

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

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Lee Tarlamis

PARTICIPATING MEMBERS

Melina Bath

John Berger

Georgie Crozier

Moira Deeming

David Ettershank

Wendy Lovell

Sarah Mansfield

WITNESSES

Ella; and

Kate Kapolos, Senior Manager, Children, Youth and Families, and

Sam Henry, Case Manager, Navigator Program, Uniting (Victoria and Tasmania) Limited.

The CHAIR: I declare the Legislative Council Legal and Social Issues Committee public hearing for the Inquiry into the State Education System in Victoria recommenced. Before I continue, I want to acknowledge the traditional custodians of the land on which we are gathered today and pay respects to elders past, present and emerging. I particularly welcome any elders or community members who are here today to impart their knowledge on this issue to the committee.

I would like to welcome Kate Kapolos to the panel. Before we continue, I will introduce myself. I am Trung Luu, the Chair of the committee. To my left is Michael Galea, Member for South-Eastern Metropolitan Region. To my right, Ms Melina Bath and Dr Renee Heath, Members for Eastern Victoria, and we have Dr Sarah Mansfield on Zoom today as well, Member for Western Victoria Region.

Before we continue, Kate, I just want to read this to 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 the 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. You will be provided with a proof version of the transcript following the hearing. Transcripts will ultimately be made public and posted on the committee's website.

If you would like to now, please introduce yourself and the organisation you represent and make a statement.

Kate KAPOLOS: My name is Kate Kapolos. I am Senior Manager for Children, Youth and Families for Uniting Vic.Tas. Part of my programs that I oversee is the Navigator program, for which we are funded by the Department of Education. The program was designed to re-engage young people back into education. The young people who come through to us essentially have disengaged – less than 30 per cent attendance at school. They come through to us from the schools, from external organisations or from parents, and their attendance at school has been less than 30 per cent over a two-term period. These young people are disengaged to a very large extent, and the work that the team do is to work with the young person to try and get them re-engaged back into education or on a positive pathway.

The CHAIR: Is there anything else you would like to make comment on?

Kate KAPOLOS: Yes, certainly.

The CHAIR: Please.

Kate KAPOLOS: Every child has the right to an equitable schooling experience, no matter what their circumstances. Article 28 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child affirms the rights of all children to access education that incorporates teaching and learning practices that exemplify human rights principles such as equality, fairness, non-discrimination and respect. We know that feeling included and connected to education is important for children for them to feel safe and for them to feel well, and this is echoed by the Australian Human Rights Commission, who state that:

School connectedness has a positive effect on school attendance, academic achievement, and the emotional and physical health ...

and wellbeing. Through our program, the work that the staff do and the work with young people, what impacts young people from disengaging from school? Bullying has a significant psychological effect on students, leading to decreased motivation, self-esteem issues and the reluctance to attend school. Victims of bullying may fear going to school, leading to chronic absenteeism and disengagement from academic and social activities.

Lack of understanding from teachers and schools – when students feel misunderstood or unsupported by their teachers or school staff, they become disengaged, and this lack of understanding can stem from various factors: difference in learning styles, cultural backgrounds, personal challenges that affect their academic performance and a lack of compassion. Children who perceive a lack of compassion or empathy from their teachers, school administrators or peers may withdraw from school activities and disengage from their learning. Feeling disconnected and unvalued can diminish a student’s sense of belonging and motivation.

Academic challenges – children and students who struggle academically may become disengaged as they feel overwhelmed by their coursework and believe that they cannot succeed. Persistent difficulties in understanding the academic material and keeping up with assignments can lead to frustration and disinterest in attending classes. Family issues such as parental divorce, housing and financial instability or dysfunction at home can also create a burden and an emotional stress for students, affecting their ability to focus on schoolwork and engage in educational activities.

Mental health issues such as depression, anxiety and also diagnosis of ASD – autism spectrum disorder – attention deficit disorder and others can interfere with a student’s ability to concentrate, participate in class and maintain motivation for learning. Without proper support and resources, students may disengage from school as a result of their mental health struggles.

Also, a lack of relevance – students disengage from school if they perceive the curriculum as irrelevant in their lives or future goals, and a disconnect of what is being taught in the classroom and real-world application can lead to apathy towards learning.

In our area, access to transport and the home environment is a significant factor in students living in remote and rural areas being able to participate in school. We have limited access to public transport, and there are long distances to travel. Geographic isolation can certainly increase the feeling of social isolation and disconnectedness from school. Students who rely on school buses, parents or carers can face challenges that lead to chronic absenteeism and disengagement from school. Low-income families struggle to support transport costs – bus fares, petrol money. It is not uncommon for families in our area to only own one car or not to own a car at all, which makes attendance at school at times impossible.

Students from families with complex or challenging circumstances may have responsibilities for caregiving duties, household chores or employment to support their family financially, and balancing these responsibilities with academic demands can be overwhelming and can increase stress and fatigue. Ultimately, they disengage from school.

Complex family dynamics – as mentioned before, divorce, substance abuse or mental health issues can also impact parental involvement in a child’s education. We see this more often than not. These families’ stresses and conflicts have a negative impact on students’ emotional wellbeing and mental health, affecting their motivation, self-esteem and overall engagement.

Another important theme that comes out in our students is COVID. Research and academic papers conclude that due to a rise in mental health issues in children and young people, alongside rising negative mental health and socio-economic outcomes because of the COVID pandemic, young people cannot find their voice and are disengaging from school at rapid rates.

Findings from key factors, also from disengagement from school – these interventions – young people are now struggling to get back to where they were or where they would like to be post the pandemic.

Also, children and young people who have experienced complex trauma – this trauma can range from a variety of reasons and also demonstrate neurobiological disorganisation and compromised brain function. Disrupted attachment styles, limited trust in adults, limited brain function and the impact of complex trauma on development is well documented, and presentations such as these are difficult to respond to and manage in mainstream schools. For the majority of students who would be stated as having normative function, boundaries and consequences can be pitched at a level that at an age and developmental stage is appropriate. Young people suffering from the impacts of trauma are unable to respond to these demands and these requests, and they require patient, repetitive responses that over time lower their state of hyperarousal. The challenges that are implicated due to this time involved and how these expectations can be adjusted and navigated in terms of young people being engaged at school need attention. In mainstream schooling there is a lack of

understanding of complex trauma and trauma-informed care. The principle of inclusivity should not lead to disadvantage because it is potentially unrealistic for children who have been traumatised, and young people, to manage at some points in their experience.

What we observe and what we see, for schools, how they can prevent disengagement is mental health support – implement comprehensive mental health support services within the school, including counselling, therapy and access to mental health professionals. This can involve schools partnering with or hiring accredited counsellors, psychologists or social workers that are trained in addressing mental health issues. With one in seven children experiencing mental illness, and mid-to-late adolescence a very common age for the onset of psychotic disorders, many schools are still ill-equipped to identify problems and intervene early. Children and young people who have experienced complex trauma or trauma in general commonly demonstrate different states of neurobiological disorganisation and compromised brain function. The impact of complex trauma and these presentations can be difficult to respond to and maintain in a mainstream school environment where the majority of students are normative in their function. This disengagement of young people in schools either or both attributes to the majority with mental health or disability disorders. Providing appropriate accommodations for students in school with disabilities or special education needs and mental health problems, and more importantly, having appropriate assessments for children in their learning and support, will help mitigate disengagement.

Other recommendations or observations that we make are qualified support staff, schools to employ qualified staff, professionals who can target interventions and support young people to address individual student needs; specialised services to prevent and address disengagement at primary stages; early intervention to identify signs of disengagement and intervene promptly to provide support and resources to struggling students; collaboration with community organisations that can help with the mental health and cognitive functioning of students; and the promotion of a positive school culture to create opportunities for students to be involved, leadership roles and meaningful projects so they have a sense of belonging and connectedness to school.

We also see the collaboration with special education professionals – again, special education teachers, psychologists, social workers and counsellors that can support strategies for children who are disengaging, especially those with disabilities and mental health issues. We also observe that teachers require upskilling or professional development so they can understand students' self-regulation techniques and coping skills to manage emotions, reduce stress and anxiety that may involve things like mindfulness and cognitive behavioural strategies. We are really well aware of the staffing shortages in schools in outer Gippsland.

There is also a pattern of young people who are transferred into alternate schools due to them not fitting into mainstream schools. In outer Gippsland these alternate settings are under-resourced, overcrowded and generally have one teacher involved. We cannot stress the importance and the absolute need in our region for an alternative school model – for example, a Berry Street school, as a model. Such a model tends to offer young people smaller class sizes, individual learning plans, flexible class structures and trauma-informed teachers – but mostly a feeling of acceptance. What we do observe is a need for and the deficits in the support services and an increased prevalence of trauma-related presentations in our young people who are disengaged from school.

The very low levels of staffing in allied health fields in our region has also seen the vulnerabilities of populations in this area grow in depth and complexity. It has also created a situation where the service shortage leads to schools and community organisations having to pick up these complexities and begin working through them. There is little or no private sector presence in allied services due to the demographic and the geography being so small and spread across the area. It is also financially unviable for private practices to be providing these services in our area. This is also driving vulnerability statistics in a negative direction and increasing inequity in our young people's access to education. The waitlist for allied health intervention or mental health support is absolutely unfathomable. We can see wait lists of two to three years for any face-to-face consultation for our young people. The public allied health system is at capacity with no room on wait lists, and similar wait times of two to three years are leading to missed opportunities to provide critical intervention to our young people.

The information that I have shared with you today is supported by Uniting's advocacy submissions to Parliament along with the support that is provided day in, day out to our young people and to our schools. We are local people who live and work in our local community and who provide support to young people who are and have been disengaged from school at times for a very long time. We want to see our young people thrive,

and we want them to be the best that they could possibly be, because they are our future and they deserve opportunity with support, compassion and a right to education.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Kate. I would like to invite Ella to attend.

Hi Ella, thank you for coming in. I know you were here before, but I just want to let you know that what I read out regarding witness protection and parliamentary privilege applies to you as well so feel free to make any comments or statements. Please, let us have a chat about anything you would like or anything you might want us to know.

ELLA: My problem started from primary school, and they just marked me down as a child that refused to go to school. Then I got to high school. I went to Bairnsdale Secondary College and got bullied very badly. They just swept it under the carpet; they did not do anything about it. They said, 'We'll talk to the girls.' That did not eventuate, so I was fighting with Mum every morning because I was terrified to go to school. They threatened to do so many bad things to me. Mum dragged me – well, took me out – of seco and put me into Nagle. That was no better. The best thing that ever happened was they referred me to Uniting. At one point seco offered a flexible learning centre. That was good, I really enjoyed that, but they were very pushy to get me back to school. I knew and I tried to tell them that I would not go back to school if those girls were there. Then Uniting introduced me to BlendED, and it has just been so much better ever since. I am thriving. I am doing really well in my education, and I am so much happier there.

The CHAIR: First of all, I am so sorry to hear that you had to go through all that at school, and I am really happy knowing that you are actually going on a path of education and you are happy to go the distance and you are actually learning now, so I am happy with that. We are basically here just to hear from you and hear about things you would like to see in the education system in relation to how we improve or how we assist people like you who might experience similar down the track, or have current experience of such, and how you think schools should improve or how schools should have certain things in place regarding events or situations like your own, and that being brought to other students as well. So feel free to make comments on anything you would like to see. That is what we are here for, to hear from you.

ELLA: They have a no-bullying policy, but they will not do anything about it. If someone gets bullied, they do not do anything about it. The principal now has said that if there is a physical fight between students, they will not get involved; they just have to let it happen. And I personally – that is terrifying. With all the stuff that those girls have threatened to do to me, if they did not do anything about it and just let it happen, then that could be very dangerous. I really do not think that is good for other students.

The CHAIR: So you would like to see the principal and the teachers to get involved and respond to what is being reported to them – is that what you are saying?

ELLA: Like help other students that are going through the same thing I went through, because no-one deserves that. They need to really crack down on help being available for students like me. And not being so pushy toward school – school is very important, but school is not for everyone. COVID really showed that you can do it from home. BlendED is a perfect example of that. They are amazing. I have no bad words against BlendED.

The CHAIR: Fantastic. Would anyone on the panel like to ask a question of Ella or Kate?

Renee HEATH: I have got a couple of questions. First of all, good on you for coming. How very brave – magnificent job today. What is BlendED? I am sorry that I –

ELLA: It is a Catholic college in Melbourne. They opened up an online school, and that is all the way across Victoria. It is basically like what public schools did during COVID, but it is all the time, and they help you get re-engaged back into school.

Renee HEATH: Has that helped your confidence?

ELLA: So much.

Renee HEATH: That is amazing. I have probably only got about 2 minutes to ask questions before I hand it on, but do you remember what it was when you were in primary school that first made you not want to go to school?

ELLA: It was from the start.

Renee HEATH: Just not interested?

ELLA: I liked the learning. I just could not handle being around so many people.

Renee HEATH: Right, yes. You have probably touched on this: what would be something that would help children like you were in primary school to become more engaged? Would it be quieter classrooms? Any ideas?

ELLA: More people to talk to, because I was handed a counsellor, but she never did anything. So more help, especially for primary students – more help available for them, because troubles that start in primary school get very bad in high school.

Renee HEATH: They grow bigger and bigger, don't they? My last question: what would you like to do after you finish school now?

ELLA: Child care.

Renee HEATH: Wonderful. Good on you. Good luck with that.

ELLA: Thank you.

Melina BATH: Thank you. Thank you very much, and I echo Renee's comments about us being hopefully not too scary. Thank you so much for being here. You are the reason why we should be having these sorts of inquiries. Thank you, Kate, as well. It concerns me that at a school, where overwhelmingly you should be able to feel safe, you got to the point throughout your schooling life where you felt that, I will just say, the system – I think you used 'they' – was not able to provide that safety net. And this is not pick-on-the-principal day, this is just our understanding, but I think you said the principal was not able to protect you if there was a physical fight. Did Mum or you ever kind of explore why that was and seek to understand how it was that you could not feel that support?

ELLA: I just wanted to know that I could be protected and safe, and they never made that clear at all. They never did anything to help me whatsoever.

Melina BATH: I was a teacher a few years ago at a country school, and they used to use – it is a funny term, but I think it is called restorative justice, where you have the person who feels in danger or has had something bad happen to them and there is a process where they meet with the other person, in this case you would say one of the bully girls, and have that conversation in a cared-for environment where there is another teacher or someone. Was that something that was offered to you?

ELLA: No.

Melina BATH: I wonder why. Do you have any idea?

ELLA: I have no idea. No.

Melina BATH: Yes. Because part of this is, I guess, for us to understand how we could improve the education system and how you would not have to go through this process of having to go to beautiful Uniting and wonderful BlendED, because I am sure it has been very distressing for you over time.

ELLA: Yes.

Melina BATH: Kate, can you share with me some of your thoughts on that?

Kate KAPOLOS: I know in the past three years that we have been operating this program – I believe there are about 30-odd schools in our region. Every single one of those schools operates differently – what one

school does and how one school does that and the support staff that are within that school. If you go to the next school, it is completely different.

Melina BATH: Different model or different operation.

Kate KAPOLOS: Yes. And I will say qualifications of staff – everything is different. For every school that we work in we have to essentially work sometimes in a completely different way, because their models and their structure and the support available is either there or it is not there. You have got schools in Mallacoota and the high country where the principal is everything. The principal is the principal, is a teacher, is a coordinator, is a social worker –

Melina BATH: And empties the bins.

Kate KAPOLOS: Yes. Pretty much. There is not one standard approach, I believe, that the schools implement on wellbeing. I know with some of those reforms post COVID the schools have really large accessibility and access to what is called a mental health suite. They have so many programs that are available.

Melina BATH: Does it help?

Kate KAPOLOS: We live in outer Gippsland, and they are metro-based support systems.

Melina BATH: Four and a half hours away.

Kate KAPOLOS: Yes. It is available and it is there, but there are no service providers down here. There is a lot happening for the schools but they have not got access to it, or they have funding for counsellors or wellbeing staff but they cannot recruit.

Melina BATH: So this BlendED model is working for you – you are learning remotely, you are having access to good teachers et cetera and then you are getting support from your local Uniting. Mallacoota will still be Mallacoota, as will Orbost and Bairnsdale: how can we make a model work in the education system like BlendED is working here or access those support services?

Kate KAPOLOS: If it is okay, Sam, do you want to come up and join this conversation as well in relation to BlendED? BlendED is St Joseph's college. They started this online and virtual classroom that was rolled out in Gippsland last year. It is an amazing model with a very substantial focus on social engagement as well. That social engagement was a youth worker, who I guess became a part of this online community and started to facilitate social interactions, because, again, young people at home all the time still need that social development. I will hand over to you, Sam, if you want to add a little bit more on BlendED.

The CHAIR: Before I go to you, Sam, just introduce yourself and the organisation you are with.

Sam HENRY: Sam Henry, Case Manager in the Navigator Program, and I actually worked with Ella. BlendED came about last year for us, I believe it was July–August. They are quite new. They are funded by St Joseph's Catholic college down in Melbourne and in partnership with Edmund Rice Foundation. How BlendED came about was exactly the COVID lockdowns. They realised that there was a model that could work and work well from home for young people who get overwhelmed in the schooling environment, and it happens quite a lot. We see quite a lot that the schooling environment is just not the right environment for these young people. So BlendED offered a really good alternative. We know that the likelihood is that home is normally the safest place for the young people or the place where they feel the most comfortable, and I think that that probably echoes into the achievements that some of our young people have made in BlendED. They are somewhere where they feel safe. They are somewhere where they feel supported. I think that is why we see some success there.

Melina BATH: This inquiry is based in the state system. Could there be a BlendED model based out of the education department?

Sam HENRY: Yes. Look, I think that some schools are being proactive with that as it is. Bairnsdale Secondary College have adapted a flexi model. The whole issue is that that is not really equitable across everyone. So you would just need to grow that space, and how you do that I would assume is through getting

the right staff to do that. So I think that they need to be someone that connects to young people and can connect with them rapidly.

Melina BATH: And trust.

Sam HENRY: Absolutely. And I think it has got to be someone that has a good understanding of what the young people face. It is very different to what it was even when I was a young person and went through school, and I think that the young people now certainly cannot escape the same things as what we used to be able to escape. We did not have internet. We were not connected to phones. I think it is really hard when young people have that added stress as well, so we take them from that, have them at home, and I think that local schools could do that better as well. They just need to invest in that, and for whatever reason that is not happening right now.

I think that there is a lot of pressure on getting them back into the school environment in a really rapid time frame when the statistics tell us that it is going to take, on average, 18 months to re-engage that person full time. It is not as easy as having a care team meeting and then the next week that young person goes full time, and that is kind of the expectation that we are working with at the moment. When you put that pressure onto a young person – ‘Whoa!’ That is what you get met with – ‘Whoa!’ – which makes that bigger. So we just need to have the right people doing the right job, looking at things differently and really trying to understand things from their point of view. It is not about what I think is best; it is about what Ella thinks is best and what is going to work for Ella.

Kate KAPOLOS: And we are so fortunate to be a part of this program. However, disengagement from school at 80 per cent would be a great starting point, where we start at 30 per cent. So what is happening is between 30 and 80 per cent – that is, 50 per cent of young people – are disengaging, but we do not get to cross paths with them until they have disengaged less than 30 per cent. And yes, the schools do have processes and mechanisms, but they do not have the staffing resources to follow a lot of that process to be able to capture the young people, whatever those benchmarks may be, at 80 per cent, 70 per cent, 50 per cent. So the young people that we have – and as Sam said, it takes about 18 months – we are so fortunate with the program that we have, that we do not have a three-month time frame or a 200-hour time frame around that. So it is very unique, but because they are so chronically disengaged, it takes 18 months for re-engagement, and re-engagement is not necessarily back into the school where they have come from. It may be an apprenticeship. It may be a traineeship. It may be virtual schools.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Michael.

Michael GALEA: Thank you, Chair. Thank you, all, for joining us, especially Ella. As my colleagues have said, it is really a brave thing for you to be here today, so I am really excited that you have joined us today. You spoke, in answering Dr Heath before, about how you wish there were more people that you could have spoken to in that school environment. You mentioned that there was like a school counsellor but they did not really do that much, and obviously each case is different and each counsellor will be different. There has been a bit more of a recent emphasis on trying to put some more out-of-school supports into schools – there might be a GP or a psychologist or something. From your perspective of going through that, do you think that is the right way to go, or should we be focusing more on in the school or people coming to visit?

ELLA: I think more in school, but make it discreet – do not make it so focused. Like if you pull one kid out of class and, say, a counsellor comes in to pick them up, the kids are not going to want to go, because everyone else will know. Doing that just – everyone freaks out.

Michael GALEA: It is like a red light over your head. You feel like everyone is looking at you.

ELLA: Yes.

Michael GALEA: Yes. That makes a lot of sense. And it is really great that you want to do child care as a profession. What is your favourite subject now that you are back at school?

ELLA: Maths.

Michael GALEA: Maths.

Melina BATH: Yes!

Michael GALEA: That will make Melina very, very happy indeed. I was a very bad maths student, but that is really exciting.

If I can ask you, Sam, Ella is clearly an amazing example of what this program can do. What are the trends that you are seeing? What are the overall results that you see from the clients that you deal with?

Sam HENRY: A lack of understanding is probably a lot of what we see, so obviously exactly what Kate echoed before us. We know that there are home environment issues in some families – not every family but some families. But I think really where the young people get lost in that school environment is the lack of understanding of them and unfortunately – I really hate to say this – a lack of passion maybe for what they do. I think with young people you have to be very passionate about them to stick to it, and I am just not quite sure if sometimes the right people are getting into the field or if it is because there are really great incentives to get into that kind of work. I am not quite sure; it can be a bit of a double-edged sword. Sometimes it does not attract the right people with the right intentions either.

I think that is what we see a lot. We see a lot of young people who have attempted to go through their schooling years and they have actually got disabilities that have never been picked up. To me that is unfathomable. I cannot imagine that there would be so many different professionals coming in contact with these young people over the course of their schooling years and that not be questioned or there not be someone curious about that, because that curiosity can actually get them the support that they need long after school years as well, because we know that if you have a disability, that could open you up to NDIS. That can open you up to a world of support beyond school. I think school is a really great place to get the foundations that you need, but it is really to set us up for the future as well. I am just not quite sure if it is doing that for the young people currently.

Michael GALEA: Thank you. I am not sure whether this is for you, Sam, or for you, Kate, but there was another case study that you provided to us about a young girl who was sexually assaulted and then ongoingly sexually harassed by her perpetrator, who was a fellow student. The example was given of how she was actually removed out of a class and he was kept in it, and that reinforced I guess victimisation on her part and made the situation worse.

Kate KAPOLOS: That is very common.

Sam HENRY: That is very common.

Michael GALEA: And that was my question: how common is that?

Kate KAPOLOS: Very common.

Sam HENRY: Yes. I have just had a similar situation with a young person who does self-harm, and it is quite significant. That young person has re-engaged in school just recently, and it has been very positive for her, and she has got to a comfortable place where she is willing to have her school polo shirt on. We should be totally embracing that. Unfortunately, it made staff and students feel uncomfortable that she had her arms out, and the school then asked her to show up to school wearing a jumper. Things like that are really quick – we lose that young person in that moment, right then and there. It takes one comment and we are back to square one with them. Unfortunately, it almost feels like we are putting it on that young person to build up their resilience when the expectation from the school would be that you actually just do not say that to young people. Let us embrace the fact that she feels comfortable enough on your school grounds to wear a T-shirt.

Michael GALEA: So you are asking them to build that resilience, but you are sort of holding their arm behind their back, almost literally.

Sam HENRY: Yes.

Kate KAPOLOS: I think some of what you are saying there is also about language and narrative. At care team meetings, meetings with schools, when you mention a student's name or mention a family you get the eye roll, you get the, 'Oh, not them again.' I cannot even explain some of the narratives that come through in relation to a family or a student, and they are not accepted for who they are or where they are at. It is so disheartening, and it is common. It is not as if it is one school, it is numerous schools. But sadly it is families,

and at times it can be generations of families, where there is a narrative built up. Or even language around behaviour support plans – as Ella said, you have just labelled and stigmatised something that does not need to be that way.

Michael GALEA: And is that, do you think – in a situation like the other one, where the perpetrator is kept in a class and the victim, even though it is something quite horrific, is removed – the reason behind it? Or are you aware of any of the policies that the schools have surrounding this and in particular if there are any that need changing?

Sam HENRY: Usually, it seems like it is a really split decision in the moment, and it is not really well thought out. That is what I would say. I could not tell you if it is in line with their policy, because it is certainly not shared with us if that is the case. But I think it is split decision-making at the time, without being well thought out, yes.

Michael GALEA: Thank you.

Kate KAPOLOS: And it is almost like the schools will say, ‘Well, we can’t keep the victim safe.’ So they are not coming to school, but the perpetrator is. And this can even go to bullying or online bullying. If there has been an instance of bullying after hours or on the weekend, well, it is okay to keep the perpetrators at school, because –

Michael GALEA: It was not at school, even though –

Kate KAPOLOS: Yes. But: ‘We believe we can’t provide safety for the victim, so please don’t bring them to school’ or ‘Please don’t come to school.’ And as Ella said, in a lot of situations things are not investigated, they are not followed through, so it is the victim who is not back at school.

Michael GALEA: Yes. That is my time. Thank you.

The CHAIR: I will cut space now. I will ask Dr Sarah Mansfield, please.

Sarah MANSFIELD: Thank you, and I really appreciate you all appearing today. Ella, I am incredibly grateful that you have come and shared your personal experiences. I echo the comments of the other panel members about being very brave, but hopefully what comes out of that is some recommendations for change. Something we have heard a bit of a theme around today is the importance of student wellbeing and how our current system uses things like NAPLAN to compare schools. If we had a system that put student wellbeing as a higher priority and a key performance measure for schools, what difference do you think that might make across the system – if there was more emphasis put on student wellbeing as a measure of school performance? Any of you can answer that.

Sam HENRY: I think it would change the culture within the school itself.

Sarah MANSFIELD: How might it do that? What sorts of things do you think then would practically flow from that, if it was a priority that schools had to achieve?

Sam HENRY: I think that it just has to be an important thing that is taken into account, because ultimately if we do not have good mental health and emotional health and if we do not feel good within ourselves, we really can only operate to a certain extent. And I think for the teachers as well it would be really important for them to honestly reconnect with themselves and why they got into the role and what makes them happy about it. I think it would be a shift within the culture, because I think just putting a spotlight on it and having people be reflective is already a start.

Sarah MANSFIELD: Do you think it would also have any impact on how resources are directed within schools? Again, we have heard evidence that if NAPLAN is the focus, that ends up being the focus of a lot of energies and resourcing within a school. If we had a bigger focus on wellbeing, do you think that might lead to more resources being put into that space, or would you like to see more resources put in that space?

Sam HENRY: Honestly, I would like to see both. So I would like to see a focus on emotional and mental health and wellbeing at the school being at the forefront of the school culture. But I think that even if it were to

go that way, the schools are still sorely under-resourced, so they are still going to have to invest in getting the right people in the right positions.

Sarah MANSFIELD: And what might that look like? Who are the sorts of people that they need? I know you have made mention of schools not having funding for things like counsellors or wellbeing officers, but what sorts of things do you think all schools should have? If you could reinvent the school system and schools could have access to anything they needed, what should be a baseline minimum that schools should have?

Sam HENRY: If it was up to me, I would say psychologists. That would be my opinion: psychologists. My personal opinion is that counsellors are not necessarily able to give strategies or advice to young people. Their own code of conduct actually says that. So I would like to see services that can actually implement strategies and support for young people in a meaningful way, rather than just say, 'Okay, here is some advice, now you implement that yourself.' I think that young people need a whole lot more handholding than what we think they need.

Sarah MANSFIELD: Yes.

Sam HENRY: So I would lean towards psychologists. I would lean towards maybe specialised youth workers and I would lean towards engagement officers. So possibly having someone in the mornings that drives the little alternative bus for the young people that fit into this category who can go to houses in the morning, knock on the door and say, 'Hey, what's happening for you this morning? Let's empower you this moment and get you to school.' I think that there is just not a lot of that. I think we put a lot of focus on people to manage this within the home themselves and sometimes it is just not possible. So really specialised services for young people is what I would like to see, rather than just generalised services, or honestly people that – I really hate to say this – are fresh out of uni. You probably need people that have been doing it for some time and really know how to connect with young people.

Sarah MANSFIELD: Yes.

Kate KAPOLOS: I think also part of it is teacher training or graduate training in trauma, because that extends across a lot of young people and especially for children who are disengaged. As I said, whether it is trauma from a developmental perspective, whether it is trauma because of environmental factors, divorce, disability or mental health, there needs to be a thorough understanding of what trauma is and how it actually presents for children, because again, the naughty kid – all those narratives around children – has some understanding as to why they are presenting the way they are.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Sarah. I think we have come close to the end, but I want to say thank you, Ella, for coming in. Bullying is a really serious matter. It has been going on for a long period of time, and we will try to address that as a society. Even in recent times bullying has come to a stage where it goes from primary school and has not been addressed going into secondary school, and you can see it across the state, not just in this area, but it has come to violence as well. So that is something we really want to address and hopefully find some solutions for. I know you got bullied through primary school. Do you mind me asking some questions about your situation? Is that okay?

ELLA: Yes.

The CHAIR: I know you mentioned it was at primary school that this happened, and you mentioned it to your mum and your family, and the teacher did not do anything about it. With the kids who bullied you, do you think they knew what they were doing at the time?

ELLA: Definitely.

The CHAIR: Now, like I said, it evolved from primary school. If we do not address it, the kids may grow up, and it may accelerate and get more violent, and we do not want to see that. Now, with your situation when you were in primary school, do you think this would have happened if the principal or the teachers of the school took it more seriously – if they had established who it was that bullied you, if after they made more investigations with the teachers and staff and other students, they had actually found the kids who were bullying you? Do you think by giving them the power to make them responsible and actually suspending those kids or expelling them from the school, it would have helped your situation?

ELLA: I think, yes, if they did something in primary school, it would have helped it not get so bad in high school.

The CHAIR: Yes, all right. In recent times I think schools in general, and teachers, have shied away when kids have violence or fighting and arguments and not tried to interact – not to punish or make those core perpetrators responsible – because they believe kids do not know what they are doing. In your experience, what do you think in relation to making sure that the principal or the teachers have some responsibility to do something at that time? Would it have helped your situation? That is all.

ELLA: I think if they – I am not too sure.

The CHAIR: That is all right. I was just wondering because we want to make sure – if that would have helped you, it might help other kids down the track. I have got four girls. They are all young, so I understand completely as a parent. If they go through something like you, I will be very distressed. I definitely do not want kids at school age, whether primary or high school, going through what you experienced. As a parent I will be putting my recommendation to stop and mitigate the situation.

Thank you so much for coming in, and I thank the Uniting Navigator for your wonderful work not just helping people who have been bullied but also helping other kids who are disadvantaged or have special needs in learning. I think your series is fantastic, so thank you so much for coming in. I will wrap it up now; I think it is that time. Thank you so much. Your submission is vital in relation to later on when we put our recommendations to the education department about what needs to be improved and what we need to keep as well, so thank you so much for coming in.

ELLA: Thank you for having me.

Kate KAPOLOS: Can I just ask, we had some young people who unfortunately could not attend today who were going to. Would you accept something written if we could pass that on to you? Because I know that they would really like their story to be heard.

The CHAIR: Yes, please. If there is anything they think would help their situation or they would like to see – any program or any resource they think they might assist their situation or those in their situation – put it in a submission, because it will help. Thank you so much.

Committee adjourned.