

# TRANSCRIPT

## LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL LEGAL AND SOCIAL ISSUES COMMITTEE

### Inquiry into the State Education System in Victoria

Traralgon – Wednesday 27 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**

Stephanie Feldt, Teacher, Albert Street Primary School.

**The CHAIR:** I declare open the Legislative Council Legal and Social Issues Committee public hearing for the Inquiry into the State Education System in Victoria. Please ensure your mobile phones are switched off or to silent and that any background noise is minimised.

Before I continue, I would like to begin this hearing by especially acknowledging the Aboriginal people, the traditional custodians of the various lands we are gathered on today, and pay my respects to their elders, ancestors and families. I particularly welcome any elders or community members who are here today to impart their knowledge of this issue to the committee.

I thank the Century Inn, Traralgon, for hosting us today. And I welcome Stephanie Feldt, who is joining us today from Albert Street Primary School in Moe.

Before I continue, I would like to introduce the committee. My name is Trung Luu; I am the Chair of the committee. To my right is the Deputy Chair Ryan Batchelor, a Member for Southern Metropolitan, and I am from Western Metropolitan. We have two members from the Eastern Victoria Region: Dr Renee Heath to my right and Ms Melina Bath to my left. We also have two Members from the Western Victoria Region: Mr Joe McCracken, who is up on the screen and Dr Sarah Mansfield, who will be joining us shortly. She has got some technical issues in relation to the IT.

Before we continue, Stephanie, I just want to inform you that 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 during this hearing 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, and you will be provided a proof version of the transcript following the hearing. Transcripts will ultimately be made public and posted on the committee website.

For the Hansard record, could you please state your full name and the organisation you are appearing on behalf of.

**Stephanie FELDT:** Stephanie Jane Feldt, and I am appearing on behalf of my local state school, Albert Street Primary School in Moe.

**The CHAIR:** Okay. Welcome, Stephanie. I would also now like to ask you if you would like to make an opening statement.

**Stephanie FELDT:** I have something I am going to read so I do not stuff it up.

**The CHAIR:** Yes, that is fine. Take your time.

**Stephanie FELDT:** No worries. Some of the topics that I would like to address are the disability inclusion program, funding challenges, school chaplaincy and addressing dysregulation from trauma and generational poverty. The inquiry into the state schools reveals significant challenges, including disability inclusion, funding disparities and the phasing out of school chaplains. and the critical issue of dysregulation stemming from trauma and generational poverty. These challenges intersect and exacerbate each other, demanding urgent attention to ensure all students receive equitable and effective education.

Many students with disabilities in the Latrobe Valley schools lack access to crucial support, and the absence of speech therapists within the department and uncertainty regarding the availability of psychologists pose significant barriers to students with disabilities in the Latrobe Valley. We are currently left with, I believe, two social workers for the entire area. This impedes their ability to fully participate in the educational experience and reach their potential. Despite the urgent need, funding for disability inclusion remains pending, jeopardising the provision of necessary support services for students with diverse needs. Discrepancies in

funding allocation exacerbate the challenges faced by schools, leading to unequal opportunities for students with disabilities compared to their peers in better resourced areas.

Parents in the community face significant barriers accessing healthcare services, with wait times of six to eight months to see a paediatrician. Many families struggle to afford health care or face difficulties in travel, compounded by the absence of personal transportation options. Schools in the Latrobe Valley require additional resources and strategies to address behavioural challenges effectively, including more personalised approaches to classroom management. Schools require additional resources and specialised training to address dysregulation stemming from trauma and generational poverty, ensuring a supportive learning environment for all students.

With the national consistent collection of data indicating over 58 per cent of students requiring additional support for cognitive, physical, sensory and social and emotional needs, the lack of resources exacerbates the strain on school staff. Despite evidence indicating parental preference for moral and ethical guidance, the phasing out of school chaplains in the Latrobe Valley contradicts this demand, further impeding students already struggling with trauma and poverty. School chaplains play a vital role in providing emotional support, ethical education and a sense of community, particularly important for students facing dysregulation due to trauma and poverty. While our school does provide wellbeing support for students, the absence of dedicated support for staff members to confide in is notably significant.

My recommendations are for immediate funding allocation to expedite funding for disability inclusion to ensure timely provision of essential support services, including speech therapy and psychological assistance; collaboration with healthcare providers to reduce wait times and improve accessibility for families, considering options for telehealth and community outreach programs; recognition of the importance of chaplains in supporting students' moral and emotional development and staff support, and consider reinstating or enhancing chaplaincy programs based on community needs. Addressing disability inclusion, funding challenges, healthcare access and school chaplaincy are crucial for fostering an inclusive and supportive learning environment in Latrobe Valley state schools. By prioritising the allocation of resources and fostering partnerships with healthcare providers, policymakers can mitigate the impacts of trauma and generational poverty on student outcomes and create a more inclusive learning environment for all. Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, Stephanie. For the Hansard record, Dr Sarah Mansfield has joined us on Zoom as well now.

I will open to members to ask questions. I just remind members we have got until 10:30 for this session, so I will try to stick to 5 or 6 minutes with respect to questions. I mean, I am sure there will be time after as well. Ryan, our Deputy Chair, would you like to start?

**Ryan BATCHELOR:** Thanks, Chair. Thanks, Stephanie, for coming in. I want to just unpack a little bit the dysregulation and behavioural challenges that you are experiencing in and around the classroom, firstly, so I can understand the experience that you are facing and then what you think we might be able to do. I wonder if you could tell us a little bit more about the sorts of challenging behaviours that you are experiencing and how dysregulation manifests on a day-to-day level in the classroom.

**Stephanie FELDT:** We have a lot of students that are medicated for things like ADHD. We have to take time out of our normal day to ensure these students are medicated every day, and if they are not, then it actually causes quite a lot of chaos in the classroom. We have a lot of students that have experienced trauma throughout their lives. So there is a lot of time spent with these students talking with them, guiding them in a normal classroom. So what we have studied to do, teaching, has become less and less, and we are more dealing with our students.

**Ryan BATCHELOR:** How many of your students, would you say, percentage-wise are medicated for ADHD or similar?

**Stephanie FELDT:** Over the whole school it is 58 per cent, so more than half a classroom.

**Ryan BATCHELOR:** In seeking to address the behavioural challenges that you have at the school, to what extent – there is obviously a sort of disability and inclusion support that could assist. There are also some views that approaches to the learning task, the adoption of more direct and explicit methods of teaching instruction,

assist with behavioural challenges by creating a more structured environment. I am wondering if you have got any perspectives on the classroom approach, the learning approach and how that relates to behavioural challenges?

**Stephanie FELDT:** Yes. We have the Berry Street model as part of our school. So all of our staff have trained in the Berry Street model, which is very student centred. And we also are using what we call the TAPPLE strategies, which really hold students accountable for their learning, and it is short, sharp sessions so the students are not overwhelmed by what is being taught. We have found that that has assisted with some of the dysregulated behaviours.

**Ryan BATCHELOR:** So you have found that the teaching strategies have helped?

**Stephanie FELDT:** Yes.

**Ryan BATCHELOR:** That is very useful. On the inclusion programs, what support are you currently receiving and what support do you think you need in terms of – again, how does that support manifest in the classroom?

**Stephanie FELDT:** The disability inclusion funding is still outstanding, and we are at the end of term 1. So with that –

**Ryan BATCHELOR:** What does that mean? You have not received it?

**Stephanie FELDT:** We have not received it, no. So with that funding we would potentially look at putting on some extra learning support staff in classrooms to assist the classroom teachers. There is already substantial money going into wellbeing – student wellbeing, not staff wellbeing. I believe that also impacts why we are losing so many of our staff members, because the support is there for our students, and we love that our students are supported, but less and less. We have had one of our staff members already go out on burnout. We have got another staff member that is medically unable to be at school, so there are a lot of things. I can see the crisis in this area led by many, many things.

**Ryan BATCHELOR:** I might leave it there and come back later if I have time.

**The CHAIR:** Yes, certainly. Ms Bath.

**Melina BATH:** Thank you. Thank you for coming here today and sharing your experiences from a Moe primary school perspective. I am interested in the chaplaincy program. I taught at Mirboo North Secondary College, and we had a chaplain there that covered off on the primary school and the secondary school. I think sometimes there is a perception that the chaplains actually provide religious instruction, and from my point of view that could not be further from the truth. They use their beliefs to provide wellbeing support to staff, students and even the parent community when there is time of trauma. Could you expand on your experiences of the chaplaincy program in your school?

**Stephanie FELDT:** So when I started at Albert Street, we had a chaplain, and I would agree with you: they are not there for religious anything. They are there to actually listen and to impart their knowledge, given that they can see above the circumstances that we are experiencing. Very much you will go to school and you will have to deal with everything, but they give that perspective that shows that they can see above the situations and give you some really good guidance. Schools have the option of having a chaplain, but that option is not being taken up by many schools due to the fact that we have got wellbeing and they want to be seen as not having a religious aspect in their school, so chaplaincy has been faded out. So we now do not have a chaplain, and I believe our staff are suffering due to that.

**Melina BATH:** Can you tell me is there a vacancy for a wellbeing specialist or officer? Is that vacancy filled now?

**Stephanie FELDT:** Yes. We have two wellbeing officers that work together to support our students. In the morning they will often have students come in and do some play before they can actually enter the classroom because they are so dysregulated each and every morning. So they are taken up with that.

**Melina BATH:** Did I hear this right: you said 58 per cent of your student population is on some form of medication – is that right?

**Stephanie FELDT:** No, not medication. They either have cognitive, physical, sensory or socio-emotional needs.

**Melina BATH:** Right. Thank you.

**Stephanie FELDT:** But that has come down from 2022. We had 87.3 per cent of our students requiring that extra assistance.

**Melina BATH:** If we are looking at this emotional wellbeing and support in order to get students ready to learn, are two wellbeing officers sufficient?

**Stephanie FELDT:** We are not even a big school. Not for our school. We have 130 students, but with half of our students requiring extra support we could well do with another.

**Melina BATH:** And is that a possibility?

**Stephanie FELDT:** Until the funding comes through, we do not know where we stand. And due to the fact that our parents cannot access or do not have the means to access a paediatrician or a speech therapist or a psychologist to get the assistance they need, we need to supply that evidence to be able to get the funding. So there is a massive hole.

**Melina BATH:** There is a lack of being able to provide that surety that that is what a student needs or many students need, so the assessment is not being done –

**Stephanie FELDT:** That is correct.

**Melina BATH:** and therefore the school cannot access the funding if there would be speech therapists or allied health therapists. Is that correct? So it is sort of like a revolving cycle – is that what I am hearing?

**Stephanie FELDT:** Yes, that is correct. But our local education department, which happens to be across the road, are trying to fill places for speech therapists. They have been taken out from the department and are now working in schools – in specific schools.

**Melina BATH:** Which is a good thing.

**Stephanie FELDT:** It is a good thing, but if everyone had access to the same funding and everyone could have a speech therapist in their school, it would be a good thing.

**Melina BATH:** Yes, sure. So you are saying that if there is sufficient funding in the school budget, then the school can actually go out to tender and try and find their own speech therapist.

**Stephanie FELDT:** Yes. I do not think there are a lot around the area because we cannot fill that position within the department anyway.

**Melina BATH:** Sure. And that is what we heard yesterday, that in East Gippsland certainly there was a lack of those specialists that can make such a big contribution. This is about finding solutions, Stephanie. What are some of our solutions here, for guidance for us?

**Stephanie FELDT:** I just believe adequate funding, and also access to the health care, access to paediatricians, access to a speech therapist – all of the things that we need to be able to provide these assessments of the students.

**Melina BATH:** Thank you. And you mentioned burnout. So just talk a little bit to that, and my time is probably running out, but teachers are doing a lot of caring, as they should, but caring before they can educate. Is that adding to the burnout?

**Stephanie FELDT:** I believe it is. We are putting a lot into our students, and that is our job, and we love our job and to be able to do that, but it is leading to teacher burnout. There is not adequate support for our staff members.

**Melina BATH:** And what would you like to see, then, for that? How could the education department support you in that? It is a big question.

**Renee HEATH:** You can take it on notice.

**Stephanie FELDT:** Yes.

**Melina BATH:** What I am hearing is if some of these other support measures were in place – speech therapists et cetera – that would assist that.

**Stephanie FELDT:** That would assist, and even the chaplaincy aspect.

**Melina BATH:** Chaplaincy and wellbeing officers et cetera.

**Stephanie FELDT:** Yes.

**Melina BATH:** Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, Ms Bath. Dr Heath, would you like to continue?

**Renee HEATH:** Thank you so much for your presentation today. It sounds like you have got a heck of a job. The 2022 teacher supply and demand report was released last week. It stated that forecast demand for teachers is expected to outpace supply, with a shortfall of over 5000 teachers. Does that surprise you, that figure?

**Stephanie FELDT:** No. It does not surprise me, no.

**Renee HEATH:** How many teacher vacancies are there in your school?

**Stephanie FELDT:** At this current time we have had quite a steady staff, retaining our staff, so we have one vacancy available right now, and that is hard to fill. It is my job to fill it every day.

**Renee HEATH:** Right. What is the impact of the shortfall? Is it bigger classrooms or is it no teacher?

**Stephanie FELDT:** No, it is not bigger classrooms. It is looking for CRTs to come in and fill that space, and I am very lucky that I have a few on my books, so we have been able to cope with that at this stage.

**Renee HEATH:** Yes, at this stage. What do you think the reason for the shortfall is?

**Stephanie FELDT:** I would say the behaviours, dysregulation in the classroom. There are a lot of staff that are really finding it difficult, you know, having students swear at you every day or kick out. It is not nice.

**Renee HEATH:** Yes, yes. There was a survey of 81 countries recently, and in classroom behaviour we were number 71 out of those 81, here in Australia. Does that surprise you?

**Stephanie FELDT:** For my classroom, it surprises me. For other classes, it does not. I am in a very fortunate situation. I have had a lot of my students for four years now, so I know them very, very well, and they know I have very high expectations for my students.

**Renee HEATH:** Do you think classroom management and how to maintain classroom discipline need to be taught at a university level, as part of the bachelor's degree?

**Stephanie FELDT:** I do not think that would be of assistance. I think teachers or student-teachers need to be in the classroom, and they need to be in good classrooms where they can see how they can deal with situations.

**Renee HEATH:** So they need to be taught how to manage a classroom within the classroom?

**Stephanie FELDT:** Correct.

**Renee HEATH:** Okay. That is good. Do you think the government is taking the necessary steps to address teacher shortages?

**Stephanie FELDT:** Not by putting out more places, I do not think. I think retention of the staff that we have is super important because they are the ones that have not necessarily the qualifications but the experience, and they have seen how we have gone from pre COVID to post COVID and the issues that that has brought into our schooling system.

**Renee HEATH:** Yes. That is interesting. Just a couple of questions in relation to your presentation. Would you recommend bringing back the chaplaincy program?

**Stephanie FELDT:** Yes.

**Renee HEATH:** There are 58 per cent that require support. How many support staff do you have?

**Stephanie FELDT:** We have one learning assistant per class, except for the 5–6 class, and we also have two wellbeing staff and a disability inclusion staff member.

**Renee HEATH:** Right, so how many classes do you have?

**Stephanie FELDT:** Six.

**Renee HEATH:** So that is about nine support staff. How many would be optimal?

**Stephanie FELDT:** How many would be –

**Renee HEATH:** Optimal – like, how many would you like to have, if you could have –

**Stephanie FELDT:** I would say potentially another two that could be our roamers. We have a lot of students that disappear out of the classroom.

**Renee HEATH:** Right. You mentioned something in your talk about the amount of time that you are not doing what you were trained to do, which is teach. What percentage of your work would be teaching as opposed to what would be considered sort of in a sense social work or those other things?

**Stephanie FELDT:** I would say one-third teaching, two-thirds looking at morning meetings, checking in on our students, talking with our students, dealing with issues out in the yard.

**Renee HEATH:** Wow, that is incredible. And you come from the private school system, I read in your submission. How does the private school system compare to the public school system, in your experience?

**Stephanie FELDT:** Definitely they have a lot more funding. I was very fortunate starting off at an all boys school and could see how their structures and the way that they had support for their staff and their students worked really well. The private schools are lucky enough to have that religious element to bring up and support both the students and staff as well. Then I moved to a big primary school in Melbourne, a state school in Melbourne, and they also had a lot of that in place, and their chaplaincy program was very, very strong. Their community, the way they went out into the community and helped support the community was amazing as well. Coming to the Latrobe Valley after being in some of those affluent schools was a massive wake-up call, but my passion is those students that do not have those supports. That is where I lie, and I am so pleased to be able to be here and to be here today to advocate for my students.

**Renee HEATH:** Thank you so much. I think I just heard an alarm, so I assume that means my time.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, Dr Heath. If we have got time, we will come back. Dr Mansfield, would you like to ask a question?

**Sarah MANSFIELD:** Yes, thank you. Thank you so much for appearing today. I would just like to go back to the topic of teacher burnout and strategies to improve retention. We have heard from other witnesses about the impact that appropriate funding up to the full Gonski funding would make a difference. I do not know what your perspective on that is. Would additional funding assist with some of those issues around staff retention and preventing burnout?

**Stephanie FELDT:** Yes, I think additional funding would indeed allow us to have the supports that we need in different classrooms. I am speaking of six classrooms, and I know that two of our classrooms need even more additional support to allow the teacher to teach, to do their job.

**Sarah MANSFIELD:** The other thing we heard about was that although vacancies might not be huge on paper, part of that is because that has been sort of patched over with a few clever tricks with using different pools of funding to fill in gaps or teachers just being asked to do more – you know, teach more. They are being denied requests to reduce their days or for flexible work arrangements. Is that something that you have observed?

**Stephanie FELDT:** We not long ago had a crisis in our school – we had a number of things happening all at one time. We lost one of our parents; they passed away. One of our teachers was sick. We had trouble trying to advocate for someone to come in and fill that position from the education department. We are now fortunate we have got someone in that position, but during that time all staff were doing extra yard duties, we were doing extra coverage where that was required, and it did take a toll.

**Sarah MANSFIELD:** And we also heard that during those times there is not a lot of extra capacity. The staff are already –

**Stephanie FELDT:** At capacity.

**Sarah MANSFIELD:** Yes, at capacity. So there is not a lot of room to stretch and cover gaps when they arise inevitably because of different things that come up. Again, is that something that your school is seeing?

**Stephanie FELDT:** Yes, definitely. We have had to do a lot more, and we are even at capacity. You know, you want to give your best to your school, and that has definitely led to one of our staff members' burnout.

**Sarah MANSFIELD:** Okay. And the other thing that I was curious about – you have described the fact that quite a high proportion of the students attending your school have experienced trauma or are experiencing other challenges in their lives outside of school. Are there things that more broadly you think would help in your community that might then make it easier for students to be able to engage in learning? Are there things that are affecting them outside that no matter what resourcing you put into a school you may not be able to fix within a school system that you would like to see addressed within the community you live in?

**Stephanie FELDT:** We believe we are doing everything we can, but our students need access – our community need access – to food. We do have a Foodbank that our community can access. We do 12 to 20 toasted sandwiches every day. Even those little things for our students are super, super important, and we need to have people in the community help support with that.

**Sarah MANSFIELD:** Yes. We also heard about things like transport to school can be a challenge for a lot of students. I do not know if that is something you have seen.

**Stephanie FELDT:** Yes, we have the Side by Side program working with us, and quite often they will help support some of our parents with driving kids to school, to appointments and things like that. We have one of those Side by Sides working with us, and that is a lot to put on them compared to what our community actually needs. Some people are getting that support, and some – we just cannot run that one person into the ground.

**Sarah MANSFIELD:** Yes. Access to health care as well was something that was brought up, particularly for kids who may have different health needs, including behavioural challenges that need allied health or other medical input. What is the experience for students in your area?

**Stephanie FELDT:** It is very, very difficult to get the assistance they need. We have a student that has type 1 diabetes. We need to put a lot into his day. We need to regularly check his Dexcom and things like that, and that does not come under any funding at all, the disability inclusion. There is no funding for this student that we need to put time into. And we also have students coming to us that potentially should be in one of our local special schools but the parents have decided they wanted them to attend a state school. There needs to be some kind of cut-off so we can have a little bit of pushback, because we do not have the staff to be able to adequately support these students.

**Sarah MANSFIELD:** Okay, thank you.



**Stephanie FELDT:** Thanks.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, Dr Mansfield. Mr McCracken.

**Joe McCracken:** Thanks very much for your opening remarks, Stephanie, and also for the ongoing work you do – it is valued and appreciated and incredibly important. There are a few points I want to touch on that you mentioned before, and I just want to dig into them a little bit deeper. In terms of teacher training, I think it might have been Dr Heath that mentioned more in-class teaching rounds, essentially – what do you think of the idea of having teacher training more like an apprenticeship model than the current structure, where it is very ‘theory, placement, theory, placement’ sort of thing?

**Stephanie FELDT:** I would advocate for that, definitely advocate for that. I love having student-teachers in my class. Over the past six years I have worked for this school I think I have had seven student-teachers, and I think they gain more of an understanding being in a classroom than back at university.

**Joe McCracken:** I tend to agree with you as well, and I think sometimes it can have the impact of, dare I say, helping people decide whether teaching is for them or not.

**Stephanie FELDT:** Yes.

**Joe McCracken:** Okay, that is good to know. I guess one of the other things too about teaching is you spoke about how teaching is more than just the teaching – I think you said about a third of your time goes on the teaching. It is all the other things that I know you mentioned before about medication support, counselling, all those sorts of other things that an outsider would not know in the teaching profession. How do you think that could be changed so that a teacher can focus on the imparting of knowledge and the practice of teaching without having to be dealing with a lot of the other complexities that they may not be equipped for?

**Stephanie FELDT:** For me I think it is really important to have that time with my students and dealing with situations, but I believe the paperwork that we have to do behind that takes up more of our time than it should. For every incident that happens in the schoolyard, we have to ensure it is written up – where it happened, who spoke to whom, who said what – and that would probably take up more of our time in that aspect than necessarily addressing little things in the classroom.

**Joe McCracken:** Okay. I have done a bit of research as well, and you are probably familiar with John Hattie and the research he has done.

**Stephanie FELDT:** Yes.

**Joe McCracken:** The two things that he says have the biggest impact on teaching outcomes are basically teacher quality and shared teacher efficacy. Do you agree with that?

**Stephanie FELDT:** I definitely agree with that. We have got a very strong curriculum team that works together to support the best way moving forward of our curriculum, and having high-quality teachers is super important as well, and I think one of the ways we can get there, Joe, is your suggestion in having teachers having a side-by-side program with our student-teachers.

**Joe McCracken:** Yes, essentially the apprenticeship model to become a teacher.

**Stephanie FELDT:** Yes.

**Joe McCracken:** Obviously I think it is a good suggestion. The last thing I want to touch on too, and I have noticed it over the last 10 years, when I was in the classroom as well, particularly from 7s coming from a primary background – I was a secondary background – is that the level of literacy has really sort of diminished over the last 10 years, probably longer, and to deal with that is a big challenge. It almost requires a break in a circuit. Have you got any thoughts about how to break that circuit?

**Stephanie FELDT:** I do not have any thoughts on how to break that circuit, but I am very interested in the way that NAPLAN believes that our students are achieving a lot higher than they actually are. Last year we had students at state level, and our understanding in being with these students every day is they are definitely not at any state level. So there are things that would be contradicting at the support in literacy and numeracy, and the

funding that we get from the prior year for our literacy program, they are saying we are all state average and that funding will no longer be accessible.

**Joe McCracken:** It would be interesting, though, what they consider to be the state average and whether that has risen or declined over the years.

**Stephanie FelDT:** I would say it has declined.

**Joe McCracken:** I agree with you, and if I have a look at some of my old year 7s and their writing, it was barely legible. I particularly noticed it a lot with younger boys – they really struggled. I know that is a bit of a generalisation, but on average I noticed that a lot more. What strategies particularly do you find that work in attempting to reverse that or at least keep it year on year for learning in terms of literacy?

**Stephanie FelDT:** We are doing a lot of support at the moment in our decodable readers. We have brought in a Sounds-Write program to really break it down for students and start to build up their literacy again within the classroom. That goes the same with their numeracy. I mean, there seem to be a lot of programs around that people are trying to grab at, but we need to maintain some consistency for these students so we can see if these programs are working or not.

**Joe McCracken:** Do you support phonics?

**Stephanie FelDT:** Yes, I do.

**Joe McCracken:** Thanks for your time. I appreciate it.

**Stephanie FelDT:** Thanks, Joe.

**The Chair:** Thanks, Stephanie. I will ask a few questions, and if we have got time, we will come back to some of the panel who want to ask a few more questions. In your submission you mention 58 per cent of students are going through challenges and require additional support. I just want to know, for primary school, what level these cohorts are. Are they all across – from prep to 6?

**Stephanie FelDT:** Yes, they are.

**The Chair:** Is that more in certain years?

**Stephanie FelDT:** More at the moment in our foundation to 2, so prep to 2, and probably less so in the upper primary, but we still have quite a few.

**The Chair:** A number of 58 per cent is a reasonably high number to require additional support. So what percentage of that 58 are from prep to 2? I just want to know roughly.

**Stephanie FelDT:** I would say probably 70 per cent of that 58 per cent are included in that.

**The Chair:** Right. So would that extra support be support in literacy and academic support or wellbeing support?

**Stephanie FelDT:** I would say academic support.

**The Chair:** Okay. From your background of teaching experience would some sort of additional support or teaching for educators prior to coming to prep and 1 assist with them not requiring support?

**Stephanie FelDT:** Quite often we will have students come from kindergartens that we recognise need support, but we need to have 10 weeks of evidence, which is a whole term of evidence, on where these students need assistance before we can ask for funding for those students. So there is a gap between our kindergartens and our primary schools and then potentially our primary schools to our high schools as well.

**The Chair:** So the upper part of the primary section requires probably more of the wellbeing, social support?

**Stephanie FelDT:** That is correct, yes.

**The CHAIR:** How long have you been at Albert Street Primary School?

**Stephanie FELDT:** Six years, I think.

**The CHAIR:** Six years. Is there any particular demographic reason why certain areas require a higher number of social behaviour supports compared to what you have had in the other schools you have been in, like the one in the private sector, which is in the eastern suburbs, inner east? Has the demographic of the area played a big part of it, or not?

**Stephanie FELDT:** Definitely the area plays a massive part. It has taken me probably about four years to recognise the impact that trauma and generational poverty in the area has on students. In the eastern suburbs of Melbourne, well, that is a lot different – you have a lot different problems than those.

**The CHAIR:** That is good to know. Also, you mentioned the chaplain program, and most of the support and wellbeing is for students and none for staff. Previously with the chaplain program, were they able to support both staff and students?

**Stephanie FELDT:** Both staff and students. Staff were quite happy to go to them and have a chat even if, as Melina was saying before, the religious aspect is not there. Sometimes you just need somebody to talk to that can shoulder that extra responsibility, whatever is going on in the school at the time.

**The CHAIR:** So whether it is a chaplain program or whatever other additional support, there needs to be something for the staff area as well.

**Stephanie FELDT:** Yes, definitely.

**The CHAIR:** I just want to also touch on classroom discipline and management. I think Joe mentioned about additional training – I think Dr Heath mentioned it also – for early teachers before they come to actually qualifications. Would the way the school has disciplined now and in the past play a big part of it in relation to – if it is an issue in class, are teachers and principals more reluctant to discipline the kids now compared to in the past?

**Stephanie FELDT:** Potentially. I think the most important thing is to build relationships with students and to show teachers coming through how to build those relationships with students so that those kinds of disciplinary things do not have to go to any extreme. It could be just, you know, the teacher look. You just have to grow that respect that they have for you. Our student–staff relationship is super important. I do not think that discipline has changed at all. I do not think anyone is afraid to discipline students; I just think it needs to be done in a different way.

**The CHAIR:** Okay. I know you mentioned your teacher strategies have helped, especially at your school at the moment, but you mentioned how NAPLAN literacy and numeracy have decreased. I was wondering, you said the teacher strategies are helping. The program or the method for students is all working well. Why then in your school, if all these strategies are working, do you think the literacy and numeracy is not up to the level that you expect? If it is working, then why is the level not at the state level in the NAPLAN? Why do you think it is not at our level?

**Stephanie FELDT:** As Joe was saying, I think that the NAPLAN overall state average has dropped, and we need to have those high expectations for our students to be able to achieve benchmark growth. So we have continuums that we look at and tick off, ‘Yes, they can do that, yes, yes, no, no, no, no,’ and that will then give us what level, what outcome, they are at. They are not meeting a lot of those benchmarks.

**The CHAIR:** Okay. But you said for your school – I am not talking about other schools – the strategies are working, and if all those systems and practices at the school are helping the kids, then why is there no result?

**Stephanie FELDT:** We are looking at the moment at our triangulation of data. Are we putting too much emphasis on one area and using that to support our teacher judgement or are we going to go more off NAPLAN? We are working on that as a school at the moment.

**The CHAIR:** Just one more question before I put it back to the panel for a few minutes. Following on from that, has the curriculum overcrowded your educators to actually emphasise numeracy and literacy? With

subjects and other things being brought into the curriculum, has that been overcrowded and that is why results are not up to the level you expect?

**Stephanie FELDT:** I do not think so. Every school has an annual implementation plan. That should help support one area, either the literacy or numeracy, and it is up to principals to push those areas forward. I do not think an overcrowded curriculum is an issue as it was many years ago.

**The CHAIR:** Okay. Thank you. Ryan.

**Ryan BATCHELOR:** Yes, just briefly, thanks, Chair. Just coming back to the chaplaincy issue, you said that in your experience they are not there for religious anything. If they are not there for a religious purpose, why do they need to be religious?

**Stephanie FELDT:** I think they have a deeper understanding of issues. I believe they can shoulder a lot more responsibilities and hear people out at a genuine level. If we had people like psychologists, for example, I do not think staff would necessarily go to see someone that they may perceive as reading them differently than they are. I think our chaplains are just genuine people. I think my experience is that in the primary schools I have been to that has been the case. People that may not have any religious affiliation will still go and have a chat to them and get a lot back and a lot of support.

**Ryan BATCHELOR:** Why do you think they are deeper?

**Stephanie FELDT:** I know because I am a practising Christian myself, and I just know how much responsibility I can shoulder.

**Ryan BATCHELOR:** Thanks, Chair.

**The CHAIR:** Ms Bath.

**Melina BATH:** Thank you. Stephanie, in relation to the disability inclusion program – it is rolled out by local government in the area, that is my understanding. I am looking up the website. I am assuming that Moe is in that local government area that it is rolled out to. The blurb at the top states:

Disability Inclusion is ensuring every student at every ability thrives at school and in life ...

That is a lovely vision. There is no doubt about it; it is a lovely vision. But you are still saying that the school has not got the funding for it.

**Stephanie FELDT:** That is correct.

**Melina BATH:** Has the funding for the previous program for student disability, the PSD, finished? I am trying to understand. Is there a gap here in this rollout? Have you been told when the funding is coming?

**Stephanie FELDT:** I cannot confidently answer that.

**Melina BATH:** You might like to take it on notice for us.

**Stephanie FELDT:** Yes.

**Melina BATH:** I am just trying to understand – the program is actually in the LGA and it should be rolled out, yet there is not the funding. It might be something that we put to the education department later on. But could you please ask your principal or find out a little bit more about that, because clearly for almost 60 per cent of your student population it is a very important funding stream and program, so that they can all thrive at school and in life. I just want to understand that a little bit further.

**Stephanie FELDT:** Yes. Thank you. I will take that back.

**Melina BATH:** Okay. Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, Ms Bath. Thank you, Stephanie. Thank you for coming in. The time is coming up to the end of the session. I just want to very quickly wrap it up. To summarise, your recommendation is you are seeking funding support for teachers to address some of the issues in relation to preschool, which will assist in

relation to the kids moving forward. Some of the other recommendations you mentioned earlier as well, but is there anything else that you want to put on record now before we finish off? I will give you the opportunity.

**Stephanie FELDT:** No, I think I am good.

**The CHAIR:** Okay. Thank you. In that case, thank you so much for coming in. Your evidence has been quite valuable. We will actually summarise it and look over it again before we put our recommendations, and we will look through not just your school but all the schools in this catchment area and in the eastern suburbs and out to the west as we try to make sure we try to capture all of Victoria.

**Witness withdrew.**