

TRANSCRIPT

LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL LEGAL AND SOCIAL ISSUES COMMITTEE

Inquiry into the State Education System in Victoria

Bairnsdale – Tuesday 26 March 2024

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Trung Luu – Chair

Ryan Batchelor – Deputy Chair

Michael Galea

Renee Heath

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John Berger

Georgie Crozier

Moira Deeming

David Ettershank

Wendy Lovell

Sarah Mansfield

WITNESSES

Rod O'Connell, and

Natalie Mitchell.

The CHAIR: Let us welcome Rod O'Connell and Natalie Mitchell. Thank you for coming in today. I will quickly introduce the panel. I am Trung Luu; I am the Chair of the committee and represent Melbourne's Western Metropolitan Region. Ms Bath is a Member for Eastern Victoria. Michael Galea is a Member for South-Eastern Metropolitan. Dr Heath is a Member for Eastern Victoria. Dr Sarah Mansfield, on Zoom with us, is a Member for Western Victoria. I think Mrs Moira Deeming is also online on Zoom, and she is a Member for Western Metropolitan as well.

Before we ask you to continue with your submission, all evidence taken is protected by parliamentary privilege as provided by the *Constitution Act 1975* and is further subject to the provisions of the Legislative Council standing orders. Therefore the information you provide during the 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 under this privilege. Any deliberately false evidence or misleading of the committee may be considered a contempt of Parliament.

All evidence is being recorded, and you will be provided with a proof version of the transcript following the hearing as well. The transcript will ultimately be made public and posted on the committee website.

Could you just briefly announce your name and the organisation you represent today, just for the record.

Natalie MITCHELL: I am Natalie. Firstly, I just want to thank you for coming out to Bairnsdale. I really appreciate the opportunity to speak. I think it is really important that you were able to get out to regional areas, because for us it was an hour and a half to drive down, which obviously we are used to travelling, but if it was in Traralgon or something like that, that would make it harder again. So I really appreciate the time you have taken. I am just representing myself. I am a parent. I am a teacher; I am not currently teaching, but I have taught. I have been on school council, and I have represented various community groups and things like that, so I just really want to speak to my experiences and, I guess, frustrations that I have experienced as a parent and as a teacher with the education department, living in a rural setting.

Rod O'CONNELL: My name is Rodney; I go by Rod. I am from Omeo. We made a life up there, moved back there in the late 70s, and I have been a school bus operator amongst many other business ventures over the years, but for 40 years I had a lot to do with the schools, a lot to do with business development in the area, community issues and so forth. I have got a fairly good knowledge of the region, and I am concerned about the way things are developing. We want to make sure that those outlying areas do get a voice. Thank you for the opportunity to come down here and talk.

The CHAIR: Okay. Thank you. We have a few questions we want to ask you, but I will open for you to make any opening statement if you like – either Natalie or you.

Natalie MITCHELL: I am happy to answer any questions. That was the impression that I had, that we were just here to answer questions. But I suppose as per my submission the areas that I really want to address are around succession planning in schools, particularly in rural and remote schools; roles of school councils; I suppose the principal selection process, if I am talking about staffing and things like that; and also more anecdotal experiences, I suppose, but probably relevant to what happens across the region – across Victoria and particularly in regional areas. I think often we are forgotten out there, and I do not believe the processes are being followed correctly.

The CHAIR: Would you like to make any statement besides your submission at all, Rodney?

Rod O'CONNELL: You would have read mine.

The CHAIR: We have, but just for the recording we are happy for you to make any comment if you want to before we ask you a question, that is all.

Rod O'CONNELL: My concern is that the outer reaches of our state do not really have a voice on these sorts of issues. Who has the knowledge to make decisions about education, for instance, on our behalf? Now, it is small numbers – our town is probably 400 and something people, and our district is probably 1200 – but it is all relative; it is very important to us. Our education is extremely important, and I am concerned about the way it is developing. We have got a town that is trying to move ahead. The high school in our town is in decline, as I said in the submission. I would like to know who monitors the situation, who makes the decisions on our behalf, and please, let us look forward to the next 10 or 20 years so our kids can have a good education. That is my concern.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Dr Heath will start our questions.

Renee HEATH: Thank you so much for your submissions. You mentioned that the timber towns, with the closing down of the timber industry, are really beginning to really suffer. What impact is that having, do you believe, on the education that children are getting in those regions?

Rod O'CONNELL: Look, I will speak on that, if I may. I will just give a little bit of a brief history. There are four towns in our region, and three of them probably relied on agriculture and sawmilling. Of those three towns, one was Ensay and one was Benambra, and both lost their schools. Swifts Creek relied heavily on two sawmills – it is down to one now; it is very small. Those other towns have basically lost their footy sides, their schools, everything that they had. I can see that that is the way, unfortunately, Swifts Creek is going as well, because it does not have the building blocks for growth. It has basically relied on the timber industry. Farming has changed, as we all know. Families do not come back. Kids do not come back on the farms and those sorts of things. So all of those little towns are in decline. Omeo on the other hand is a town that is a service centre providing a lot of services and employment for those outlying areas. The one thing we cannot do is keep professional people or attract professional people because of the fact that there is no high school. The people that do come there will not send their kids down to the high school that is there now. We cannot keep doctors. A doctor mentioned this to me recently. He said, 'I'm trying to get doctors to come to Omeo, but they won't come, for reasons of education.' That is the situation. Omeo is growing. We are getting a lot of interest with building and investment from people in Melbourne.

Natalie MITCHELL: And government investment.

Rod O'CONNELL: And government investment. There is a mountain bike track, a \$9 million mountain bike track, so there is progress there. But for that town to carry the rest of the community, the rest of the outlying towns, education is something that needs to be addressed.

Renee HEATH: Thank you. Prior to the last election, then Premier Daniel Andrews said, 'Our positive plan will ensure that every Victorian gets a great education.' Do you agree that every Victorian is getting a great education?

Rod O'CONNELL: No.

Natalie MITCHELL: It is not to be disrespectful to teachers currently, because I understand the workloads and the challenges that teachers are facing. But if we come back to, again, a rural and regional perspective, I know there was an expert advisory panel that was held in I think 2019, and there were recommendations that came out in 2020. But that panel came out to Traralgon to talk to rural and regional schools, and it was by invitation; it was a very closed shop. Traralgon might be regional to Melbourne, but for Gippsland you have still got another 5 hours to Mallacoota, you have got 3-and-a-bit hours to where we are, so how are they really ever hearing the issues and challenges faced by regional or rural students? We do not have the option to move schools. If you are not satisfied with the education you are getting, even in Bairnsdale or metropolitan Melbourne, you can vote with your feet. I know schools are zoned, but we also know that there has been a 16 per cent increase in private school education because people are not happy with the public education system as it stands. For us, we have no alternative. We cannot send our kids to another school, and that is what Rod spoke about before. People will just leave.

Melina BATH: Leave town.

Natalie MITCHELL: Leave town, and they will move to a bigger area. Is it inevitable that some towns will unfortunately see a demise? There are important service centres that our towns rely on, and we are seeing heavy

government investment into regional areas, which is fantastic. But then we need to support that growth and that investment so that it is not just money down the drain. So no, I do not believe my children are getting the same level of education that someone in even Bairnsdale, Traralgon or Melbourne is getting.

Renee HEATH: Yes. It is actually interesting. I do not know if you saw the recent Grattan Institute that said that one in three children cannot read proficiently, but when you are in rural and regional areas that is actually one half, it is even worse, so there certainly is that gap.

Natalie MITCHELL: Sorry, if I can just add to that. We are told that NAPLAN is the guideline, the tool, that we use to see how results are in schools like that, and then we also get told that it is just one day and it is one aspect and one way in which we can assess where children are at. However, for our school often our cohorts are too small, so therefore the NAPLAN data does not register. Then you say, 'Okay, well how can we tell how our students are travelling in comparison to their city counterparts?' So you get told one thing by the department, that this is how we measure our general academic levels, but if your cohort is too small, then that does not matter and we have to rely on teacher observations – which is okay for one aspect, but when you do not have other schools or other comparisons to then look at, how do you know that that is an accurate reflection of where your child is at?

Renee HEATH: Yes. Thank you so much.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Michael.

Michael GALEA: Thank you, Chair. Thank you both for joining us. I might start with you, Mr O'Connell. You spoke about in your submission and also your opening statements the distance between the towns, and there is probably no better person to ask than the school bus driver about this. I note in particular that you said that the nearest secondary school to Omeo is 25 kilometres away. I am assuming you mean Swifts Creek by that.

Rod O'CONNELL: That is correct.

Michael GALEA: Yes. Firstly, just to get some context, in the catchment that you serve do you serve all the schools in the region or one particular school?

Rod O'CONNELL: I am no longer a bus operator, I have retired – from that business anyway. But yes, the buses served all the way out through to Dinner Plain. Dinner Plain – I am not sure if you are familiar with the area. Mount Hotham is a ski resort – Dinner Plain as a ski village has been established for more than 30 years, with probably 3000 or 4000 beds maybe, I am not sure. The population there has grown. That became established since the high school was taken from Omeo, which was about in 1978. Now, we have the school bus running from there. It is probably one of the most interesting school runs you could find anywhere in Australia. Dinner Plain is 1500 metres above sea level in the snowfields, so that school bus runs down to 300 metres in altitude, if you like, just for interesting statistics. It is a school run where you have got to fit snow chains and then deal with hazardous conditions. It also goes further out to all the points, if you like.

Michael GALEA: Then you converge on Omeo and Swifts Creek, is that right?

Rod O'CONNELL: That is right. You come into Omeo, drop the kids off at the Omeo Primary School and pick up and go on to Swifts Creek. Just whilst you are on that particular issue, this point I will make now will emphasise the problems that Omeo is facing, or the district is facing. Omeo had two school runs, Benambra had a school run. The two Omeo school runs – one 70-year-old contract and another 50-year-old contract – have now just been handed over to a Swifts Creek school operator. Swifts Creek has run out of kids. Because his school run at Swifts Creek was in there first, he was the last out. The Omeo ones were transferred down there after the school was transferred. Therefore he has run out of students. With the school bus rationalisations, the Swifts Creek operator now comes to Omeo to do those runs. I think that should emphasise the fact that the numbers down there are just not there. They are looking to Omeo now to feed that school.

Michael GALEA: Because now at Omeo, as you both said –

Rod O'CONNELL: We still have some kids.

Michael GALEA: There has been significant private and public investment into Omeo.

Rod O'CONNELL: Yes, a lot.

Michael GALEA: And that is driving growth of the town.

Rod O'CONNELL: There is a lot of public investment, a lot of private investment, shops being built, businesses being opened, a lot of people building houses and renovating houses. Again, there are a lot of people that are expressing interest, but they will not come and live here until their children finish their high school education.

Michael GALEA: Yes. Interesting, thank you. I might open this to both of you: what are those typical post-education pathways that most students take, from your region? Do you see them stay? Do you see most of them coming down to Bairnsdale, Traralgon or Melbourne? What sorts of patterns are you seeing?

Rod O'CONNELL: I send my children away. The school was not satisfactory – the high school – at the time. I think they went to about year 8 or year 9 and then onto either the grammar school or to colleges down here. I have got a letter here that I presented to the previous minister – a family that moved in and bought a farm, expecting an education, but they have had to leave, so they have gone to Albury. They still retain their farm. There are so many families where one parent will go and live in Bairnsdale or Albury and the other one will stay home and earn a living, and then they will educate the children and then they come back. That is quite often the way.

Michael GALEA: So a sort of uncapped potential you would have by doing that.

Natalie MITCHELL: Yes, I think so. Kids will go and do trades. As we know, broadly in East Gippsland, transition rates into tertiary are quite low, generally speaking. Accessibility is a barrier, cost, all of those things, the further you get away. That is not to say that university is the be all and end all, but it does become a barrier for kids to be able to do that. I might add, though: yesterday you may have heard that there was regional university centre funding from the federal government announced for 10 regional study hubs across Australia. East Gippsland was one of the successful recipients, which included Omeo as the satellite hub. So we will now have that tertiary option. I think it is a really positive step to offer that option for school leavers but also mature age students. We have been operating that study hub for the last six months, and already six students have come organically that are studying online. So there is a lot of potential there and there is a need and the desire. But I think it is about lifting the bar, because unfortunately I think it is very easy to become sort of complacent. A bit of competition can breed that success, and if it is not there and there is no sort of striving to be the best you can be, whether that is academic pathways or trades. We have got hospital, hospitality and what is about to come with adventure tourism – there are so many aspects that the area can offer, if I am speaking specifically about our area. But I think it is really important, because if you do not have the quality and I guess the desire from school leadership in the area, then who is there to push it along and then who is holding them to account? Because it is very removed, and with centralised processes from a department, which for us is Morwell – I would not hazard a guess as to how many times they come out to areas like ours. It just does not happen.

Michael GALEA: Yes. Thank you. In terms of the services that are being provided at some of the local schools, it was another submission I think that talked about some of the health services, like GP visits, nurses, speech pathologists et cetera. Have you seen much of a benefit from those services in the schools where they have been provided?

Natalie MITCHELL: Look, I think so. For example, the Smile Squad is there at our school today. Fortunately, my children have not had to access those services, but I do know other students who do. There is a lot of wellbeing funding – those post-bushfire, post-COVID services are offered, and there are welfare officers that come up to the school. Look, I think so, but I could not speak to it –

Michael GALEA: Not from personal –

Natalie MITCHELL: Not from personal experience.

Michael GALEA: but would you say there is good uptake of it from the school community?

Natalie MITCHELL: Yes, I would say so. There was a seminar at the school last week that was speaking to change and difficult times for students, and it was open to the parents of the students. They offered

babysitting services and catering so the parents could attend this seminar, and it was really well attended. So I think when those services are offered parents are certainly taking up the opportunity to help their kids.

Michael GALEA: Thank you. I think that is my time.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Dr Mansfield. Would you like to ask some questions?

Sarah MANSFIELD: Thank you. Thank you both for appearing today. I am interested in understanding, Natalie, a bit more about your concerns about NAPLAN. I am not sure if you had anything more you wanted to discuss. You mentioned in your submission, and I know you touched on it briefly, about it not necessarily applying to small schools, but did you have any other concerns or, I suppose, recommendations or suggestions for improvements?

Natalie MITCHELL: Look, I think from my perspective and on my submission it was around how schools are viewed or how they are tracking, so to speak, on an academic basis in comparison to other schools – even schools in metro areas. As we know, it should not matter where a child lives; they should be offered the same standard of education. However, even though the individual student might get their result, from a school perspective or a regional perspective, if that cohort is too small – I think it is less than four kids in a grade 3 or grade 5 class – then those results are not generalised and made available to then compare. When we used to get NAPLAN results, as a teacher or as a school council member you would ask these questions. If NAPLAN is the guide, if NAPLAN is the standard, we cannot compare ourselves as a school and see how we are going. So NAPLAN either is the guide or it is not a guide. It cannot be just okay for schools with bigger numbers, we have got to be able to see – I know small cohorts can skew averages and things like that, but it should still be able to show. And really, those kids should be doing really well, because if there are only three kids in the class – I know, again, the learning challenges across kids can be vast, but we should be really able to hone in on those sorts of gaps. Or conversely, if they are really excelling, what are we doing to support those kids to go further?

Sarah MANSFIELD: You also mentioned in your submission you wanted to discuss issues around quality of education. Did you want to expand on that at all?

Natalie MITCHELL: I think, again – my experience is that we will just do what we need to do to tick a box. We never sort of encourage or challenge children who might be excelling or promote them. That could be academic, but it could also be in a sporting sense or a cultural sense or any other things that get offered to schools in larger areas like Bairnsdale, even from a metropolitan area. It might be team sports or individual sports. You only know what you get told by the schools or by departments that are leading that.

I think the way that the teaching recruitment and principal recruitment is structured is that you can become stale in a job. Again, that accountability – are they performing and are we meeting the standards that we need to – might not be being addressed like it would be in other sectors.

Sarah MANSFIELD: Okay. Rod, you talked about the importance of a secondary school in terms of the viability of towns like Omeo. What difference do you think it would make if you did have a secondary school there? What do you think you would see?

Rod O'CONNELL: Well, I think if you look at how towns operate, Omeo for one has hospitals, paramedics and three policemen. We have got all the services other than a school. Without a school, we cannot really grow because people do not want to come there. Similarly, if you were a young teacher, for instance, and you were coming out of training and you had an opportunity to go to say Bright P-12 or Swifts Creek P-12, where would you want to go? They just will not go there. There are always a lot of vacancies unfortunately because, I am sorry, but there is just nothing there. There is nothing for young people to do, as opposed to a town that is providing a lot of services and a lot of outdoor activities. There is just so much more. And why would it do any better? I think the fact that you would attract teachers a lot more easily and people who would want to come out there to be there rather than the last resort, if you like. I am finding that a lot of the young teachers who come into Swifts Creek – we see them – do not last long. They might stay 12 months, and they go.

Sarah MANSFIELD: And do you think you have enough families to have a secondary school there at the moment?

Rod O'CONNELL: Not at all, not at all. Unfortunately, this should have been addressed 20 years ago. These concerns were made 20 years ago, in fact. In my discussions with the previous minister we acknowledged that, and I guess the regional director at the time said, 'There's only 40 students at Omeo' – the average is between 35 and 50, if you like. It is static; it does not grow. There is a reason for that – because parents either send their kids away or they leave. There is no family growth.

Natalie MITCHELL: Having said that, though, if I could just interrupt what you were saying. Again, Rod spoke about in the early parts of his submission who is looking at what is happening in the area. If you look at the early childhood centre, which again was a purpose-built building that opened in 2019 to cater to 25 kids – another fantastic facility that we were fortunate to get because they saw the need for it – that three-year-old and four-year-old kinder is full. Those kids are going to go to school and then high school and then onward, so are we looking at what is coming through now? If that decision is then made in five or six years time, maybe those families have already gone because they are not happy with what is happening or they can see that, 'Okay, well, we want to have more opportunities for our children.' And look, education might be one factor. There might be other reasons why people do move on, but when you look at the growth versus the static, the number is 40-odd now, but we have got 20-odd three- and four-year-old kinder kids coming through, which is the strongest numbers we have seen in a long time. What are we doing to address that?

Sarah MANSFIELD: It becomes a bit of a vicious cycle because you do not have a high school, so people leave.

Rod O'CONNELL: Can I just explain too, briefly, this geographical situation – Omeo is actually in north-east Victoria. From a municipal point of view we are in East Gippsland, but geographically we are in north-east Victoria, and a lot of our other areas of management are from north-east Victoria. A lot of the Gippsland agency control, if you like, which comes out of the Latrobe Valley mainly, would come as far as Fish Creek, because that is where the DEECA depot is, which is large, and then you have got the high school. There is no need for them to come up the hill and see what is going on. So I guess the point of my submission is, who is monitoring what is going on? Nobody is reporting back in and making decisions for the future. That is the sort of situation that we have got.

Sarah MANSFIELD: A need for some broader strategic planning for regions.

Rod O'CONNELL: For sure, and as I said earlier, it is all relative. Whilst we have only got small numbers, the ability for towns to grow – and Omeo is probably very unusual in the sense that a lot of little rural towns throughout the state do die. Omeo is not going to die. It has survived a lot of setbacks through losing its council, losing its high school and various other things, but it is still growing. Seventy or 80 houses have been built there in the last 20-odd years – but no kids and no families, so there is something out of kilter. We have got to address that.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Dr Mansfield.

Rod O'CONNELL: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Ms Bath.

Melina BATH: Omeo is a fantastic place. It is a place I love to come and visit and stay and walk and do and share in all the beauty up there. Natalie, you spoke in your submission, and I want to drill down into this more. You have got the floor, so I want to understand what was in there. You spoke in your opening statement about the frustration with the education department and that some processes are not being followed. In your submission you talk about the principal selection process, and I want to understand the role that the school council has and, in your opinion, should have. Can you speak to that specifically?

Natalie MITCHELL: Thanks, Melina. Yes, I think, having sat on school council as a president, as a councillor and as a community member prior to having kids and then being as a teacher, but then also my experience I have had with sitting on other boards and other committees, I see the role that councils play in the selection process of a CEO or a school principal for that matter, and then the review of that. School council should play a very important role, but unfortunately, in my opinion, after seven years on a school council I felt that we were nothing more than ticking off head lice policies and uniform policies with really very little input into the school's vision and –

Melina BATH: Culture, management –

Natalie MITCHELL: Culture, accountability, all of those things, and where we wanted to see it go. It was very much where school council were told that it was managed by the SEIL, and ‘Yes, you can have your say’ – but really you are just having your say; nothing is really taken into consideration. If I think back to a process that happened last year to select an acting principal role, there was no real process documented for an acting principal role versus fulfilling a principal’s role, but I am assuming that guidelines would be very similar. Those processes were not followed: school council were notified of decisions before applicants were notified.

Melina BATH: So the regional department had selected?

Natalie MITCHELL: I do not know whether they had selected or had not made a decision, but the school council was notified of the decision prior to applicants who had gone for the position, who had not been notified. When the advertisement went out, a panel had not been formed. A panel should be formed before the advertising goes out. The advertising of an acting principal role is distributed by the department to school principals, who then decide who they will let know, and it only goes into a cluster. For us that only went into East Gippsland. So why aren’t we telling everyone?

Melina BATH: Inviting people to come.

Natalie MITCHELL: Why aren’t we inviting, and why is it up to the discretion of the school principal as to who they are going to then send that expression of interest on to? Because we should be encouraging succession planning, planning for the future, and looking at – as we know, with a person out there – that there might be mixed personalities within schools. If a principal does not like a teacher – and that teacher might be a fantastic applicant – they might not get notified, because it is up to the school principal who they will send that expression of interest to. I think from a department perspective there is very little forethought. It might be different in metropolitan schools, but there are very limited opportunities in rural schools for leadership training roles, and that is often why schoolteachers leave our areas. It is because they have aspirations in leadership roles, but they do not get the opportunity because principals, basically once they are selected, do not have to leave.

Melina BATH: Is it a job for life?

Natalie MITCHELL: It is a job for life. It is like, you know, if you are a CEO for local government or a hospital. You might get a five-year contract, but at the end of that five-year contract, that council or committee who is responsible for that CEO –

Melina BATH: There is an assessment of criteria.

Natalie MITCHELL: Yes. They are then either invited to have their contract extended or they can choose to advertise and invite that existing CEO to renominate – not in a principal selection process. Once that is rolled over at the discretion of the SEIL, the school council may be invited to –

Melina BATH: Just define ‘SEIL’.

Natalie MITCHELL: I do not even know what a SEIL means, but I know that is who the principal reports to. Senior something improvement leader, I think it is.

Melina BATH: Okay. But is it regionally based?

Natalie MITCHELL: It is a regionally based role, and they are responsible for the principal, which is fine. But from a school council perspective, which is made up of staff, parents and community members who are living and breathing what is happening in the community, to have very little say or comment on how they view their school to be performing is just in total disregard of the people who are living there.

Melina BATH: If we are going to make a recommendation, Natalie, from your position as a parent who has got a wealth of experience, what do you want to see the role of the school council to be – more lines of communication that are transparent with the region?

Natalie MITCHELL: I think absolutely: more weight given to the school council's view of how the school is progressing. I think an assumption is made that people who make up school council do not have the skills.

Melina BATH: They are just parents.

Natalie MITCHELL: That they are just parents that do not have those. But I mean, as we can see, if I speak to local government, that council is directly responsible for the CEO recruitment, CEO accountability, responsibility – all of those things. Now that might not be the full gamut of school council powers, but school council, especially in rural areas, must have more ownership, more responsibility for how their school is travelling.

Melina BATH: If I can put one question on, Chair, if it can go on notice: there has also got to be that balance, doesn't there? So if I go to the principal and defend the principal – he may have been there for a long time – you do not want a lynching mob of school councils either. So there needs to be that transparency and that balance.

Natalie MITCHELL: Not at all. But I think after a five-year contract if the school council says, 'We would like to see the position advertised,' then what is wrong with that? Why can't the current principal reapply?

Melina BATH: Go up against the new crop?

Natalie MITCHELL: Because again, if we are trying to encourage that – and we are seeing now the effects of this lack of succession planning and amongst other things workload and all of those things. We are in a dire shortage of teachers across the state, which is compounded the further you move out into the regions. So then trying to find those people in leadership areas, why aren't we looking within our schools and giving teachers the opportunity to experience that?

Melina BATH: To grow?

Natalie MITCHELL: Exactly. And that just does not happen.

Melina BATH: I have got loads more, but my time is up.

The CHAIR: I might get back to you if we have got time. Natalie, I understand you are a former teacher. I know that being remote there are challenges related to the kids schooling and teacher shortages and so on. We will break it all up, but I am more interested in relation to the kids' education standards at the moment. I will focus on that. Being a former teacher yourself and having kids, how do you rate your kids at the moment from your own experience and from what feedback you get from the teachers and your kids on the standard or grade at the moment? How do you think your kids are going with their education and the curriculum at the moment?

Natalie MITCHELL: Look, if I am completely honest, I am concerned because I do not think it is transparent as to what is happening and what gets taught at the school. I am in a position where I can help my children and both of them could read before they went to school, and my eldest started at COVID so it was homeschooling for the first two years. I am in a fortunate position where I can help my children, and listening to the speaker before and listening to those challenges, we have similar children in our area who do not have those same support services and things like that. Yes, parents play an integral role, more so than schoolteachers. Schoolteachers have 30 hours a week with kids, and that is I guess one of the challenges that we see with the curriculum. It has just been compounded and compounded because it seems like parents are relinquishing most of that responsibility onto the teachers. So it is a very fine line. I have seen that from both sides of the fence, but having said that, when I do hear about what is happening in other schools from friends or family that I know – it is very hard to know. I mean, my eldest went through NAPLAN last year and according to the NAPLAN reports she is doing very well. But again, I am in a privileged position where I can help her as much as what she is getting at school, but I do not know whether that is –

The CHAIR: Could you expand, Natalie? I know you mentioned you help her. Could you expand for us as to what you are doing in addition to assist your kid? And for parents who are not in a position to do that, what can be improved, and what are the deficiencies in relation to education at the moment?

Natalie MITCHELL: I think fundamentals are lost in the school, so your reading, your writing and your maths. Unfortunately, as we all do, if you are a teacher and you have a preference for literacy or numeracy,

some things might get missed or might not get fully taught. I think numeracy might be lacking in our school. There might not be such a focus on that because literacy might be a preference in that area. I can spend time with my children at home but not every parent can. So if those fundamentals are not focused on at school, then there is such an opportunity for gaps, like for children to keep falling through the gaps. We know that there is a decline in the standard, or I guess our children's education in Australia broadly, in comparison to the rest of the world – it is dropping, it is declining – and I think that is because the fundamentals are not being taught.

The CHAIR: Okay, thank you. Time is running out, but I will ask one quick question to Rodney. I know in your submission you mention about needing to bring back secondary school to the area. I was wondering, being a bus driver and covering much of the catchment, does the catchment you mention have the numbers to implement a secondary school in the area?

Rod O'CONNELL: No. As I said earlier, there is not. We have got to look down the track. As Natalie said before, we have got a new kindergarten there with 18 or 20 children, and we have only 35 in our primary school. What is going to happen in five or 10 years time when those kids get to go to high school or go to school? Those parents will up and go. Where do we draw the line and say, 'Let's look down the track and ask where the education is going to be.' I fear for where education is going to be if it stays where it is at the moment, put it that way. That is not the fault of the school; it is the fault of the location and the environment that it is in. The school is supposed to be a regional secondary college. It is not a regional secondary college; it is a one-town school that the other towns come into. It does not see itself as being a broader school. To answer your question, no, the numbers are not there, but the town is growing, so when do we say, 'Look, in five years what are we going to do?'

Natalie MITCHELL: But is anyone looking at the school now and going, 'How many kids are travelling by bus versus how many kids arrive?' If more than half of the kids are being bussed to the school, why are kids spending an hour each way – some of them are – to go to a school? I do not know what the numbers are, but let us say 20 are turning up by car and 80 are coming on a bus – that is not the number – then what are we doing?

The CHAIR: I think time is up, but Dr Heath, do you want to ask the last question?

Renee HEATH: I was just thinking – and this is more of a comment from you – there does need to be a plan, doesn't there, for a high school. There are 25 kids that will be coming up at some stage in the next batch. Do they add a year on? Some schools have added a year 7 then added a year 8. Would that be an option that you could see working?

Rod O'CONNELL: Yes. We did suggest maybe taking the Omeo school to year 9, for starters, just to retain and maybe stop that flow of families when the kids hit high school. That would be an option for us. But I am not here just to bag out the school that is there now. Geographically and development-wise, Omeo is the town that is developing and providing all the services and employment for the entire region, but it cannot continue to do it without any higher education. It is as simple as that, so thanks for the question.

Natalie MITCHELL: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Rodney, and thank you, Natalie, for coming in. Your evidence in relation to the area and the need to review that and oversee the catchment and look for a plan forward I think has been quite valuable. We are looking forward to the recommendations. Also, your time is greatly appreciated. Thank you so much for coming today.

Witnesses withdrew.