

TRANSCRIPT

LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL LEGAL AND SOCIAL ISSUES COMMITTEE

Inquiry into the State Education System in Victoria

Melbourne – Wednesday 8 May 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

Richard Welch

WITNESSES

Genevieve Sheppard, Senior Policy Adviser, Respectful Relationships Education;

Cara Gleeson, Director, Prevention in Action, Our Watch; and

Felicity Marlowe, Director, Rainbow Families, Switchboard Victoria.

The CHAIR: Welcome back to the Inquiry into the State Education System in Victoria. Joining us for this session are Felicity, Cara and Genevieve.

Before continuing, I will quickly introduce the panel to our guests: I am Trung Luu, Chair of the committee. We have Deputy Chair Ryan Batchelor, Mr Aiv Puglielli, Ms Melina Bath, Mr Joe McCracken and Mrs Moira Deeming, and we have Mr Michael Galea and Dr Renee Heath with us on Zoom as well.

Before continuing, I would just like to inform you of this information. 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 provided 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 things, those comments may not be protected by this privilege. Any deliberately false evidence or misleading of the committee may be considered a contempt of Parliament.

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

Just for the Hansard record, please state your full name and the organisations you are representing today.

Felicity MARLOWE: Hi. Thank you. My name is Flis Marlowe. I use they/them pronouns. I am from Rainbow Families at Switchboard.

The CHAIR: Hi, Felicity.

Cara GLEESON: Hi. I am Cara Gleeson. I use she/her pronouns, and I am from Our Watch.

Genevieve SHEPPARD: And I am Genevieve Sheppard, she/her pronouns, and I am from Our Watch as well.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Welcome, ladies, to this lovely session. I would like to quickly invite you to make a short opening statement. Because we want to allow time for the committee to ask questions, feel free to make a quick, short opening statement.

Felicity MARLOWE: Lovely. Thank you. I just wanted to let you know that I am a parent of three children. I have also been an education support staff member, doing student wellbeing in a number of high schools over the last couple of years, and I am a trained teacher. Like it was said in the previous one, I did suffer some burnout from doing student wellbeing during COVID, so I no longer work in that field at the moment.

What I think is really important is that 20 years ago rainbow families were fighting campaigns to be recognised on birth certificates and to have access to IVF and other areas of support. When we are thinking of rainbow families, I am talking about LGBTQIA+ parents and carers and our children. We had three slogans at that time 20 years ago. We talked about 'Love makes a family' and we talked about 'Australian families come in all different shapes and sizes', but one of the ones that was really important and continues to resonate is 'The law needs to catch up with the reality of our children's lives'. So here today my presentation is going to focus primarily on the wellbeing component of FISO 2.0 as part of this inquiry and consider the issues that our children face when we think about being reflected in a curriculum – reflected in terms of their lived experience, their family diversity, their needs, their own sexualities and genders – and how we create a wellbeing environment in our school communities from early childhood to secondary that is inclusive, that is welcoming, that is diverse and that has a curriculum, has books and has teaching staff.

Cara GLEESON: Thanks. I will jump in if I can. Thank you so much. Our Watch is really grateful for the opportunity to provide evidence as part of this committee's inquiry. Our Watch is the national leader in primary prevention of violence against women and their children in Australia. We are guided by our national framework, *Change the Story*, and we work at all levels of our society to address the deeply entrenched underlying drivers of violence against women, especially those stemming from gender inequality.

We recognise and note that the committee is investigating a broad range of topics around the trends in relation to the education system, but we want to specifically look at Respectful Relationships education and the role there as well. We have extensive experience in Respectful Relationships education, or RRE, and working with the Victorian government over a number of years – and we really commend the announcement of the continuation of that funding yesterday. We really look forward to answering questions and discussing the evidence based in this area.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Genevieve?

Genevieve SHEPPARD: No, that is fine. Thank you.

The CHAIR: So we will quickly start. Ms Bath, if you would like to start off, please.

Melina BATH: Thank you very much. Just reading the bio, Our Watch is:

... an independent, not for profit organisation –
that was going to be one of my questions –

established by the Commonwealth and Victorian Governments in 2013.

I think we have been living under a toadstool if we have not been recognising what has been happening in this state in terms of violence against women and just the tragedy of it all and the impact that that has not only on the person who is no longer with us but also the ripple effect on those families.

I am interested in developments from 2013 to now. How is that Respectful Relationships education working in our state schools? What is working well? What do you feel is not working? What could be improved? And I know you have got a number of recommendations there that you can speak to, but kind of drill down in the classroom or across schools – what is working?

Cara GLEESON: I might just open up and then pass to my colleague Gen if that is all right. I think you are right; the significant and tragic deaths and murders that we have had in Victoria and across Australia are the tip of the iceberg of the violence and discrimination that women and people are experiencing across Australia. Respectful Relationships education is one of the most powerful tools that we have to be able to address what drives violence against women and gender-based violence. I will pass over to Gen to talk about more.

Genevieve SHEPPARD: In partnership with the Victorian government, Our Watch led a pilot in 2014–15 into this work in secondary schools. We then led a pilot in primary schools doing Respectful Relationships education in Queensland and Victoria. From there we had the Royal Commission into Family Violence in Victoria – and again we commend the Victorian government on picking up all of those recommendations, one of those being mandating the teaching of Respectful Relationships education in Victoria. Victoria is leading the country nationally in this work. One of the biggest enabling factors in Victoria was the policy platform – so the mandating of Respectful Relationships education – and then the development of a Respectful Relationships or primary prevention workforce. That looks like 34 professionals working across Victoria supporting schools – every single school. There are 1950 currently working in this space at the moment to implement a whole-school approach. In addition to that, we also have the development of specific teaching and learning materials, the four Rs, or rights, resilience and respectful relationships education.

It is really important to note here that Respectful Relationships education is more than just the curriculum. It is a whole-of-school approach, so it looks at the ecosystem of the school. So yes, we can teach those things to our young people about gender equality, respect and inclusion, but we need to role model that within the education system. So what does that look like at our policy level? What does that look like for our leaders? What does leadership look like? What does that mean for the language we use across the school? What does that mean for how we engage parents and how we support those who have experienced violence?

I would say in Victoria what is working well, again, is the continued commitment since the 2016–17 budget to now, with an investment of, with yesterday's investment, \$120 million in Respectful Relationship education. That investment is significant and is enabling the work to happen. One of the challenges, which I think the union spoke to earlier, is teacher burnout. This is a lot of work to understand what respectful relationships are and how we address that within our school culture. The work that we do there, that workforce, enables the schools to do that work, to be able to take it and embed it within the school system. So one of the things we need to be thinking about there is how to support the teachers to not just teach the specific curriculum but what does gender equality look like in maths, what does gender equality look like in science? How do I teach when I am reading a book? How do I talk to young people about the language in that book? It is about taking it across the whole curriculum as well, so it is a really big piece about supporting our teachers and supporting our school leaders in a space that we know is receiving quite a bit of backlash and resistance to this work. How do we support our leaders as we have seen principals in the last couple of weeks in Victoria stand up and really lead in this space?

Melina BATH: Thank you. I have got more questions, but I will defer to the buzzer.

The CHAIR: Sorry, we are short on time. Deputy Chair.

Ryan BATCHELOR: Thanks, Chair. Flis, I might start with you. There have been pretty disturbing scenes in Sydney overnight, where books about same-sex parenting have been banned from a library. Clearly the progress we hope we are making is not universal. I am wondering if you have, for the benefit of this inquiry, perspectives for us on why it is important that children from same-sex families are supported in our schools and what happens to those students and for those students when they are made to feel that their families are being singled out for attack and abuse?

Felicity MARLOWE: Thank you. Yes, people may not be aware, but Cumberland council voted to remove books depicting same-sex parents from their region's libraries last week, and it has been widely reported in the *Guardian*, the ABC and online that that has occurred and is getting quite a bit of backlash from New South Wales political classes and others. I think it is really important because a distressed child, a child that does not see themselves reflected and included in the school environment, in the school curriculum, cannot learn. An emotional dysregulated child who cannot focus, who is upset, who fears being bullied or harassed in their class or their playground, cannot learn. And when young people cannot learn, they cannot achieve and they cannot thrive and be the best they can be in their school environment. They have 13 years of school education. If we start at a primary setting level and they do not see books in the library representing them and they do not see days celebrated that talk about the diversity of Australian families, that is what we are talking about. When we think about LGBTIQ+ children and their families, we are talking about children who were conceived through IVF, who may have been adopted or where their families were created through surrogacy. We are talking about families that have one, two, three or more parents and carers that look after them, co-parents as well, who have always lived across one, two or three homes. These children need to see their lives reflected. They are here. We have laws in every state and territory that allow queer and trans people to access fertility treatment and fertility preservation. We have laws that allow birth certificates to reflect who the parents are, not necessarily using the words 'mother' or 'father', but who the legal parents of these children are. Yet we often see the school curriculum not reflecting the reality of these children's lives.

Any child would tell you, when you can acknowledge and see yourself represented, it makes you feel like you are part of that group, part of that team. We do the same when we think about young people with disabilities, we do the same when we particularly think about race, religion and of course the fabulous focus we have through our education system with our First Nations communities. There is no reason not to also include issues, topics, debates, celebrations, posters and books that do depict diverse families, and those diverse families will also reflect rainbow families. I think that is the really crucial part of any education system, that it must accommodate the lived experience of the community at that time. It cannot be stuck back in the 80s or stuck back in the 50s – we need to move forward, it is 2024. We also need to think, what are the impacts of a particular exclusion from a curriculum on the health and wellbeing of our children? I know from my own experience, my 20 years worth of advocacy with rainbow families across Victoria and nationally, seeing yourself reflected and your family reflected makes a huge difference to young people's health and wellbeing.

Ryan BATCHELOR: Thank you. Just briefly, for Genevieve or Cara, on Respectful Relationships, obviously the program has been in place for a while now. What more do you think we need to do to improve the effectiveness of what the program is designed to try and achieve with understanding in our schools?

Cara GLEESON: I think we need to, firstly, give it time and support. This is the first time that we have seen a continuation of resourcing and support at the scale that is happening in Victoria – it is internationally world-leading. The evaluations that we have available – whether from the pilots that Gen spoke about or other research activities that have been undertaken around the place – are saying that it is producing outcomes. It is changing children’s attitudes and their ideas, and young people’s attitudes and ideas, but it is also supporting teachers and having good outcomes for the classroom as well. So we need to continue doing that work. We also probably need to strengthen it, and I understand that there has been an update underway for the teaching and learning curriculum, and we really welcome for that to be rolled out.

I do just also want to support what Flis said as well: while we are speaking specifically about violence against women, Our Watch’s vision is for violence not to be taking place in our community. We recognise the structural inequality and discrimination that has been taking place, in particular for LGBTIQ people at this point in time. We see Respectful Relationships as a good tool, just as Flis was talking about before about schools being a good tool for every child to be able to see their family reflected and supported to learn.

Genevieve SHEPPARD: I think the other point on that is – and it is probably getting quite technical – when we talk about the curriculum materials, there are eight topics. One to six are social and emotional learning and seven to eight are around gender and identity and positive gender relations. What we know is happening a little bit in Victoria at the moment is there is a reluctance to engage in teaching around those particular topics. That is because of what we are seeing in broader society, not necessarily the views of the teacher or the school leader, but there is a real fear, whether that be perceived or actual, of backlash from the community about this work within schools. We have amazing leaders and teachers standing up and doing this work, but we have also got to then be supporting our teachers to have those conversations and to know that they feel that their work is grounded in evidence and that they will be supported by the Department of Education.

We know principals’ inboxes are full, with things from car parking to school classroom lists to all the big issues, but we also do not want to be adding to that load. So how do we support our teachers and leaders? I think there is a real piece around principals as leaders of cultural change in this space, and it is giving them the skills and knowledge to understand what that means as a leader in this space and how they support their staff to do it.

I think there are opportunities for us to think upscale a little bit around this too. Thinking about the education union speaking earlier around initial teacher education, if this work can be embedded with our preservice teachers, and it is something that is core business of what I learn – I was a teacher previously – through my education degree, I come out as a teacher who already has an awareness and an understanding of gender equality and respect and inclusion and what that looks like in everyday practice. It becomes part of my core business. It is not something that we then need to be adding onto and adding onto a load. We are certainly not advocating for adding to teachers’ loads. It is about supporting them, and we are doing this through the package, the funding at the moment, but how do we support those teachers, how do we engage parents and how do we really address that backlash and resistance and support schools to do this work really well?

Ryan BATCHELOR: Thanks, Genevieve.

The CHAIR: Mr Puglielli?

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Thank you, Chair. Thank you all for appearing before us today and for the work that you do. I might start with you, Flis. Just to follow on from the previous line of questioning, if you could name two things – and I am sure there are many more than two – what do you think are the top two things that we could see change in our schools or improve in our schools that would better make them more supportive and inclusive of LGBTQIA+ students, particularly trans and gender-diverse students?

Felicity MARLOWE: Thanks for your question. Two things, Aiv – all right. I will just have to think for a moment to narrow my list to two things.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Or you could just go to the top of the list and work your way down if that works.

Felicity MARLOWE: All of the recommendations from Rainbow Families and Switchboard are on pages 11 and 12, so you will be able to see those specifically. I think absolutely enhancing and improving things within the health and PE curriculum, which is the Respectful Relationships curricula being included as well as sexuality education that is inclusive, because we want all of our young people – LGBTIQ+ young people, particularly trans and gender-diverse young people, but also young people who have come from families where there have been a myriad of ways that their family lives or was created – reflected in the curriculum so it is no longer a taboo or a stigma to use IVF, to be adopted, to have your family created through surrogacy or to have two mums or a trans parent, for example. I think it is consolidating those wins. I also acknowledge how great it is: I have taught the RR curricula to students, so I think it is really important to consolidate that. Continue the funding and enhance it, have it futureproofed around the curriculum being updated to ensure we are keeping up to date with the young people, where they are at. I am always out of the loop; I always get the language wrong.

I think the second thing is we need systemic change from the government level all the way down to the early education sector, to the primary school sector. We need systemic change that remembers that LGBTIQ+ people are members of families, that we are not isolated people, we are not lonely people – we have relationships, we have care responsibilities, we have people we nurture and love – and that we can be parents, co-parents and carers. Sometimes we fail to do that. We tend to just isolate LGBTIQ+ people as individuals and think of the wellbeing and health needs just for an individual, but many of us have families.

You know, I have got family of origin, I have got my own family that I need to care for and think about, and some of the ways we talk about trans and gender-diverse young people or the ways we talk about LGBTIQ+ people in general can have a huge negative impact on my children, two of whom are trans – one who dropped out of school and never went back after COVID, so should be in year 12 but is not; and one who is having a ‘school can’t’ experience at the moment around their mobility issues within a school community. And the reason my older child did not go is because they experienced trans bullying all the way through, and the first day they tried to go back, in year 11 last year – it was the first day – they experienced bullying and they were unable to return. They are too scared to go back to school. That is a really difficult thing as a parent to go through and a really distressing thing. So I think the impact of trans bullying, gender hate, anti-trans activism on these young people in their day-to-day reality – too scared to leave the house in some cases – needs to be acknowledged across the whole education system from the state government down.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Thank you, and –

Felicity MARLOWE: Just two small things! I mean, you did not say how big they had to be.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: But so, so crucial. Thank you. For the remainder of my time, on Respectful Relationships – obviously fantastic work that is going on – and speaking beyond the budget that was announced yesterday, what in the long term in terms of resourcing would you like to see for this program and this work going forward?

Genevieve SHEPPARD: I think, as Cara pointed out, it has continued and becomes part of core business of schools in the education system. We are not waiting for four-year budgets to see whether this work is continuing, so we need RRE to be part of the education system – it is not something we wait for. When we think about the new FISO 2.0 and student wellbeing being lifted up to the same level as literacy and numeracy, how do we incorporate RRE in that? One of the challenges at the moment for schools is there is no home for RRE, as in where we teach that curriculum. Schools are amazing places, and they find lots of opportunities to do this work, but at the moment, in primary school, this generally sits in the student wellbeing space. In secondary school often it sits with the HPE teacher, which is really quite problematic, because that means that the HPE teacher is the only person who holds that knowledge and works with those students, and might work with them once a week. So we are talking about maybe 12 sessions a year – maybe – if they are even doing that work. So the real piece, and building on what Flis said, is about structural change, so we need respectful relationships education just to be core business of the education department.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Mrs Deeming.

Moira DEEMING: Thank you. I have got a few questions – if I just put them out there and you guys decide amongst yourselves who to answer. I just wanted to start off by saying I really appreciate how you obviously care about kids, and what you said about kids who are unhappy and afraid about being bullied and how they cannot learn, that is absolutely true. I just wanted to push back a little bit on the way that you framed the resistance to this curriculum. I am one of the people – and a teacher and a parent – who has massive resistance to this program. It is not because I disagree with the fundamentals of what you are saying. I have for years and years been going around speaking to parents about this. They are not anti-trans, they are not anti-LGB – in fact the LGB union is a massive fan of mine because they agree with me. The fact is, from my perspective, personally and from what I have heard – and I would just like to hear your response back, because I have not had a chance to speak to someone like you about this – that I have found that the resistance is based on the disparity between parental expectations about what is going to be taught at what age and how. Parental consent and parental involvement – that is a big one. Age appropriateness – I find that is really out of step with my expectations as a teacher and a parent, and when I look at the curriculums down lower, I am very shocked. There are certain things that I do not want to be normalised in terms of other adults speaking to my children about, just because I want them to know that that is a discussion for basically their parents and a doctor or something like that. It is just extraordinarily young, in my opinion, and I think a lot of people agree with me on that.

I think what I was not expecting to see in the program was a lot of the erotic sexual content. I was not expecting to see that. In all of the sex ed that I had done before, it was not so erotic. I did not know why that was there. I thought it was inappropriate. I thought it was uncomfortable for my students in the classroom. Safeguarding policies – parents and teachers are worried about that for lesbians who feel that their sexuality is actually being erased by the idea of gender identity. That is not based on hate; that is just how they feel – girls obviously feeling like they do not have access to the privacy of a single-sex toilet or change room, or they are going to be put in a room. They do not hate the trans kids, they do not, but they just have this obvious desire for sex-based privacy. The teaching methodologies were something that stood out to me in particular, which introduced role-playing, and role-playing things that I found very shocking – and then this new concept of having to debrief the students because they might be traumatised by it. I will give you some examples from Respectful Relationships:

You are a 16-year-old girl who was sexually assaulted by her boyfriend. You do not want to see your boyfriend but he goes to the same school. You do not want to go to school and your grades are really suffering.

Like, it is an important topic, but I would not get kids to role-play that. As a kid who was in a classroom as one of those people who had been assaulted, I would have found that extraordinarily traumatic. Here is another one:

You are a 15-year-old boy who has been forced to give your uncle oral sex. You are so ashamed but are scared that he will hurt you if you say ...

I will not go on, but I find the role-playing aspect of that a massive and extraordinary change, and I worry about the kids for that. Also, even in the way that you guys were talking I noticed that there is no framework for expressing concerns about these programs that is not somehow anti-trans hate, and I think the students feel that as well, and the parents, and I think that is one of the key sources of resistance. Anyway, that is my point of view, and I just wanted to hear what you have to say about it – give you a chance. Thanks.

Felicity MARLOWE: Yes, absolutely. Part 8 of our recommendations talks about improving facilities funding and infrastructure funding for primary and secondary schools to absolutely do that – include single cubicle gender-neutral toilets for anyone in the school community, whether it is a visitor, a parent, a carer, a teacher, an education support class, an aide or a student, to have access to a change room or a toilet or a bathroom that is gender neutral, so they can make a choice about where they would like to go. Absolutely.

Moira DEEMING: Good. That is the issue.

Felicity MARLOWE: Change rooms are also incredibly important. Also, I find in many schools that I have worked in it becomes – the ad hoc thing – the disability toilet.

Moira DEEMING: Yes, exactly. They need to have their own.

Felicity MARLOWE: I do not approve of that, having a child who needs mobility aids to get around. They find that really difficult when they have to use the disability toilet and it is not appropriate.

If you looked at part 8, we talked about that we need all-gender single cubicle toilets and change rooms available to everybody, including sensory wellbeing rooms and other places. So we are thinking about the whole school community requiring places in the school they can regulate, be safe, go to the loo, refresh and get back into class.

In terms of things like some of the delivery: my experience of delivery, having worked in a number of schools and also having looked at teacher training over the last 20 years – that is primarily what I have done – is that you always have a group agreement. You always have an agreement and a safety warning, and that is discussed very thoroughly in front of the Respectful Relationships curricula where it talks about when you are sitting in a classroom of 16-year-olds, which would be year 10 students, which is the last year you really do triple R, or year 9 students, who are 14 or 15, you have a group agreement. You say: what are the things that we are going to be aware of? We are going to be aware of not judging each other and keeping what is said in the room. Who do you talk to if you are upset by the content? What do you do if you want to leave the room because you are upset? How do you indicate that to the teacher? Have you got a wellbeing person? We always had a wellbeing person attend or be available when these curriculums were being taught in year 9 or 10 classes or other classes.

So I think some of the safety concerns are dealt with because this model allows it to be a teacher who has become potentially a trusted adult or a person that the child knows pretty well, who is seen around the school. They are teaching the curriculum; it is embedded within the school community. It is not an external provider coming in for a day, doing their thing and leaving. It is actually all about embedding that care and concern into the school, because we know when a child has a trusted adult – and child safe safety standards talk about this constantly – they can talk to, they are more likely to disclose sexual assault or other issues because it is someone maybe outside their family they feel confident will support them. That is what a teacher is showing when they set up a group agreement, they talk about the parameters in which discussions will happen and they deliver this material with kindness and care. So I think that hopefully responds to some of the day-to-day concerns I would see as a parent but also as someone who has worked in this field previously.

I just wanted to push back also a little bit about the LGB Alliance. They are, I think, who you were talking about who you work with, Moira, or who you said were fans of yours. They are an imported organisation that is in Australia now. LGB literally just means lesbian, gay, bisexual. They are anti-trans. If you look at their website and other materials, they are not supportive of gender-affirming care that saves the lives of our children and our older trans community. It is just really important, when we talk about the different groups, that we are very clear about the aims of these groups and how they are articulating their support or lack of support for certain social changes at the moment. That would be the same with this curriculum.

I think parental expectations are really important. I have sat on my primary school's education policy committee and student council. I think they are really important to get engaged in your kid's education, and I was the chair of the policy committee for four years, so I have a lot to do with the PAL, or the policy advisory library that all teachers and school staff can access, as well as families. You can read there the expectations you would have on sexuality education, LGBTIQ+ support and complaints, which parents are welcome to do – they have introduced in secondary school different levels of complaint systems post-COVID as well for parents and carers to make about the principal or about the school curriculum or anything like that. So there are already levers and opportunities for anyone with a complaint about a curriculum to put that in writing and have that addressed. I think it is incredibly important to be able to do that. There is Parents Victoria, there is Parentline, there are other support mechanisms that parents and carers can use to ascertain what their rights and responsibilities are and what actions they can take. I do think that parents have that right and responsibility and I approve of that being the case. So I hope that just maybe reflects to the rest of the committee some of the concerns that Ms Deeming was raising, and those would be my responses. I am happy to give more responses in writing later.

Moira DEEMING: Just one more thing, Trung, if you do not mind, just very quickly.

Cara GLEESON: Would it be all right if I –

Moira DEEMING: Do you want to speak too?

Cara GLEESON: Yes, if I can, just quickly.

Moira DEEMING: Absolutely.

Cara GLEESON: We just really agree. I know Gen earlier was talking about a whole-school approach, and that needs to include community and parent expectations and engagement. When it is done well, and we have seen it done well in some Victorian schools through the Respectful Relationships education program, there is an engagement and it is a discourse between the parents, the teachers, the children and the broader community as well. That is really, really important. Age appropriateness I do think is really important. My understanding of the current four Rs is that it is about best practice and age appropriateness. Those examples that you read out I am not familiar with, and it would be good to hear where they are from.

Moira DEEMING: They are from the actual curriculum.

Cara GLEESON: Okay. We can have a look at that, because we do trust the teachers and the experts that have come up with this work to be looking at what is in the room, who is in the room and how they can be supported. I think that that is why it is so critical that Respectful Relationships education is delivered as part of the education system. It is not some stranger coming in for an hour and talking about this; it is people that have that longstanding relationship with families and students. I think that that echoes what Flis was saying before as well. It is a safety –

The CHAIR: I know Moira has another question. I am happy for you to ask some quick questions and be put on notice. I am quite happy, because a few other members want to ask questions. Please do submit those answers. I am sure you have written those questions down, so Moira, if you just want to give them a couple of questions.

Moira DEEMING: Yes, and I am happy to give you the page numbers of what I was reading out.

Cara GLEESON: Yes, that would be great. Thank you.

Moira DEEMING: I just want to push back again on the idea of being anti-trans for not supporting trans-affirming care for minors, especially in light of the Cass review that has just come out. We can all disagree about this, but the people who disagree about it do so out of care for children just as much as you agree with it because you care for children. I think that is one of the very, very biggest problems in this whole sphere, that everyone is demonising everybody else. But I can see you care for children. That is undeniable. I do as well. I just genuinely disagree, that is all. It is not anti-trans. I am open to persuasion; I just cannot see it, and I think that is one of the issues. But anyway, thank you so much for your time, and I appreciate you responding to my questions – actually responding to them and taking them seriously. I do appreciate that. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Moira. Just with those questions, I know there are quite a few questions – please do submit those answers as well.

Cara GLEESON: Thank you. We will.

The CHAIR: Michael, over to you.

Michael GALEA: Thank you, Chair. Thank you for joining us today and for the work that you do. I note from your submission that you stated that the program is nation-leading – indeed I think you mentioned world-leading before as well. Particularly just in light of some of the previous questions, I am keen to hear from you why the program has been developed in the evidence-based way that it has, some of the evidence that has formed that, and also some of the outcomes that you have seen and been able to show through the program.

Genevieve SHEPPARD: Thanks, Michael. If you are talking about the curriculum component of it, that is separate to what we are talking about with the evidence base for Respectful Relationships education. That has been developed based on international and national evidence over the last 30, 40 or 50 years in this space. This is not new work. We are not bringing anything new. We are taking the evidence base that people have been working in in Victoria, across the country and internationally and bringing it together, and we know that this is how a whole-of-school approach is the best way for this to work, because it has to be reinforced within the culture we live in. It has to be reinforced in the community we live in. It has to be reinforced in the household we live in. The evidence base for that is – I am happy to send you a list, Michael, but it is about four pages long. I am happy to take that on notice and send that through to you and provide some of the evidence base for that there for you, if that is useful.

Michael GALEA: Yes, terrific. I guess particularly in terms of the outcomes that you are seeing, though, I would be really keen to know a little bit more about it, particularly with student behaviours. I know you are a very important part of that, but you are one part, and there are other factors, positive and negative. There are a number of external forces such as very disturbed people overseas – Andrew Tate, for one. There are some very negative things that a lot of young men and young students are exposed to. I know that you have got a lot of headwinds against you as well, but can you talk to me about how you combat some of that, and some of the outcomes that you see through the program?

Genevieve SHEPPARD: Yes. Great question, Michael. It is an ever challenging world in this space for our schools and for our teachers, and we recognise that. I think Flis spoke to that need to be constantly up to date in being able to talk to that work. When we talk about primary prevention, which is what Respectful Relationships is – a primary prevention initiative to prevent gender-based violence – to prevent gender-based violence is a long-term game. So we are talking about short-, medium- and long-term outcomes that we are looking for within Respectful Relationships education. In the short term and, through the pilots, the short- and medium-term outcomes that we are seeing through respectful relationships education are that increased student knowledge and positive attitudes towards and confidence in discussing issues around gender-based violence.

We know there is a decreased student adherence to gender-stereotypical attitudes and occupations. When we worked with, in the pilot, grade 1 and 2 students, for example, we talked to them and did some evaluation beforehand about, ‘What jobs could you do when you go up? What activities could you do in the playground? What could you play with?’ Then we implemented the respectful relationships education curriculum over a term, so a 12-week period, and we re-evaluated those young people. Really interestingly we saw a real shift in their gendered attitudes, particularly amongst our young boys. They saw it was more acceptable and okay for them to play with dollhouses. They saw that it was okay if they wanted to grow up and be a florist. So we know that when we do this work and we do it with care, we are having a real impact on how children see themselves and how they see themselves in the future.

Improved student–teacher relationships – as Flis just spoke about, when this work is done and hence why it is a long process, that safe space for young people is fundamental to anything a teacher does in a classroom regardless of the work. Our safe spaces in our classrooms are fundamental, and the relationship they build through young people and becoming a trusted adult, when they can have these discussions about consent or about issues that happen in their daily life with their teacher, we know is improving their relationship with teachers, which improves that behaviour relationship within the classroom. So we need to continue to do that work and to build those relationships and to be working alongside the evidence base and building it, because we know that it is having an impact. But we need to be thinking about short-, medium- and long-term gains and how we are getting there.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Thank you, Michael.

Michael GALEA: Thank you. There is much more I could ask, again, but my time is up, so thanks very much.

The CHAIR: Joe, do you have a quick question?

Joe McCRACKEN: Yes, thank you. It has been an interesting discussion here. There is a lot to talk about. In 4 minutes I do not think we could do it justice, let alone in 4 hours. I come to this conversation having been a teacher as well, and I am a gay man. I find a lot of the stuff that is spoken about in this space a little bit confronting given my experience, but my real concern is that there is a curriculum that is in schools that lacks, probably, parent consent because of the age-inappropriateness of some of the content. You guys obviously have had some experience with some pushback on that. Can you talk about some of the issues that have been raised and how you intend to deal with that?

Cara GLEESON: I can talk in general terms. I am not a previous teacher, unlike many people around the table, so I will just put that caveat there. Look, age appropriateness is just really, really critical. I think that what Gen was just talking about, the work we did with grade 1 and grade 2 children, was really about who you want to be, how you see yourself, how your relationships are with your friends, your teachers. It was not content that was appropriate for a 16- or 17-year-old. Just like we teach a different style of maths to six- and seven-year-olds, we need to teach a different style of respectful relationships education to the right age group.

I know in a lot of the work there is general teaching and learning, but then there is also the trust within the teacher to be able to adapt to who is in the room and what they need in that particular space. I think that is why teacher support and teacher professional development are really, really critical. I do think when we have seen it done best – and Gen might be able to talk about other examples with more particulars – parents are a part of the solution. We are around the table. We are talking about these things.

I have worked with some parents who have said that this has just been fantastic: ‘I have seen a change in my child at home. The way that they interact with their siblings and the respect and intention that they have in their behaviour are really important.’ I think it is just about trying not to create any division. It is not about either/or; it is about all of us working together, and that is the only way that I think we will be able to combat the big waves that are happening through the Andrew Tates and the online world to be able to support our young people to grow into healthy human beings.

Joe McCracken: Do parents have the ability to have their child opt out of this program in school?

Cara Gleeson: I do not know the technicalities of that one.

Genevieve Sheppard: I do. They can. We have not seen any students to date, that I am aware of, opt out of the work, because fundamentally when we are talking about gender inequality every parent wants their child to be able to be sure that they live in a gender-equitable world. I think that is the framing, and it can get taken in other spaces, and I think we need to be really clear about the key messages about what the work is that we are trying to do in this space. And I would push back on the age appropriateness – this curriculum is grounded in evidence; it is grounded in age appropriateness. It looks at all the national and international research. The authors from Melbourne University and Deakin University who have written this curriculum and the soon-to-be newly released one have worked for 30 to 40 years in this space. It is not something that has just simply been cooked up. When we are talking about working with young people, the topic is ‘Labels are for jars, not people’. That is how we talk about it with five- and six-year-olds. When we talk about consent, we do not use the word ‘consent’. We are talking about ‘Can I please borrow your backpack? Can I borrow it again next time?’ ‘Just because I said yes once, doesn’t mean you can borrow my backpack again next time.’ So we need to be really clear – and not get caught up in sometimes the vitriol around this work – that it is very much grounded and evidence based. We would not be and the Victorian government I highly doubt would be investing in a program of this level if it was not evidence based.

Joe McCracken: I would hope not. I guess, for me at least, you would want to think that at the end of this there is, you know, some sort of outcome in place to essentially delabel or destigmatise individuals in society so that whatever your sexuality might be, whatever your situation might be, nothing is an issue. Would that be a fair comment to make – because regardless of what your lifestyle is, regardless of whatever your personal circumstances are, every student has a right to learn, and those issues, the labels that we attach, should not matter, should not stigmatise a young person. Would that be something that you would agree with?

Cara Gleeson: I agree with the sentiment, but I think it is the means of being able to get there. The structural nature of what happens in a classroom when one child or one family is discriminated against means that we cannot just erase that and go, ‘There’s no labels, everything’s okay and we’re all equal in the room.’ We know that we actually need to have a really critical reflection and an analysis of what is taking place in that spot. That might be the end, and that would be a fantastic end, but in the process of reaching that end I think we need to be using what the evidence base is telling us, and it is to understand what is happening in every moment that would be affecting either the experience of violence, the experience of discrimination or other types of things that affect your ability in this instance to learn and become the person you should be.

Joe McCracken: It is such a complex area, and I know there are a number of different perspectives that feed into it, but I appreciate the way that you have engaged. Thank you for that.

The Chair: Great. Thanks, Joe. Thanks, Felicity, and thanks, Cara and Genevieve. I know we have gone way over time, but it is a very important topic, so I did want to extend it a little bit. Now, I have got one more person. Renee on Zoom, do you have any questions? No – okay. I have got one question, but you can take it on notice. I am happy with that because we have run out of time. I know, Genevieve, you mentioned about running the program, the RRE, to both primary and secondary. Just going on from Moira’s one, the content itself, who decides the content, and is it open to review like all curriculums are? Basically that is my question,

because I think you mentioned you were getting pushback from parents on what kind of content is being delivered, so I was wondering: who decides the content. Is it open for review by the education department or whoever reviews all the curriculums? Basically that is my question. So will you put recommendations further in relation to what –

Genevieve SHEPPARD: All the four Rs are open, and we can happily provide that information to you on notice.

The CHAIR: Thank you so much for coming in. It is the kind of content that is really important. Thank you very much.

Witnesses withdrew.