff around, but it did make it a lot easier, especially for our camps. Being rural we have got to travel for everything. Our camps are quite expensive. I know at Orbost, like I said, we were very financially stable, so the school camps were quite often subsidised, a lot of the camps, to make sure that every student could attend. And we also had our own uniform stash for kids that needed it. We could not do that if we were just running by the budget that we are given. That is where the voluntary funding comes in.



**Sarah MANSFIELD:** Okay. But a lot of those things you are describing are fairly basic things that a school would be expected to provide. It sounds like if there is a drop-off in voluntary contributions, that can reduce the opportunities available for students, potentially.

**Matt JENKINS:** Yes, definitely.

**Sarah MANSFIELD:** I guess just from your experience, what difference would additional funding make if it was, say, brought up – if schools were fully funded to the standard? What difference would that have made to your school?

**Matt JENKINS:** Like I said, we have been very blessed, because we have had funding and a lot of additional money come in through the bushfire grants, drought and COVID. Even just paying for social workers to come into the school and our school counselling system, they are additional costs that we have got to make those applications for, which should be in the schools. Since my girls have got into high school – that is probably one of the things that I never had when I went through high school, access to that professional psychiatry or counselling services – the girls have used it quite regularly, which really surprised me. They are very strong-minded girls, and it was interesting to see that uptake. Again, that is funding that the schools have to seek. We have to seek that funding and apply for it. If you have a lot of student voluntary payments, like we did at Orbost, you would actually use some of that money to go towards those programs. So if we were funded 20 and it was going to cost us 25, we would move that money aside to ensure that we had that service.

**Sarah MANSFIELD:** And so do you feel that that is something that should just be a standard item rather than something that schools should apply for?

**Matt JENKINS:** Yes, I do, definitely. In today's society, yes, especially that social, counselling and welfare side of things, it is a big thing that I can see as a benefit to all schools, not just regional schools. Like I said, to see how much it is used out at Orbost was a bit of an eye-opener for me. I did not think it would be utilised that often, because again, country kids are sometimes a little bit tougher and just get on with it – they seem to have that attitude – but when it is offered and it is there and it is in their face all the time, they actually use it, so it is well and truly worth it.

**Sarah MANSFIELD:** Okay. And you mentioned before housing being one factor that would be important around teachers and attracting some workforce. The other thing you raised is training people in place so you have got more of a chance of them staying on after their student placements. Are there other things that you feel would help to attract and retain teachers in schools in your area?

**Matt JENKINS:** It is really hard. The major factor is getting people out there. Once people get into the rural towns, they generally will like it. Orbost is lucky because we have got everything. We have got the hospital, we have got a reasonably decent opportunity for others to have employment, like partners. It is just the housing issue. I know the incentives at the moment; I think we have only ever had one take up that incentive. They have offered. I think the last advertisement went out to \$50,000, and if you stayed the extra and went to three years, there was another \$10,000, and no-one has taken it up. I know as a young person, if I had gone to university, I would have jumped at that chance as my first option to go, 'There's 50 grand in my pocket', and experience it, so I do not think money is an incentive anymore. We really need that grace-and-favour housing probably. I have also been working with the hospital with joint advertisement. Obviously I am short, they are short, so we have advertised in conjunction with each other to try and grab those partners amongst our community, the professional side of the community. But yes, with the education, definitely grace and favour – obviously it cannot be forever, but you might say 'Grace and favour for three years', and by that stage they should be embedded in the community and more likely to hold on.

**Sarah MANSFIELD:** Yes.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, Dr Mansfield. Just within your time, Matt, we will quickly put questions to you before time is up. You mentioned that your school's finances were stable, which is fantastic to hear. I am just wondering, besides the voluntary contribution, are the parents out of pocket in any way in relation to additional stationery they have to purchase?

**Matt JENKINS:** I think at Orbost Primary we ended up paying for most of the stationery. We put the orders out, and those who could not pay we just paid for, which is just normal day-to-day business. I think our biggest

increase in cost was our cleaning over the last few years, and maintenance. I am just trying to think what else. Off the top of my head I cannot really think of anything. Like I said, COVID cost us a fortune, as it would have every school. Our biggest thing is trying to get kids, elsewhere too. The out of pocket for the school and parents is travel. School sports or regional sports in Bairnsdale – there is a good hour. It is expensive to travel at the moment.

**The CHAIR:** All right. Just one final question before the time is up: having four kids all in secondary school, just from your experience in relation to the curriculum and the education standards in relation to their numeracy and literacy, are you happy with the standards at the moment? What could be improved, or what is good at the moment that we should keep?

**Matt JENKINS:** Like I said, we are very fortunate. We have got some really good primary teachers. We sent a couple of teachers away to become specialists in literacy and numeracy, and they are shared amongst the other primary schools under what we call SREC – Snowy River education community. We share our teachers to train, so we are very lucky in that respect.

I have got a mixture with my four kids, from personal experience. My youngest is arts and maths – absolutely loves them and does not mind reading. The next one up hates literacy unless it is factual. Ken is actually quite smart at maths, but unless it is practical, he will not entertain it. The two girls are very even across the top. It has all been contributed to through that primary school base. The high school is a different level, but again, they will often move the kids around and into the appropriate classrooms for the right area. The personal touch in rural areas definitely works. I can only speak about Orbost – like I said, I think it is well and truly at level.

**The CHAIR:** Good. Fantastic. That is good to hear. All right, your time is up. I might just thank you again very much for your time. It has been invaluable, and we will definitely consider your recommendations down the track. If you have got any further information that needs to be in your submission, please feel free to submit it through the normal channels, and again I thank you for your time.

**Witness withdrew.**