T R A N S C R I P T

LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL LEGAL AND SOCIAL ISSUES COMMITTEE

Inquiry into the State Education System in Victoria

Melbourne – Thursday 9 May 2024

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WITNESSES

Soo-Lin Quek, Executive Manager of Policy, Sector and Business Development, and

Richard Filer, Team Leader, Education, Centre for Multicultural Youth.

The CHAIR: Welcome back to the Inquiry into the State Education System in Victoria. Joining us for this session are Soo-Lin and Richard from the Centre for Multicultural Youth – welcome. Before we continue I would like to read this information 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 during 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 a proof version of the transcript following the hearing. The transcript will ultimately be made public and be posted on the committee's website.

Again, thank you so much for joining us today and for your submission. Just for recording purposes, could you please state your full name and the organisation you are representing today, please?

Soo-Lin QUEK: Hello. I am Soo-Lin Quek. I am from the Centre for Multicultural Youth.

Richard FILER: My name is Richard Filer. I am also from the Centre for Multicultural Youth.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Soo-Lin and Richard. I am Trung Luu, the Chair. The Deputy Chair is Ryan Batchelor. Mr Joe McCracken and Ms Melina Bath are to my right and Mr Richard Welch and Ms Moira Deeming are to my left. Also we have got Mr Lee Tarlamis and Dr Renee Heath joining us on Zoom as well.

I know you have made a submission. I would just invite you to make a short opening statement so we have time to ask you questions as well.

Soo-Lin QUEK: All right, okay. Good. First up I would like to thank you for the opportunity to present to you today. Education: in terms of education for multicultural young people, it is the cornerstone of their ability to integrate and settle well into Australia. But also, it is not just young people – what we also know in terms of skills in young people is it is also the relationship that parents have with the local community. So parent and student engagement is one of the really critical glues that brings people together, but also it sets up young people for the opportunities that Australia provides. Having said that, we do know at the Centre for Multicultural Youth – we have been in the education space for well over 15 years and have done research and have done a lot of consultation with young people and educators to try and unearth what the blockers are for young people in education but also what some of the things are that work well and what some of the facilitators are for them in terms of them getting a good education and having good student outcomes. Out of all that work we have now got a really strong team that works in schools and does a lot of what we would call capacity building of schools in how they engage and work well with multicultural young people.

I will hand over to Richard, because we do work right across rural and regional Victoria as well as metropolitan Victoria to try and strengthen refugee students' outcomes as well as multicultural young people generally. Richard, over to you to describe a bit about the RESP work and LBB work and also maybe what the top three or four things are.

Richard FILER: Awesome. Thank you so much for bringing us in. As Soo-Lin mentioned, education is something we are really passionate about, especially because we know that it has this massive impact on the lives of multicultural young people. I think for the team that we have at CMY, the education team, we are really lucky to have a really wonderful, experienced team who get to work with schools right across metro Melbourne and also regional Victoria. I currently lead the education team, and in my time at CMY I think I have worked directly with something like a little over 20 schools and each for two years. That is through our refugee

education support program. We really are passionate about trying to support schools over a long period of time, not just a 'drop in and drop out'.

That being said, we know that there are things that we can do that achieve really massive impacts for schools and school leaders. For example, earlier this week I was in Warrnambool speaking to school leaders about a thing called Culturally Sustaining Schools and Schools Standing Up to Racism, basically supporting school leaders who really wanted some support addressing racism in their schools and their students' experiences of racism and trying to understand how they can better support their multicultural students and families. Aside from that, our team also works with something called the Learning Beyond the Bell program, and I think we are one of the only programs that actually supports an entire sector, which really oftentimes goes overlooked, and that is the out-of-school-hours learning support programs. I think that is a big mouthful, and we often turn to the acronym OSHLSP, but I would probably better refer to it as – yes, it is not good, is it?

Soo-Lin QUEK: Colloquially we call it homework clubs.

Richard FILER: Homework clubs is the right move. Yes.

Melina BATH: That is something we all understand.

Richard FILER: Yes. Exactly. We have been supporting homework clubs for something like 17 years. We do training and reports on the sector. We celebrate the work of the sector through some education awards. I volunteer outside of my role at CMY at a homework club and can tell you that it is really impactful on the lives of migrant and multicultural young people.

I will take our submission as read, but for us I think three big priorities that come out of our work with schools, with OSHLSPs and with the sector as a whole would be (1) better supports and more targeted supports for EAL, EAL learning in particular; (2) as I mentioned, homework clubs – I think it is a really valuable sector, and I would love to speak on the value of it and how much it benefits from the level of community engagement it has and community support; and the third and final one is really the one that schools are most often coming to us about, and students and families as well, which is our work in anti-racism and having schools be a real place for change, not just in their community but also I think for our state and hopefully for the nation. I think those three things are probably our biggest priorities.

Soo-Lin QUEK: Just on the last point, often we do hear where students really struggle, and they say, 'Look, I don't think I can. I don't want to go back to school anymore, just because I don't feel safe. I don't feel like I belong and I don't feel connected.' It is not just racism in the playground, it is also the kind of unconscious bias that teachers or curriculums may have that do not speak to the student's experience. I think even though it is not a curriculum issue – I think it is a teacher skill issue – it is an issue where we need a whole-of-school response from the principal, the leadership, the school board and the school committee right down to the person at the front desk to create a safe environment for students to learn well. For us, on racism the kind of social cohesion that we can and should be building in schools is critical.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Thank you for your submission. Obviously the services you provide are something I can relate to, having gone through that. We never had that when I was growing up through school, so I commend you for what you are doing. So my question to you is basically – I know you mentioned about racism. I think the EA language support is one thing that is crucial, and the homework group is crucial – it is something that will assist. But I was wondering: do you actually assist them to – I do not want to use the word 'integrate' – be part of Australia, to assist them to progress to be part of Australian society? Do you do that as part of your program as well?

Richard FILER: Yes, I can speak to this. I would say the department supports us. There are maybe two aspects to what you are asking, if I am hearing it right. One is through the English as an additional language support that schools give to students that are there, and I think part of the curriculum that exists and part of the progress map that students are often assessed against does include, for example, an intercultural capability, where young people come to understand not just the vocabulary of a language but how it is used in context.

But as for something like the homework clubs that we work in, which, as I say, I think are really critical and really important and really attached to community, what we see is that they play a massive role not just in student learning, because I think they help to bridge learning gaps really critically, but also this massive role in

supporting social skills and supporting wellbeing, and I think really critically, that we hear so often, in supporting the settlement journey for families coming into Australia. Here is a place where you can connect with others, where you can connect with the community. Here is a place that is very often linked to other community agencies, other community supports. Often, even though these programs run in schools and out of schools – generally they run either before or after – they can really integrate and partner with schools so that they can fill these gaps that otherwise schools can find hard to fill or otherwise do not have the time to fill. I feel like that is a really critical thing that I want to emphasise – the fact that, yes, they bridge learning gaps, but also they play this massive social and wellbeing role, especially for migrant and refugee young people or those bringing those experiences, because they are a real part of that settlement journey.

Soo-Lin QUEK: Can I add to that too? I think it is not just about the students. I think the gem that homework clubs bring is that they also bring individual community members, and usually they are volunteers. They are volunteer tutors. So we train them and they get their working with children check and we do all those things with them, but what happens is that local community members step into the space. I do hear stories where the volunteer tutors will say, 'I've never really listened to or heard a refugee's story before, and me volunteering as a tutor and coming into contact, I really do understand what people mean when they say refugees are struggling to connect in Australia.' For the students too, often students say to us, 'Gosh, you know, I have lots of friends in my South Sudanese community, but I want to make friends with someone who is from a white Anglo culture; I want to make friends with someone who is Iraqi,' and homework clubs in that sense, because they are so diverse, bring a mix of people together – from volunteer tutors to a mix of students – into a space where normally they would not be able to come in contact with each other. They hear each other's stories and journeys and understand, 'These are people in your community – this is who lives in Wantirna, this is who lives in Melton.' Out of those homework groups I think – and, Richard, I think you can testify to it – amazing friendships form that are lasting beyond the homework groups. I think going to your question, for me, that is a very unseen, untapped potential for building stronger social cohesion in local communities.

The CHAIR: Deputy Chair.

Ryan BATCHELOR: Thanks, Chair. Soo-Lin and Richard, thanks so much for coming in. I want to take you to the first part of your submission about data –

Soo-Lin QUEK: True to my heart.

Ryan BATCHELOR: yes – to sort of kick off with the aphorism of 'What gets measured matters'. You obviously made a series of recommendations to an inquiry in 2015 about what could change in terms of the data collection that the department does. Although 2015 was only yesterday, in the last decade what progress have you been able to make, and what do you think the barriers are to the recommendations that you seek being implemented?

Soo-Lin QUEK: I do not know where to start. With data collection, I think sometimes when you talk about data people kind of back away a little bit from it because they go, 'It's too hard to collect.' I think there are things that we could put in place that would make it seem easier and not as onerous. The data collection has not improved a lot, to be honest. It does not have to be 100 per cent accurate. If we could even get something that is 80 per cent or 70 per cent accurate in terms of data, at least it would help us in planning – us as is in not just not-for-profit organisations but us as in the Victorian community. I do not have an answer unfortunately, Ryan, because different departments collect different datasets. The Department of Education may collect a particular dataset which is quite different to, let us say, the Department of Health and how they collect data around ethnicity and cultural backgrounds. For a student with mental health issues, you can kind of guess what is in the schools' data, but it may not match up with, let us say, mental health data overall. Richard, I think you have a better sense of what they collect in schools. The way the department collects it – it is the only department that collects it that way. Do you want to talk about the other datasets?

Richard FILER: Sure.

Ryan BATCHELOR: It just seems to me as a parent that we fill out forms all the time. They are really long, so I cannot imagine what they are not collecting, but anyway.

Richard FILER: Well, I am not sure about the trajectory and whether the data is getting better, but what I can say is that the consistency is not there at the moment. You say you are filling out lengthy, lengthy forms.

One can only imagine for, say, a family that has recently arrived in Australia the kind of challenge that those forms might present. You asked about barriers to collecting this data. I would say a big barrier is just some consistency of direction for schools about what data they should collect. To give you an example, some standards exist already from the ABS about what kind of data would be helpful and some ways of asking those questions, but we can imagine that there are very different responses to a question like 'What is your primary language spoken at home?' versus 'What languages do you speak at home?' For families who are coming from migrant and refugee backgrounds, who might have complex refugee experiences, they might assume that their children would be treated with a certain level of prejudice or discrimination if they are deemed to not be proficient in English, so they might then think to write down that English is the primary language spoken at home. Unless they have a really significant sense of trust with the school – again, recognising that their experiences could be really complicated in terms of their relationships with government, with society or with schools from the country that they have come from – that is a big ask.

The other thing that I think is leading to a certain inconsistency in the data is that that responsibility is put on schools, and they do not necessarily have the training or support at the moment to meet that need. How many principals are also statisticians and demographers?

Ryan BATCHELOR: Few.

Richard FILER: Exactly. What kind of support can we put in place for them to say, 'These are the questions you need to ask. Here is a flowchart of how to do an enrolment process so you can step families through. This is why it is so important to have translators and interpreters, and these are the kinds of barriers you might come up against using an interpreter.' A lot of what we speak to schools about is some simple stuff around how you use an interpreter effectively. You know, do you speak to the interpreter, who then is facing the family? No, you speak to the family member across the table from you and you use all of those things like body language and eye contact, and the interpreter is just there to interpret. Those are skills that are hard to intuit, and quite simply it is a low barrier to saying, 'Let's have some consistency.'

Soo-Lin QUEK: I think sometimes too with the way the datasets are collected – if someone is from a refugee background, when is a person not a refugee anymore? They could be first-generation, yes, but for instance, with a lot of us from these communities, a lot of the young people are born in Australia now, so they are not from a refugee background in that sense. But then it does not appear in the school stats for them to be able to say, 'Right, 50 per cent of our school population is from a diverse cultural background.' When you look at their refugee stats, for instance, it may say, 'We've only got 120 refugee background students in our schools,' but actually a number of them could be second-generation by now. They may still have a number of challenges that are very similar to someone who is of a refugee background because their parents may not be able to help them with their homework or they may not have the kind of social capital they need to have to be able to work their way through the school system. Sometimes the way schools collect stats – and not just schools but departments across the board as well – does not really speak to what is in front of you in terms of what you assume. So a school could say, 'We've only got 50 per cent of our population that is diverse.' Well, if I walk through the school gate, it looks like there is probably 80 per cent, but it is not reflected in the data because of the way we collect data. So having a dataset that says 'refugee background' is sometimes not the most helpful dataset.

Richard FILER: I would re-emphasise, as a former teacher and EAL coordinator myself, that I know the data is not consistent. Again, it is because we are asking people to collect data in a very complex environment that they are not well suited to and not providing the supports we already have but just need to be better communicated. To give you one final example that I think is a really important one – again, to reiterate the soft skills – it is not just 'These are the questions to ask' but 'Here's how you could ask them and how you could build trust and why it's important.' For many of the families that we work with, we hear anecdotally – and it is not very well captured – schools are funded for EAL. They get EAL index funding, as you well know. But on top of that, that funding is adjusted based on the occupations that families have, which is supposed to be an indicator of socio-economic advantage or disadvantage. Again, these are probably things you already know, but what we often find that is unseen is that families will not accurately report their occupation. For example, if you have arrived in Australia and you were a doctor where you came from but your qualification is not recognised here and at the moment you are driving a cab, when a principal or a teacher asks you the question 'What do you do?' and you do not have trust or faith and do not understand the importance of that question, you are going to say, 'I'm a doctor.' And that is going to misrepresent the actual challenges that your family might be facing and

the ways in which the school could support you. So I would stress that we need some consistency and we need some support – technical support – for school leaders but also, importantly, support in terms of those soft skills, social skills. So much of our work in, say, culturally sustaining schools or anti-racism is about these invisible barriers that we are not seeing and how we can lower them.

Ryan BATCHELOR: I literally wrote down implications of data collection on funding allocations before you said it.

Richard FILER: There you go.

Ryan BATCHELOR: We are on the same wavelength. My time is up now.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Thanks for that. Believe me, data across the board for all occupations is an issue in the way it is entered. It is how the questions are worded that help you to answer the question. Ms Deeming.

Moira DEEMING: Thank you. Thanks for coming in. I think your work sounds absolutely fantastic. I just wanted to congratulate you on what you are doing and tell you one of the success stories that we had out in my area. I had a mum contact me. She has got little redheaded kids – you know, white, freckles and everything – and she said that her son came home and was really distressed because this friend that he had made with a refugee background had been told not to play with him anymore. The mother was really distressed because she had heard that Australians were racist. So the mother was worried, but it was through after-school activities – chatting on the sidelines when they were playing sport together – that that fear was able to dissolve, and now they drop each other's kids off. They had an opportunity to get to know each other, and fears on both sides were allayed.

I have just been thinking about a line that has been coming up a lot in this submissions process and in these hearings, which is 'You cannot be what you cannot see.' I think one of the resources that would be really great to come along with these things would be positive stories – heaps and heaps of positive stories of where interracial harmony worked well. It can create a fear, but in that particular context it was unnecessary. So I love your work. I really hope that you guys get funded. I hope we can fund this kind of research and training for people that are not teachers to do that background admin work and to do it properly, as you have said. I wish you all the best. I think it is really important work.

Soo-Lin QUEK: Thank you, and that is a great story. You are right, sometimes good work does not cost a lot of money. Sometimes it is just: how do we create the spaces that are already there to bring people together so that they can have a bit of a conversation on the side, like you said. And it is perception; sometimes it is perception rather than what is reality.

Moira DEEMING: Yes, like that family did not actually have anything to fear, but just a little bit of contact fixed it.

Soo-Lin QUEK: Yes.

Richard FILER: One of my favourite things is that young people I work with use language that they picked up from friends. I love that it is very Australian for a kid to use words like 'wallah' and 'yallah' and 'uce'. They are using Samoan and Arabic, and they do not know it. They know it as Australian language. It speaks to what incredible value we have in the sheer diversity here. Some of the stats we have are something like close to 50 per cent of Melburnians have both parents born overseas. Wow, that is such a wonderful thing. We know that all students and all staff and all families learn best when their values are seen as strengths for their learning. What we recognise is that for some students there are barriers to their values being recognised as a strength, so what are those barriers and how do we lower them, because it is going to benefit us all. I love that.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Moira. Any questions, Lee?

Lee TARLAMIS: Thank you, Chair. Thank you, Soo-Lin and Richard, for coming along and talking to us today. I am first going to take this opportunity to thank you for the amazing work you do across Victoria but in particular in the south-east. I have seen firsthand a lot of the work that you have done and a lot of the programs to support families and young people in terms of making schools a safer and more inclusive place but also in terms of empowering communities to have discussions within their communities and understand the issues so

they can help be part of a kind of collaborating to understand how they can be part of the solutions as well in terms of addressing a lot of these issues. I know you have spoken about some of them already, but are there any other particular impediments that you see in your day-to-day work that could be fixed to make your programs more effective?

Richard FILER: I could absolutely speak to this, and I think it is something that our whole team is really passionate about at CMY – about homework clubs. From our own reports and from sector evaluations we know that these clubs have a massive impact, as Soo-Lin was saying, not just on young people but on their families and on the people in the community who volunteer at those clubs. I know for myself the connections that I have with tutoring kids from my local community is massive. It adds such incredible value to my life. It makes me feel like I am actually part of the community that I live in. But unfortunately, the trajectory that we have been seeing in so many of those clubs is actually towards less stability, and we are having clubs that have been open for 10-plus years coming to us and saying that shortly they might actually have to close their doors. I think that is really heartbreaking for us, knowing the kind of impact that they have.

If we look at something like the tutor learning initiative, which I think is a really fantastic initiative, we can see that small-group tutoring has a massive impact. That is the evidence base we are using to talk about the tutor learning initiative. I think that program is funded for something like $250 million. To put into context the kind of work that these homework clubs do: we support 365-plus homework clubs, and I think the annual grant that we give to those clubs is about $80,000. They function off of so much volunteer effort, which is actually one of their incredible strengths. Volunteerism is going down in Australia, and yet here is a wonderful opportunity to be a person in a young person's life even if that young person comes from a language background or a cultural background or looks different to you. I think with something like the tutor learning initiative, that should absolutely continue. It does things that homework clubs cannot do in terms of bridging learning gaps within a school and with teacher-trained tutors. However, I think about if a similar, say, $5 million to $10 million was instead directed to: how do we support a club that already exists? How do we support volunteers who are already passionate? How do we support agencies that already have incredible links with families? I think that is really valuable.

To give you an example of how that plays out in real life, at a school that we work with – I was working with – they were saying one of their real difficulties was that they had very few connections with their multicultural families. They found that they would invite them to parent–teacher nights, they would invite them to school events, and those families would not come. Just down the road – they were not aware – literally within a block of the school, there was a community agency that ran a homework club that those same families attended, and they attended regularly. They engaged in their students' education. They were passionate about knowing how their students could improve and what they were learning next, and they felt a sense of real ownership of the space and a connection to their child's learning. What was missing was just a connection between the two – between the school and between the agency. I think for something like $8000 we supported that club to expand its work and connect with that school. They were able to link those families in with that school, and I think that school then ran a health night and it was thoroughly well attended by families that they had been trying to target for years.

So I think we need to recognise that schools are not always a place where everybody feels like they have ownership over that space. Even though I think it is wonderful to think about 'How can we bring more people into the school? How can we ask schools to do more stuff?' there is some value in thinking we do not have to put everything on a school. We do not have to put everything in a school building. There are ways in which we can partner that are going to have massive impacts, as Soo-Lin was saying, in a much more cost-effective way.

Soo-Lin QUEK: And also impacting, so some homework clubs, for instance, may run sporting activities before they sit down and do the homework. It is the way you engage. It is basic 101 youth work in some ways – how you bring young people in and engage them, make them want to come back again. A lot of these clubs, like Richard says, run on the smell of an oily rag – $8000 a year, $10,000, $15,000. That pays for catering, because you need to feed the young people; you need to buy stationery, you know, a whole lot of things. One, I think government needs to recognise the goal that is there, and secondly, how do we help to financially support those homework clubs? And I think that is something we would love you guys to take away and consider.

Lee TARLAMIS: Yes. And I think the homework clubs really do provide that sense of connection. Some people may not be able to go home straight after school because they have other complex issues within the

family, but this gives them a space to be able to go, to socialise, to make new contacts with other like-minded people but also even just to basically do their study. What I have also witnessed through them is that a lot of the people that have come through them that otherwise would have become disengaged and gotten involved in antisocial behaviour have actually gone on to then volunteer in the homework clubs or volunteer in the wider community as well because they have benefited from that and see the value in it. So it has actually helped them contribute better to society as well, having been through that themselves.

Soo-Lin QUEK: Yes, absolutely. You are absolutely right. I keep forgetting that too. Students who graduate come back again because they see what they can do for themselves and they want to pass it on. So we get that intergenerational support, and it is a building block for communities. If you talk about social cohesion and integration, that is one way that – I hear a lot of stories from refugee families and communities to say, 'We're so grateful in the sense that we've got a safe place to live in now. Australia's given us that.' And young people often say to us, 'We volunteer because we want to find ways to give back. How do we give back?' So there is a pool of goodwill to give back – how do we harness that? I do not want to go too much over time, but I have said some things do not cost money, but some things you just have to financially put in the basic infrastructure to allow it to kind of grow and flourish, because I think what we get back is more than the $8000 that they get a year in terms of supporting a homework group.

Richard FILER: Absolutely.

Lee TARLAMIS: And I will just add, in terms of that, when you talk about funding I think it is really important to recognise that funding local homework clubs is more effective because each of them are slightly different to the cohort that they deal with, and they do have that co-design element of the participants that are using it. It is really important that that is maintained so that you are not running a kind of standardised system across one size fits all, because that would impact on the effectiveness of a homework club. So I think it is important that the funding is provided for the homework clubs but that there is that kind of autonomy from the organisation to be able to modify it to the needs of the community.

I think it is also about recognising that the organisations that run them, as opposed to government, make the money go a lot further, again because you do have that voluntary involvement as well. There are people that are passionate about it, so they will put in that extra effort to make the money go further. A lot of the extra activities that end up being run out of the homework clubs are not actually funded but happen because of that additional voluntary component that comes in.

Soo-Lin QUEK: Yes, absolutely right.

Richard FILER: Could not agree more.

Lee TARLAMIS: Thanks, Chair.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Lee. I think you touched on a topic of Ms Bath's.

Melina BATH: This is fabulous. Thank you so much. So just help me unpack: 365 homework clubs across the state – and take these on notice, because it might not be something, but – are they in libraries, or are they in halls, or are they are in youth centres, or are they attached to schools at all? Paint that scenario for us, if you could. What is your funding from the state government? Did you say $80,000? I wrote that down.

Richard FILER: That is from something called the ARC grants. That is actually a set of grants – if I am right, and I might have to clarify this later in our actual budget. But it is funding that comes partly from the department of – actually it might have changed recently – partly from the government and partly from philanthropic donations as well. I think it is matched. Is that right?

Soo-Lin QUEK: It is matched. So we get funded through the Department of Education for both our refugee education support program and Learning Beyond the Bell, which is about homework clubs. Other than that funding, we have very clear deliverables under that funding agreement that we have to deliver, so there is not a lot of fat in it. Sometimes when there is a bit of what we call fat in the budget, we kind of put that aside –

Melina BATH: Lean fat, I think, probably, yes.

Soo-Lin QUEK: A bit of money; we did not run two workshops over there, so we saved some of that money. We have a partnership with the Australian – what is it called? ACF?

Richard FILER: ACF – Australian Communities Foundation.

Soo-Lin QUEK: Australian Communities Foundation. We partner with them to say, 'Here's $40,000 that we've got, a bit of surplus that we can use.' They partner with us by looking around for private families or for philanthropic trust funds to match what we have got. So the last financial year was $80,000, so they matched that. Then through that combined pool of money, they helped us to put in place a grants process where local councils or communities themselves can put in a very simple application to say, 'I want to run a homework club.' We always get oversubscribed. We get over hundreds of applications, we can only fund a small handful every year.

Melina BATH: So this is a demonstrated positive outcome in, I am saying, 365 communities, whether they be suburbs or towns or the like. It is run on the smell of an oily rag, if I am being honest here. You are putting your cap out to government saying 'Please, please give us some funding.' We read in the papers daily about concerns about multicultural youth, and I am not going to go down a big path there. But intervention and community building – provide us with what you think is a reasonable amount to even increase your program to government – we are going to make recommendations to government – because this to me seems like a no-brainer, and you are not wasting a cent of your pennies. So you can answer to that or nod in agreement or say no or 'I don't know.'

Soo-Lin QUEK: I can tell you right here, off the top of my head – and Richard, you will have the numbers off the top of your head – homework clubs run out of local community halls, they run out of churches, they run out of local council facilities. Sometimes local councils come in and say, 'Yes, we can provide a room for you.' They run out of schools, after-hours. In general, roughly, Richard, what is the proportion of homework clubs that are run out of schools as opposed to being run in community facilities?

Richard FILER: Off the top of my head, I do not know. We can try and take those on notice.

Melina BATH: That is okay.

Richard FILER: But what I would say is, given the tight financial situation so many homework clubs are in, I believe CMY is the only organisation that provides sector-wide support. We have been advocating for some time to view it as a sector that sits alongside and in partnership with schools. There is not accurate and helpful data, that is one of the things that we are desperately trying to do all the time. When we can shave off 0.2 of an afternoon from someone's time, I can say, 'Hey, can you call all the homework clubs we know and find out when they run?' That is one of the things that we are trying to do and trying to advocate for. So I can take that on notice and see what data we can give you.

Melina BATH: That is fine.

Soo-Lin QUEK: If I was to put in a –

Melina BATH: Funding.

Soo-Lin QUEK: bid right here and now with a figure plucked out – in terms of the requests we get to run homework clubs locally, and I know it sounds a lot, but I do not think it is for what we get – I would say another million dollars to go into supporting these homework clubs from Warrnambool right across to Melton and to the other end of Victoria. The beauty of these homework clubs is they are not just for multicultural students. We get local students who are white Anglo students also coming into the homework clubs for support.

Melina BATH: You are not judgemental.

Soo-Lin QUEK: No.

Melina BATH: You accept all people who need it.

Soo-Lin QUEK: So I think you are right, Melina: these are gold. This is gold that is about to disappear if we do not hold it up somehow to keep it going. I will tell you exactly why CMY was funded to support homework

clubs across Victoria. It is because homework clubs did exist before we came along. What happened was the local pastor at a church down the road was running a homework club, and someone else who was an ex-teacher was running another homework club and a father who was a taxi driver was running another homework club.

Melina BATH: You were a solution waiting to happen, weren't you?

Soo-Lin QUEK: The schools did not want to refer students to the homework clubs, because they were saying they were teaching them how to do, let us say, maths homework in a very odd way – 'It is not according to how our standards are in how we teach and learn math.'

Melina BATH: And that was my other question. I had 'relationship between schools and homework clubs', because clearly if there is a unifying friendship there and a respect there, that promotes it. Because you do not want students going back and saying, 'No, my homework tutor said that you're doing it all wrong.' And there are different ages. If you have got an older person, when they teach how to subtract, it is a different way. So there has to be that respectful improvement, not negating. I want to understand: is that something that you can speak to?

Soo-Lin QUEK: That is our role – to bring in some standards so that schools feel confident and can trust that if they refer students to the homework club down the road, that that is a referral they can trust.

Melina BATH: It is a symbiotic relationship.

Soo-Lin QUEK: It is symbiotic. We run training for homework clubs in terms of how they run homework clubs – what they need to have, some standards and skills that they need to have in there. We monitor it so that schools and students can feel that they are getting the best support that they can get. It is not just, 'Oh, my dad, who happens to be good at maths, is running the maths homework club.'

Melina BATH: Thank you. Okay. I am using up too much time.

The CHAIR: No, thank you. These are important questions.

Richard FILER: I can give you a concrete example. We can send you some case studies, if you like, of various homework clubs.

Melina BATH: Thank you.

The CHAIR: That would be great. There are more questions coming; do not worry, Richard.

Richard FILER: Please.

Richard WELCH: Thank you, Chair, and congratulations, guys, on the work. I have a couple of questions that sort of segue nicely from that. If you got that million dollars, what do you see as being the main obstacles to scaling what you do? Where will you hit scaling issues? How many staff do you have to begin with and things like that? Where will you start to hit the barriers, and how do you see you are going to jump over those?

Soo-Lin QUEK: I think if we got a million dollars, we would go through a process. Like Lee was saying, we do not want to just fund homework clubs and set up a cookie cutter, one size fits all. We would go through a process and scale up, a grants process so that people can apply. I think we have already got the infrastructure in place at the moment, so adding another million into the bucket that we have with that partnership with the Australian Communities Foundation, would not add too much more than what we are already doing, because we have got the structure and the processes and systems in place. What we do not have is the actual funding to give homework clubs. We are so oversubscribed in terms of clubs applying for money. I think putting in another million dollars would just grow our homework club sector. But also I think in terms of scaling up, we have got the bare bones ready to scale up if we need to. So the money would not go too much into paying for, you know, 20 additional staff. We have got the staff in there that we can use. Maybe we need a bit more, half a day here and half a day there, but it is not, you know, 100 staff that we would need to roll out.

Richard WELCH: And that sort of benchmark of $8000 that you give – what is that for? What do they spend that on? What is the financial need there that you are addressing in that?

Soo-Lin QUEK: Richard, jump in here. For a lot of homework clubs, not all, when they do get the funding from us, it is to pay for a part-time, even if it is just half a day a week, person to coordinate: you know, book a venue, organise the lunches, organise stationery and most of all do a call-out to recruit and support volunteer tutors to come to the homework clubs, because tutors, even though they are volunteer tutors – and you are a volunteer tutor – do not just turn up by happenstance. You have got to kind of motivate them to come, keep them coming back, do a lot of that work locally to build your volunteer tutor pool.

Richard WELCH: It needs a lot of passion, doesn't it, and commitment to do it.

Soo-Lin QUEK: It does need time and passion.

Richard WELCH: Yes. And you would expect that to last 12 months?

Soo-Lin QUEK: They do a lot of pro bono work in that too.

Richard WELCH: I bet. Like you say, that is the very thin end of it.

Richard FILER: And it depends entirely on the program as well. As Soo-Lin was saying, the programs look so different, but to give just again a real-world example, my own homework club, to give an insight, runs on Mondays and Wednesdays from 5:30 to 7, and it is accessed by a few dozen kids, and it has two different elements – an early childhood literacy program and then a standard homework tutoring. And for the volunteers, we do not teach – we support kids with their homework. If you have ever had the value of just someone sitting next to you while you do your homework, that is what we do. What was my homework club coordinator, who probably works some ludicrous amount of time and is paid for maybe 0.1 of a tiny role – excited about spending money on? She bought a printer recently. The program has been running for I do not know how many years, and she was like, 'We got a printer! That is what we got! Amazing!' So much of it goes to pencils, apples and paper. And hopefully some homework sheets, that is the other big one – homework sheet books. I will not tell you if they are illegally copied or not – that is off the record, never asked.

Richard WELCH: Slightly different, but something that has been absolutely a learning curve for me is that in Australia we have obviously had a rich and successful migrant program and integration program, but certainly in my case I did not appreciate anywhere near enough how different a refugee arrival is to a general migration and the challenges of that. A recent learning for me is about the integration of a refugee, especially from a violent place and the relationships with government and all those things. Is it time, or what do you think these programs should actually really genuinely reflect. It is not our multicultural community – it is our multicultural community and of course the refugees are part of our multicultural family, but they have got very, very distinctive needs, I feel, from a regular migration story.

Soo-Lin QUEK: Absolutely, and a lot of the young people, you are right, have got very different learning needs. They may have maybe one or two years of formal education, and the rest of the time it is on the run or living in refugee camps where they may not have had continuous education. So they land in Australia, are put into year 7, and instantly go, 'Oh, my God, how do I cope with studies at year 7?' Homework clubs, I think, are one answer, one really good solution for them. I think a whole lot of things – and RESP does that – a whole lot of structures and things can be put in place in schools to support refugee students who have come through that very different journey to education. And you know, we look at someone and you think, 'Oh, my God, how do you cope?' I look at some of them and some of the young people that we work with – amazing resilience and determination, because our parents sacrifice everything to get us here, and it is determination. The parents would say education for them – not just migrant students, I think a lot of refugee families are going, 'This is our way out of poverty,' or, 'We sacrificed everything, we left and lost everything, and you are our future,' and education is a road to that.

Richard WELCH: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thanks, Richard. Joe.

Joe McCRACKEN:No, I think time is up. I just want to congratulate you on the work that you do, and you are obviously filling the gap that is in place that the government is not filling at the moment, so well done to you.

Soo-Lin QUEK: Thank you.

Joe McCRACKEN: We really appreciate that. My area that I represent is Melton as well, and I know that you mentioned that a few times.

Soo-Lin QUEK: Yes.

Joe McCRACKEN: I know of the impact that you have in the community because I see it every day in the faces of the young people I work with, so well done and congratulations.

Soo-Lin QUEK: Thank you.

Richard FILER: Thank you so much.

Soo-Lin QUEK: Thank you for your time.

The CHAIR: Just a few more questions for you. Dr Heath, are you still there? Do you want to ask some questions? No? Moira, I know you want to ask some questions.

Moira DEEMING: Sorry, Joe. I have just really enjoyed listening to you. In my maiden speech I brought up an experience I had with a child who had come from a war-torn background. It really impacted me. He struck me as having PTSD, and he was not getting care. I would just assume that every kid and every adult really that comes from a war-torn background would have that kind of thing. Even to a certain extent just changing countries must be traumatic. But what I put to one of the other groups that came was – they were talking about kids with autism, and one of the things that I did that was successful was explaining to the other kids about autism and why they are reacting strangely because of the lack of facial expressions, things like that. I know that you have just given a figure on money, but could you also please give a figure and a time line on some other resources in terms of how to help other kids understand what it must be like for a kid from a war-torn background, something like that? Also, just on that resource you were talking about in terms of when we are doing that data collection in schools – an actual resource, the exact checklist, the flow chart you were talking about – let us get that paid for, let us get that done. If you can just provide more specifics on what you would need for that, that would be great.

Richard FILER: I can probably speak to this quite well.

Moira DEEMING: You can take it on notice if you want.

Richard FILER: I can absolutely take it on notice if that is easier for you. Is that better?

Moira DEEMING: I do not mind. It would be great to recommend it.

Richard FILER: The easiest way I think to explain it would be through the refugee education support program, and the one thing that I would say to take away from it is it is complex. We are trying to support schools who are already very pressured with a complicated thing. The refugee education support program works over two years and across five different sections of the school, one at a time, providing professional learning for staff and then also secondary consults. A staff member can call up and say, 'How do I deal with this?' And we can say, 'Here's some advice.' We are funded to do that. That has recently actually been expanded, and we are really grateful for that. We are working with I think up to 50 schools – at the moment we have got 33 – over the next two years, and then we are implementing a one-year program for some schools that have slightly different needs next year. That is really exciting, and that is really only possible with the support from the Department of Education, who fund the refugee education support program and Learning Beyond the Bell.

We recognise that it is not just one thing. It is not being able to just say, 'Here's how you do it. Goodbye,' but instead saying, 'You've got a thing that your school needs to do, so how do we support your school over a substantial amount of time so you can actually embed practices that change and have a whole-of-school approach,' which you have probably heard a lot about for the past couple of days, 'to supporting your students and families who come from refugee backgrounds.' Because for some schools it is a lot of their students, and for other schools it is a very small number. Many of those interventions have to be context specific, so that is I think what we are trying to do.

Moira DEEMING: But in terms of getting the data, let us just standardise that for you guys.

Richard FILER: We would love that.

The CHAIR: Soo-Lin and Richard, thank you so much for coming in. As I said before, I did not have this program when I was growing up, but I think it is invaluable and what you do is fantastic. On this committee it is recognised what you have done. I think the education department has recognised it. That is why you are here and the grants have been given to you. I think moving forward, to better the program and to improve it, certain recommendations we will look forward to, as Ms Bath has mentioned. I hope you have continued success to support the community. Well done. Thank you very much for coming in.

Witnesses withdrew.