

TRANSCRIPT

LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL LEGAL AND SOCIAL ISSUES COMMITTEE

Inquiry into the State Education System in Victoria

Melbourne – Wednesday 12 June 2024

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WITNESS

Nicole Antonopoulos, Public Policy Consultant, Amaze.

The DEPUTY CHAIR: Welcome back to the Legislative Council Legal and Social Issues Committee inquiry into the state education system. Welcome, Nicole Antonopoulos from Amaze. I will just read out a short opening statement about your evidence.

All evidence taken is protected by parliamentary privilege as provided by the *Constitution Act* and the Legislative Council standing orders. Therefore the information you provide to us in 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 the Parliament.

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

My name is Ryan Batchelor. I am the Acting Chair of today's hearing and a Member for the Southern Metropolitan Region. We have Melina Bath, Member for Eastern Victoria; Joe McCracken, Member for Western Victoria; Rachel Payne, Member for South-Eastern Metro; Richard Welch, Member for North-Eastern Metro; and, on Zoom, Aiv Puglielli, also a Member for the North-Eastern Metropolitan Region.

If you could state your name and the organisation you appear on behalf of for the Hansard record, and then I invite you to make a short opening statement.

Nicole ANTONOPOULOS: Thanks for the opportunity to attend today. My name is Nicole Antonopoulos, and I am a Policy Consultant at Amaze. At Amaze we aim to reflect the views of our diverse autism community, and we are closely connected to our community through our Autism Connect helpline, our peer support networks and our community capacity building initiatives. Today I will be focusing on and the best input I can provide is in relation to autism. I will also note that I am mum to a wonderful 14-year-old autistic boy who has experienced some extreme highs and extreme lows in his education journey. He has been to two mainstream schools and four special schools – it is a bit of an indication – but is now at a wonderfully supportive school. Even though I am clearly here in my professional capacity, my lived experience also plays into my work and what I can provide.

As outlined in our submission to the inquiry, in recent years we have been really pleased to work with the state government on its development and rollout of the disability inclusion reforms as well as the autism education strategy, and these reforms really were nation-leading, with really great capacity to improve the experiences and outcomes of autistic students. It has been really pleasing to see these reforms being rolled out and to hear anecdotally of positive impacts that they have been having for students but also for creating more neuroaffirming school cultures.

But the problem we have is that in the absence of any clear and transparent targets and outcome measures we do not really know what the impacts of these reforms have been. While some students may be benefiting and feeling well supported, we are continuing, unfortunately, to hear of poor experiences through our Autism Connect helpline and our peer support networks. In the last financial year to date, for calls that we have received from families regarding education, the leading reason is barriers to education and inclusion, with most callers calling about inadequate supports at school followed by school refusal or a lack of positive behaviour supports in schools. You get a lot of calls about choice of schools, with callers mostly calling about autism-specific school options and callers looking for information about rights to reasonable adjustments, post-school planning and school transition as some examples there.

We have been making very strong recommendations to government to create a detailed and robust outcomes framework to measure the impacts of the disability inclusion reforms and education strategy on Victoria's autistic students and argue that they need really consistent indicators across mainstream and non-mainstream schools that really look at the outcomes for students – so the impacts on year 12 completion rates, the uptake of higher education, rates of suspension and expulsion. We are also concerned that the rollout of these reforms will be completed in 2025 and at this stage we do not really know what comes next. As I said, we are concerned

that we do not know enough about the impact the current reforms have had and how they will inform learning, and it is going to be really important that autistic students and their families and obviously all students with disability are part of that journey as well and that they are able to feed into the next step of these reforms.

I would also really like to highlight that, as far as next steps go, a lot of the work has been done, I think. A lot of autistic students do, unfortunately, experience ‘school can’t’, which is otherwise known as school refusal, where they are so anxious and emotionally distressed by school that they physically cannot go, and the recent Senate inquiry into school refusal made a number of recommendations which are aimed at the Australian and state governments which need to be actioned quite urgently. Then also, looking at the disability royal commission and the unanimous recommendations that they made, again many targeted at the state government level, which have been informed by years of evidence from experts and people with lived experience, we really strongly recommend the Victorian government taking quite an urgent strategy towards implementing them. I will probably leave it there, thanks.

The DEPUTY CHAIR: Thanks very much. I might kick off with the questions. You mentioned the disability inclusion reforms that the government has been working on over the last few years. How has that process gone, from your perspective? Do you think that that reform process has seen changes in both the way the needs of students with autism have been viewed and also then the outcomes that have been seen across the system?

Nicole ANTONOPOULOS: I think the reforms do bring in a strengths focus, which I would hope has filtered through the schools that have transitioned to disability inclusion profiles and that strengths-based approach to date. But as I say, it is very hard for me to really say what the impacts have been without those outcome measures at this stage.

The DEPUTY CHAIR: Getting onto that, which is sort of the first point of your first recommendation in the submission, that we need to move towards an outcomes framework or have an outcomes framework for those measures, how do you see that? In a practical sense, how do you see that working and what sort of benefit do you think such a framework would have for the system?

Nicole ANTONOPOULOS: I think it is really important that any outcomes framework, as I say, is focused on outcomes and really understanding, for one, how the experiences of students that have experienced these reforms have improved. That can relate to looking at rates of exclusion – for example, ‘Are students still being asked to attend only 2 hours a day because there isn’t enough support for them? Is there still a high rate of suspension among students with disability compared to students without disability, and what are the reasons for that?’ – and also then looking at, as you say, those longer outcomes around how long a child remains at school. I am sure you are probably aware of the statistic that only 30 per cent of autistic children are still at school past year 10, a much lower number compared to non-autistic students. How many go on to high school? Those sorts of questions I think are really important to be embedded in that sort of framework to really create that long-term insight into not just the outcomes of these reforms but the outcomes of this inquiry’s reforms as well for autistic students. It is so important that that impact is assessed for autistic students. And also it is important to highlight that different cohorts of autistic students will have poorer outcomes than others, so the importance of breaking it down and looking at, for example, students with complex and high support needs and First Nations autistic students as well.

The DEPUTY CHAIR: One of the things that has come up with the other witnesses has been the question of whether specialist schools versus having students solely in a mainstream environment is the best approach. Do you have any reflections or any positions on that question?

Nicole ANTONOPOULOS: Yes, I certainly do. It is a very divisive issue, certainly among our community. Again, as recognised by the disability royal commission, the views on either side are incredibly strong as well. But at Amaze we really want an education system that is inclusive of all students and supports them to thrive academically, socially and emotionally, and we certainly recognise that definitions of inclusive education can vary and that there are different views on whether that can include special schools or not. But from our perspective, in the absence of any confirmed views from government at this stage on whether inclusive education can include special schools and looking to the disability royal commission and seeing there that again there are very divided views so far as whether they can or should include special schools, we will just continue

advocating for a system that leaves no autistic students behind and provides really meaningful choice between quality, safe and inclusive schools.

But we would really be urging the government to be national leaders in this space. I think there is a real role there to be driving what are going to be really difficult conversations around what a truly inclusive education system looks like and, importantly, looking to really drive those conversations around: what is the work that going to be required before any fundamental change can really happen to the current system? What evidence are we going to need – modelling, testing? What is going to be required in that regard for a new system, looking at the skills shortage we currently have and the skills that will be needed and the workforce change that would be needed to again implement a fundamental change like that? So until those sorts of conversations are had, we think it is very difficult to support a really unclear notion of what that would look like and we will just continue for now to be advocating for inclusion in the current school model.

The DEPUTY CHAIR: Thank you very much. Mr McCracken.

Joe McCracken: Thanks, Nicole, for your opening and your submission and everything. When you say that there is not a clear understanding of the impact of the current reforms, can you talk a bit more about that? Because it would seem pretty illogical to go ahead with a new set of changes when the current impacts have not fully been fleshed out.

Nicole ANTONOPOULOS: Yes, I think the time is now to be doing that, to be really trying to assess what those impacts are. Amaze is currently working on an outcomes framework around the *Victorian Autism Plan*, for example. We are working with the Victorian government on that to try and assess the impacts that that has had as the next iterations of that flow out, and I think we are at a similar juncture with these reforms as well. As I said, on the ground we still hear that students are having considerable difficulties in schools, so it is very hard to reconcile the two.

Joe McCracken: Are you aware of any piece of work, be it a report or some other document, that has been compiled which does look at any of the impacts of the current reforms in any meaningful way?

Nicole ANTONOPOULOS: I am not, but that does not mean it does not exist. Specifically from within government, I would imagine there might be something, but nothing that I am aware of myself.

Joe McCracken: Okay. I am not aware of any either, particularly in this more specialised area.

Nicole ANTONOPOULOS: It is difficult because we do not have a lot of current data generally on the experiences of autistic children in schools. We have got ABS data from 2018, and I think there is some more coming through soon, but obviously that does not reflect on the current. As I said, through our Autism Connect helpline we get thousands of calls a year and I would say probably around a call a day in relation to education, so for us that is a bit of a direct line into how the community feel. But at the same time I acknowledge that a lot of students are having positive experiences and we might not hear from them, so I would not purport to sit here and give you a ratio of who is having a good experience and who is not.

Joe McCracken: I guess in terms of the data that you have received, you have compiled and you have collected, what are you hearing in terms of what the broad themes are?

Nicole ANTONOPOULOS: We have certainly heard of some good experiences of the disability inclusion profile development, although families have been looking for more information to support their involvement in that process and also to support the involvement of students; it is really important that their voices are heard throughout that process. So there certainly have been some calls for that. That is probably the main thing I have heard of it, yes.

Joe McCracken: I mean, when people call up, particularly in education contexts – I know before you said there was a lack of support. What sort of lack of support? Are we talking not a learning support officer in a classroom, or is it not a differentiated enough teaching practice? What sorts of issues are really coming up from your perspective?

Nicole ANTONOPOULOS: The reality with our autism community is it is so diverse and the needs of autistic students are just so varying that reasonable adjustments can look very different for different students.

We certainly receive calls around a lack of adequate support, funding – those sorts of matters. Failure to address sensory needs is also quite common, and a lot of people are just seeking information too. We also get calls from teachers – ‘What can we be doing to better support those needs?’ – as well as, as I was referring to before, a lot of calls around students who are I guess so poorly supported in the classroom or whose sensory difficulties are so big that they are actually refusing to go to school. We are certainly getting a lot of calls around that as well.

But as far as those adjustments are concerned, I think it is that direct support together with meeting sensory needs, so whether it is around noise, proprioceptive input, light – it could be as simple as turning the lights down a bit – and those sorts of areas but also individualised approaches to learning and recognising that autistic students do learn differently. Many are visual learners, and so it can be adjustments around providing those visual supports, supporting executive functioning through schedules, those sorts of approaches, which are not expensive. They are quite straightforward. It is having the resources and building the expertise and confidence among staff to do that, recognising that they have already got a lot on.

Joe McCracken: Yes. I think my time is up, but thanks so much anyway.

Nicole ANTONOPOULOS: Thank you.

The DEPUTY CHAIR: Mr Puglielli?

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Thank you. I think my question might actually follow on from what you were just talking about. You mentioned in your opening remarks neuroaffirming school cultures, and in your submission you talk about neuroaffirming schools. Could you just give the committee a bit more detail and maybe some examples of what they are and why they are important?

Nicole ANTONOPOULOS: Yes. I should I guess preface this by emphasising that Amaze is an organisation that has expertise in autism. We do not pretend to speak on behalf of all neurodivergent students, who can have very different needs to autistic students. But neuroaffirming cultures really do take that strengths-based approach to learning, and they build that understanding across the school of the great benefits of having students with disability within the school and what they contribute to the school and also recognise that any adjustments that we might have been talking about before – reasonable adjustments – are not just benefiting the students with disability; they actually benefit the whole school. So it is really recognising that and realising that disability does not make a student less – it does not mean that they do not deserve the same education and social life as other students – and really recognising that the students are equal and have just as much of a contribution to make to the school culture as everybody else.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Thank you. With regard to autistic-led peer support and mentoring, could you paint us a bit of a picture of what that looks like in practice?

Nicole ANTONOPOULOS: Yes. The best organisation to speak to about that is the I Can Network, and I would defer to them. But autistic-led peer support has been found through evaluation of the I Can Network’s program that is currently in Victorian schools to have great impacts socially, emotionally and I would imagine academically as well. It is that power of meeting somebody who says, ‘Oh, well, I’m just like you. You’re not alone,’ and really is able to support with that understanding of their own experience and support them through that school process, whatever their needs may be. But as I said, I would really encourage a conversation with the I Can Network about what they are doing there and the benefits that their evidence has shown around that.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Thank you. Thank you, Chair.

The DEPUTY CHAIR: Thank you, Mr Puglielli. Ms Bath.

Melina BATH: Thanks, Nicole. Thank you very much. I heard off air that you were taught in a very fantastic region called Gippsland, in the Latrobe Valley.

Nicole ANTONOPOULOS: I was – a Gippsland girl.

Melina BATH: Congratulations. I knew you were a very amazing person.

The DEPUTY CHAIR: You always find a way, Ms Bath.

Melina BATH: I do.

Nicole ANTONOPOULOS: And my mum was a teacher in Morwell as well.

Melina BATH: So it is not only your passion and your understanding but in your blood as well. Congratulations on that one. We heard from Stephanie Feldt back in March of this year, and she made a comment. She is a teacher from one of the Moe primary schools, and she spoke about how the disability inclusion funding is still pending. So it is still coming and still yet to be rolled out for their particular school and, she said, 'jeopardising the provision of necessary support services'. Is that something that Amaze has heard of through your channels so far, and what has been the implication?

Nicole ANTONOPOULOS: Yes, I understand that the rollout will be completed in 2025, so I think we are almost there. I think most definitely that schools would be looking to move forward into the new model, particularly for that strengths-based approach, and ensuring that children are receiving the funding that they require. I can imagine it is difficult for those schools that are the last in that rollout not to be quite there yet.

Melina BATH: Sure, yes. And I think part of the discussion around it all is also about those support services that come with that – the speech therapists, the occupational therapists, the psychologists or whatever. They are quite thin on the ground in regional Victoria specifically. I want to talk to you about point 4 in your submission. You talked about teacher shortages. First of all, it is a widespread problem across this state. But what about casual relief teachers? You spoke about them. How challenging is that for (a) the teacher but (b) the student, that autistic student, facing yet another teacher coming through? What needs to happen to support those students in that scenario?

Nicole ANTONOPOULOS: It is, as I mentioned before as well, teacher shortages but also therapist shortages. I can give you an example of the school my son is currently at. It has been looking for a new OT since, I think, the start of the year or early into term 1. That is difficult as well. But with teacher shortages, that lack of permanent staff is a really unique challenge for autistic students, who can really struggle with that sort of uncertainty or lack of familiarity around a teacher, and for casual teachers coming in it is definitely quite challenging. But I do think that there are, if some steps are taken, some quite simple things that could be done around ensuring that they have got really quick access to the disability inclusion profile around the students. It could have very quick information on the students' needs and steps that can be taken and probably reference people who know that student quite well too. It could look into the skills of education support staff as well to be able to support the students and the casual teachers in those roles and really build up that capacity.

Melina BATH: Sure. I guess for my value, while funding is still pending for some of these schools, that is where you go back upstream a little bit, and the regional education department needs to support that school, considering that this teacher shortage is not going to go away overnight – it is going to exist. A CRT walking into that class also wants all the resources available to them, and that is not just a 'naughty child'; there is an issue there that they need to be aware of. Is that something that Amaze would support?

Nicole ANTONOPOULOS: Yes, very much so. I think it really highlights that point, which I so passionately believe, that every teacher is absolutely doing their best in every situation and has the best interests of the kids at heart. I think as much as can be in place, consistently across schools as well – I think maybe some schools do this well and others do not – should be consistently put in place to support that quick understanding of needs.

Melina BATH: I am going to sneak one quick question in. You mentioned teachers assistants. I know a Grattan Institute report talks about teachers assistants. How valuable are they, and what is the message for us to send to the government about teachers assistants? What do we need more of or less of? What sorts of supports do they need in the education setting?

Nicole ANTONOPOULOS: They are obviously so valuable. I will probably talk to this more from my personal experience. I think as much as their capacity can be built up, the better. They are just so important to support the capacity of teachers to be able to teach students. The education support staff are not there just to teach. They are not there to replace the teacher, but they are there to provide supports where needed, obviously, as well. Again, it is a consistent understanding across schools of the role of support staff, and to be able to really build up their capacity is key, because they just play such an important role with our kids.

Melina BATH: Not to get the chagrin of the Deputy Chair, but – this is on notice – what does the education department need to do to support our teacher assistants? What other things might they need? Take it on notice.

Nicole ANTONOPOULOS: I will.

Melina BATH: Thank you.

The DEPUTY CHAIR: Ms Payne.

Rachel PAYNE: Thank you, Deputy Chair, and thank you, Nicole, for coming and presenting to us today. In reference to your submission, you talk about the federal royal commission into disability and discrimination, and you also talk about creating a Victorian strategy. Do you want to outline for us what you would see would be some of those key priorities to be focused on from the royal commission leading into a Victorian strategy?

Nicole ANTONOPOULOS: Yes. As you know, the royal commission unanimously made 13 recommendations to address the barriers to education and foster a more inclusive education system. We believe that it is really quite a matter of urgency, as I was saying before, recognising that so much work has been done towards this and so much lived experience as part of that in putting together a Victorian strategy around how those recommendations might be implemented. They include measures to ensure equal access to mainstream education and prevent gatekeeping practices, which is a big priority; to prevent the inappropriate use of exclusionary discipline; to build better understandings around reasonable adjustments and what they can look like; to improve strengths-based funding; to entrench stronger connections between mainstream and non-mainstream schools – that was quite a strong message as well, and we also agree that that could really be of great benefit particularly to social outcomes for our kids; to improve career guidance and transition support services; strengthen parent–school relationships; and improve workforce capabilities as well as complaint mechanisms. That is the gamut of what those recommendations directed to the state level covered. And obviously they were directed nationally, so as I was saying before, Victoria is a step ahead in some regards. Different measures were required across different states, but certainly in each of those areas there are different areas in need of reform.

Rachel PAYNE: Excellent. And just to completely pivot, you also mentioned flexible learning options. Something that has come up quite repeatedly throughout this inquiry is that some students need to have more flexibility with their learning arrangements. Would you like to delve a little bit more into what you have proposed in your submission and your own lived experience in that space?

Nicole ANTONOPOULOS: As I was saying, the ‘school can’t’ senate inquiry made a number of observations there, one being that neurodivergent students, and autistic students included within that, are the most likely to be unable to attend a standard school system, so many are looking for those alternatives. We certainly have a number of families of autistic students across Victoria that are now homeschooling their students or that are accessing a type of remote learning either through their school or through the virtual schooling channels. It is really important, I think, that we are really listening to those children about what their barriers are and listening to families and then really trying to address that stigma – and fear, I think, in families as well – and provide those supports for them to be able to access a system that is going to work for the individual needs of that child at that time. And that can change; a child might be in need of a flexible learning approach for a short time and then be able to transition back. So again, it is that support to be able to transition back and what that looks like as well. At Amaze we are in the process of just finalising some ‘school can’t’ resources, which look at supporting teachers as well as families around identifying those indicators of ‘school can’t’ early and when another approach that may be needed – it might just be for a time – and again addressing that stigma and just supporting families and teachers in that. But as I say, there is a lot more work to be done I think around understanding what those other approaches could be and how they could be better embedded into the system, again noting the Senate inquiry made some recommendations around that that might provide some good guidance as well.

Rachel PAYNE: Thank you. Thank you for your responses.

The DEPUTY CHAIR: Mr Welch.

Richard WELCH: Thank you, Chair. I am another Gippslander as well.

Nicole ANTONOPOULOS: Taking over!

Melina BATH: It is a faction we have got.

Richard WELCH: Thanks, Nicole, for coming in. This may overlap with what Mr McCracken was asking earlier. Your recommendation 1 around the outcomes and attainments: you said better results and increasing this and increasing that. Have we got any benchmarks going back five, 10 years in terms of what they were or anything like that?

Nicole ANTONOPOULOS: Unfortunately, we do lack benchmarks. As I was saying before, we do lack data. There is some ABS data that can be drawn on, and so that certainly would provide some benchmarks, particularly around school completion rates and going on to higher education, numbers of children in special schools, mainstream schools – those sorts of things. But we have not had the transparency around issues like exclusion and understanding how many students with disability are suspended or are only allowed by their school to attend 3 hours a day. Those sorts of measures I think we lack baseline for.

Richard WELCH: Even then I think there would be some rubbery ground in that the understanding and definition of ‘neurodiverse’ has evolved over the last 10 years as well, so you do not really know where your starting point may be.

Nicole ANTONOPOULOS: That is a very important point, yes.

Richard WELCH: If you were advising government, would one of your recommendations be around getting some benchmarks and just trying to extract what we can from the historical data?

Nicole ANTONOPOULOS: Very much so. Yes, I think that is the starting point, extracting what we can from that historical data. I should mention as well there have been surveys done by Amaze and also the Australian Autism Alliance that would provide some data on those broader experience issues that could be drawn on. But taking the opportunity to really get some benchmark data is –

Richard WELCH: Because we do not know what we do not know in a lot of –

Nicole ANTONOPOULOS: We just do not know what we do not know. As you said, everyone has such different experiences, and without that we really do not know what the experiences are other than what we hear and what we see. I can tell you about mine, but that is just my experience of my child. So it is very difficult.

Richard WELCH: Tangentially but sort of related to that is that if we think about implementation of how we improve things, of how we do take things forward – I am thinking from a practical standpoint. I understand and you understand that neurodiverse children are exactly that. They are very diverse in terms of what their particular needs, strengths and weaknesses are. But from an implementation point of view, how nuanced do you think the education system needs to be? Can you safely categorise need and therefore adopt efficient universally adoptable standards, or is it always going to be very much a child-by-child type of implementation? Do you have a view around that?

Nicole ANTONOPOULOS: I think it needs to be both, which sounds like a bit of a sitting-on-the-fence easy answer. Again, I think in any approach that is being implemented ensuring a consistent approach across schools is so important. There does need to be that overarching level of consistency and a high-level approach to that implementation, but then the needs of autistic children are just so diverse that a child-by-child approach is needed within that implementation framework as well.

Richard WELCH: So that very heavily comes back to resources then, doesn't it, really – those, as you said, teaching aides and other in-school supports.

Nicole ANTONOPOULOS: Yes. As I say, a lot of the supports do not need to be resource- or funding-intensive either, around speaking, sensory needs, making those adjustments, providing that visual support – those sorts of things.

Richard WELCH: Thank you.

The DEPUTY CHAIR: Thank you, Mr Welch.

Richard WELCH: Thank you, Chair.

The DEPUTY CHAIR: Ms Antonopoulos, thanks so much for coming in today. We really appreciate the evidence that you have given to us. You will be provided with a copy of the transcript to review soon, and with that we will take a short break.

Witness withdrew.