

TRANSCRIPT

LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL LEGAL AND SOCIAL ISSUES COMMITTEE

Inquiry into the State Education System in Victoria

Melbourne – Thursday 9 May 2024

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WITNESSES

Darren Zhang; and

Trisha Jha, Research Fellow, Centre for Independent Studies.

The CHAIR: Welcome back to the Inquiry into the State Education System in Victoria. Joining us this afternoon is Trisha Jha from the Centre for Independent Studies, and Darren Zhang. Thank you very much for joining us today.

I will quickly introduce the committee to the panel. My name is Trung Luu; I am the Chair. My Deputy Chair is Ryan Batchelor, and we have got Mr Joe McCracken to his right, Mr Aiv Puglielli, Ms Moira Deeming, Mr Richard Welch. Lee Tarlamis is on Zoom. Also Ms Melina Bath will be joining us shortly; she is two seconds away. Again, thank you so much for joining us. Before we continue I will just read some information to you. As we speak, Ms Melina Bath is joining us now.

Regarding the evidence produced today, all evidence taken is protected by parliamentary privilege as provided by the *Constitution Act 1975* and further subject to the provisions of the Legislative Council standing orders. Therefore the information you provide during this hearing is protected by law. You are protected against any action for what you say during this hearing, but if you go elsewhere and repeat the same 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 a proof version of the transcript following the hearing. The transcript will ultimately be made public and posted on the committee's website.

Thank you so much for coming in. Just for recording purposes, could you please state your full name and the organisation you are representing today, please.

Trisha JHA: Trisha Jha, Research Fellow in education, the Centre for Independent Studies.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Trisha.

Darren ZHANG: Darren Zhang. I am representing myself, I guess.

The CHAIR: Fantastic, thank you. Welcome. I know we got your submission, but I will open up for a short opening statement before we open to the committee for questions. Please, Trisha.

Trisha JHA: Thanks. The Centre for Independent Studies is an independent, nonpartisan think tank based in Sydney. I myself, though, am based in Victoria. The CIS is funded through donations, does no commissioned research and receives no government funding. The education program's focus is on producing research work to help inform policymakers and practitioners and by doing so improve the quality of education in Australia. Participating in inquiries such as this is a huge part of that work and thus I thank the inquiry for this invitation to this meeting. My professional background is that I have been in education for about a decade, both in policy and in teaching, including three years teaching at a public high school in regional Victoria. My submission is broad and very long, so I will briefly mention some key developments that have taken place since I wrote it.

The policy landscape is changing around us. There is a growing appetite from all sides of politics and from different school sectors for being more prescriptive about what is taught in schools, the curriculum, and how it is taught, the pedagogy, due to a growing recognition that this is a significant factor influencing student outcomes. For instance, the recent federal Better and Fairer review has made recommendations around embedding evidence-based teaching assessment and educational supports into the next government funding agreement. Furthermore, explicit teaching across the curriculum has been made a systemwide priority by the Catholic systems of Canberra–Goulburn, Tasmania and here in Melbourne. More recently the New South Wales Department of Education published research based on its internal data to support their move towards explicit instruction, and now New South Wales is also reviewing its syllabus to focus on more curriculum detail to complement the shift in pedagogy.

Another area of policy convergence is early reading instruction. Stronger system mandates on early reading have involved rejecting the philosophy of balanced literacy in favour of structured literacy, which involves

systematic and explicit teaching of the big six factors of early reading instruction. I mentioned in my submission that it is South Australia, New South Wales and Tasmania that have made the shift, but since the submission was written in October, Queensland and the ACT have also progressed in this area. All have rejected the vestiges of balanced literacy and committed to implementing structured literacy and a full year 1 phonics screening check. This means that Victoria stands virtually alone in not having fully embraced structured literacy.

However, Victoria can learn much from the ACT's recent independent inquiry into literacy and numeracy, which had bipartisan, or tripartisan, support. The panel's report is titled *Achieving Equity and Excellence through Evidence-Informed Consistency*. I believe Victoria should adopt a similar mission. Like Victoria, the ACT has a very autonomous school system and boasts high average NAPLAN outcomes, but these averages hide pockets of disadvantage for particular student groups. Also like Victoria, ACT educational outcomes are not what we would expect to see given, first, the funding increase of the past decade and, second, the general level of socio-educational advantage relative to other jurisdictions. Many target equity groups are underserved, and this was the impetus for the inquiry in that jurisdiction. Just last week the Victorian Auditor-General released a report showing similar outcomes in Victoria. That report concluded:

Since 2012, literacy and numeracy outcomes for Victorian government school students overall are stable.

The department is not improving outcomes for Aboriginal students and students experiencing disadvantage. Since 2012, the proportion of these students below the expected level has been stable or increased.

Victoria has always used the language of evidence-based practice, but a commitment to school-based curriculum and pedagogy, combined with a lack of transparency around education research and evaluation, has meant that schools too often are left to go it alone in terms of figuring out what will work best. This has consequences for staff and students. The quality of learning programs for students is left more to chance and dependent on which school they happen to attend or whose classroom they happen to be in, and this unevenness in quality has been acknowledged by the VCAA. In addition, leaving huge decision-making around curriculum and pedagogy solely to schools has also had a significant workload implication for teachers, particularly those early in their career. I will leave it there.

The CHAIR: Darren, have you got any opening statements?

Darren ZHANG: Sure. I guess I might as well. I mean, I will be quite impromptu. In terms of my background, I am from New Zealand, as you can probably tell by the accent, and I was educated there. I got my bachelor's there. Then I started teaching in France for a wee bit – I have been teaching in a number of universities and middle schools in France. So I have seen, I guess, a very prescriptive school system. Nationally, effectively what happens in France is that it is a very prescriptive national curriculum, but in French law there is this provision which allows teachers absolute autonomy to implement the curriculum how they want. Effectively, every teacher decides their own assessment and decides their own sequence and scope. So it is completely different every teacher to the next. Then I came back from France, and now I am currently teaching at Montmorency Secondary College as well as doing my masters of teaching because of the whole teaching shortage and whatnot. So it is a bit of a juggle. This is my day off, thankfully.

I guess my issue is: like a lot of my colleagues, I can see why we are having this sort of crisis now. At the front line, when you have got teachers who are overworked and you have got so many behaviour issues and so much administration, some days it feels like the system is sort of against you. You want to do what is best for the kids, you want them to succeed, you want to meet them at their point of need, but the issue is increasingly we are having just so many, I guess, administration – all that sort of paperwork. Then there is the 30+8 model of teaching, where 18.5 hours is face to face and 8 hours is additional duties. That leaves only 37 minutes to do preparation, correction, marking et cetera and all that. But also, the increasing standardisation which we see in the education system means that instead of being able to meet the students where their needs are at, for example, in my own sort of practice I am having to deliver this uniform curriculum because it is the requirement under the whole guaranteed and viable curriculum model, Marzano. How it is being implemented is every teacher at the exact same point does the exact same thing. So even though my kids, for example, are not there yet, I have got to sort of pull them along. They are just not ready to move forward. Things like that – this increasing standardisation, this increasing prescriptiveness – I believe we need to have a wider evaluation of what is going wrong in the fundamental of education. I will probably stop there because I assume you have got sort of – yes.

The CHAIR: Thank you for your opening statement. That gives us a good platform. I will start off very quickly, and I think that will lead to most of the questions which will focus on what I want to ask you. You mentioned phonics teaching. All the states have embraced it, and I know Victoria has embraced it as well in the last year or so. In your submission it says that the Victorian government has introduced the teaching of phonics from prep to grade 2, but you mentioned that the checking of phonics that Victoria is conducting is ineffective in its form. So can you just elaborate on what you mean by 'ineffective' and how we can do better?

Trisha JHA: The only thing I know about the phonics screening check, which is incorporated into the English Online Interview, which is a compulsory assessment, is what is available publicly. What has been made public around that is the fact that, as opposed to the federal literacy hub phonics screening check and the model that has been adopted in other states and territories, which is 40 items, 20 words and 20 non-words, the one that is used in Victoria I believe is only 10 – so five real words and five non-words, which is a very, very limited sample from which to draw a conclusion about a student's capacity in the critical area of phonics and decoding. Obviously that would inhibit the quality of judgements that teachers can draw.

I would also point out – it is somewhere in the submission. If you have got it in front of you, pages 35 and 36 have advice for designing foundation to year 2 literacy lessons as well as the reading and viewing section of the Literacy Teaching Toolkit for Foundation to Level 6. If you look at that, you will see that phonological awareness, phonics and decoding, is in there, but it is one small thing – it is almost like a menu or a smorgasbord of options. In that sense that is why I described in my opening statement the balanced literacy approach; balanced literacy is whole language with a little bit of phonics sprinkled in. What we actually need is to step away from that and be much more clear about what the big six keys to reading are and how to explicitly teach and develop those skills in the classroom.

The CHAIR: Thank you. I will move on to the panel and I will come back to you; there are a couple more questions I need to ask. Richard, would you like to start?

Richard WELCH: Thank you. Thank you, Darren. It is actually really refreshing to have an actual teacher in here, and you are from outside the bubble so I am sure everything you contribute will be very refreshing and another perspective. Certainly the phonics issue is, for me, a really important and obvious one. The sprinkling in – it is really a bit of a compromise point around that. If we were to transition to a fully phonics stage, how have the other states managed it? Are there any transition issues?

Trisha JHA: With any kind of large-scale shift of teaching practice there is a significant investment that needs to be made in terms of training. I cannot remember the details off the top of my head, but in the submission I recommend that the government examine the South Australian Literacy Unit, which is the oldest Literacy Guarantee Unit of its kind because that was started under the last Labor government then continued under the last Liberal government and now they have had another change of government. So there is a model there that shows how that model has worked under successive types of governments, and like I said it is the oldest one. But what I can tell you is that part of it is that they do report global – when I say global I mean statewide averages – for the achievement in that phonics screening check. It is also accompanied by significant amounts of professional development, so they have had literacy coaches that have been employed by the department, to the best of my understanding, to go out and actually work with schools and help develop the teachers' skills. So it is not a question of blaming the teacher and just saying, 'You guys need to do this now,' and not actually providing the support to do it.

Richard WELCH: And the other states have navigated that transition successfully, to your knowledge?

Trisha JHA: It is probably a bit early to say with some of the other states. New South Wales is probably the second most recent and obviously Queensland and the ACT have literally in just the last six months announced them. What that means for this panel is that there are tons of different people that you can speak to and lots of different models that you can look at before making recommendations in this area should you choose to.

Richard WELCH: And one last one, if I may, Trung: why do you think Victoria has not followed this path? Why is Victoria the last to do it?

Trisha JHA: That is a good question. I think that a huge amount of it is just the culture of our government, which is around a lot of school-based decision-making. The VCAA has sort of acknowledged that there was a big devolution back to schools of curriculum, so instead of having the five books or whatever that you needed

to teach and the teachers just teaching from them, that devolution happened starting in the 1970s. There were two things going on: one is that school-based decision-making was the best way to be respectful of the teaching profession, so that responsibility got lumped onto schools. In addition, the evidence was moving away from some of the rote learning aspects of phonics in the past, so the old 1950s style. As we have begun to realise, particularly from the 1990s onwards, that evidence base to support some of the more naturalistic views of learning to read, given the complexities of English in print, has essentially not vindicated that position. I think it is the combination of just a habit of autonomy, and the ACT has a similar problem, as well as that research base not quite having trickled down, and a belief that we just want to leave this to teachers, even though that has proven to not be effective in the past.

Richard WELCH: Thank you, Chair.

The CHAIR: You have plenty of time left. Have you any more questions?

Richard WELCH: I think one for Darren: the pendulum swings one way and swings another way; we go from rote learning to free. Under your preferred model, I think the obvious question is: how do you maintain a consistent minimum standard? How do you prevent deactivism, for want of a better word, of all of a teacher's preferences, or their leans or interests, from influencing then the quality of education a child might receive?

Darren ZHANG: That is a really good question. I mean, it is interesting to examine different models of curriculum et cetera. In New Zealand, where I am from, it is quite flexible. There is a framework and afterwards the values, the outcomes and all that. Of course in New Zealand we have got the Education Review Office, which is I guess almost like an inspectorate body. There is of course internal auditing by the school, making sure that the principal is ultimately the one who decides. But in New Zealand also we have got boards of trustees, unlike school councils here in Victoria which are toothless bodies. In New Zealand the boards of trustees effectively hire and fire the principal and they set governance policies, actual policies. School councils here seem to only just do property and a bit of money here and there. So yes, that is one of the key differences. It is important to do a comparative analysis of different systems. For example, in Finland and Norway, which everyone keeps talking about, there has always been strong decentralisation. However, it is quite centralised on the regional level, so it is the regional educational authority of the city, for example, that really runs it, and then afterwards they have a lot of trust in the school. There is still some degree of control but within more of a localised, regionalised body as opposed to a state level. It is important to get the nuances there.

Richard WELCH: Thank you, Chair.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Moira.

Moira DEEMING: Thank you. I will start with you, Trish. That was fantastic. You obviously know your content backwards and forwards. I was just wanting to say that I agree 100 per cent with point 4, where you said that wellbeing should be viewed 'as a product of achievement rather than its precondition' for students. I agree with that. I have found that if you help them achieve, that actually goes a huge way to helping their wellbeing. But we have actually heard a little bit, I would say, or a lot of the opposite actually, in a lot of the submissions, so I wanted you to talk to that a little bit. Also, I wanted you to talk to something else that your submission did stand out on, which is about behaviour – that the teaching of a behaviour curriculum and classroom management should be mandated. Can you just cover those two topics, the idea of achievement as the precondition and the behaviour? Thanks.

Trisha JHA: Actually I think the two are linked, and perhaps due to the way I had to structure the submission that maybe did not come out as well. But if we think about behaviour, I think the word 'behaviour' has an almost negative connotation when you sort of think about the drill sergeant aspect of behaviour, but what effective management of classroom behaviour and effective management of school culture is about is fundamentally creating a safe learning environment for students but also for staff. So we do not really have a lot of detail about the level of disruption and mislearning time that teachers in Victoria face, whereas in England, which I do mention in that submission, they do have a behaviour survey, and I think the most recent one that came out said that teachers lose something like a quarter of lesson time to behaviour issues and disruption. When we are talking about the explicit teaching of behaviour, and I hope they do not mind me saying, one school that has been profiled recently in the media around that has been Rosebud Secondary College, where instead of it kind of being about the drill sergeant, it is about setting clear expectations but also ensuring that

those expectations are clear for all staff and all students. It is about that warm, strict framework – so you are warm and you do show the kids that you care, but the strictness is not strictness because you are on a power trip, it is strictness because that is the environment that helps the students learn.

I want to relate that to wellbeing, which goes to the other point of your question. First of all, wellbeing is really complex and there are elements to a child's wellbeing that exist far outside of school, which I think we can take as read. But if you think about what the clearly number one duties of the school are that maybe no other institution has responsibility for, it is about if that child is feeling safe and well to participate in learning. Obviously, there are a whole bunch of other things that incorporate that, but in terms of what is strictly within the school's control – things like clear routines, sanctions where necessary, positive affirmation and things like that – those sorts of things help all students, including those who may have traumatic backgrounds or who may come from chaotic families. School at least becomes a place where they can come and be safe. I think that there are lots of types of different schools which will have different approaches, but both the schools that I have taught in – one, a relatively high-fee independent, and one, a lower SES public school – took things like routine seriously as setting the preconditions for effective behaviour, because we cannot expect students to behave in a certain way if we have not taught them. I think there is this expectation that kids will know and the truth is that they do not.

Moira DEEMING: Excellent. Thank you. And Darren, yes, that was very good. I wanted to just very quickly put it to you – you were talking about the difference between Victoria, where we have school councils, and New Zealand, where you have boards of trustees. I notice that in America they have got the ability for parents to come and speak to that, I think, similar board of trustees. What do you think about any ideas of getting families more involved in schooling in any of these models that you might have seen?

Darren ZHANG: I guess it is sort of about the culture which you cultivate within the school. I mean, I guess in New Zealand the idea is that I think initially it was all the members of the school council – not the school council, the board of trustees was parents at the base, but afterwards they added staff and student members and whatnot. One of the issues has been of course getting enough parents interested. Even though there is a high degree of autonomy, there are elections run by – I cannot remember the election authorities and whatnot. But getting parents involved in schools, wow.

The school that I was involved in in France was a very unique school, because it was almost an alternative to school. I guess in France it is quite a strict sort of system. In every single school across the country, it is pretty much standardised. The kids line up. When you go in, they all stand up behind their desks until they say hello and then afterwards the teacher tells them to sit down, and even at the end sometimes, and I do that in my French classes as well. I implement that sort of system. But in France it is quite a severe sort of system in that regard, and my school was the almost the exact opposite. There were no bows. You called teachers by – it is equivalent to the first name. 'Tutoyer', if you know French – 'vouvoyer', 'tutoyer'. In this environment, how they got the parents really involved was I guess making the school almost like a community hub. So on weekends they had workshops for photography and film and all that sort of thing, turning the school into not just an academic environment but also having those sorts of clubs and social events and making it really a centre of the community, which it should be – a school should be a centre. I am not too sure if it is not. That is one of the issues which I have found in terms of comparing Victorian government schools to I guess private schools. I mean, even in New Zealand state schools there are so many more activities and there is just so much more happening in the school. There is so much more life – clubs, activities – whereas here, even when I look at say University High, which is probably the top government school which is non-selective, and the range of offerings compared to even the cheapest Catholic school.

I mean, I just do not know why. But of course there is a reason why. It is because of how the Victorian education system was initially set up, with the four public grammar schools and all that up until the opening of the first government school in 1905, with that being Melbourne High School. So for a long time we have privileged private schools, but we need to turn schools, to make them a centre of community life, and I think that is the difference, because in New Zealand schools were always at the centre, their local public school.

Moira DEEMING: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Mr Puglielli.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Thank you both for coming in today. Excellent submissions. Darren, I might begin with you. Really fascinating to read about those international comparisons that you were able to draw upon. Suppose that we tomorrow decided to adopt the French model of schooling in Victoria, what would be the first thing that you would choose to bring across – like the most urgent thing that you would have observed?

Darren ZHANG: As in from France?

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Yeah, yeah, yeah – to Victoria.

Darren ZHANG: I mean, like, I guess I do not know whether I am being indoctrinated by the Melbourne University faculty of education and whatnot, but according to what they teach, everything about the French model is bad practice, according to Rosenshine and everything. Especially in primary school, the kids are afraid to leave their parents to go to school. They are literally begging their parents not to go to school at the front door because of how severe it is. I mean, school is strictly an academic environment, so you go to school for your classes, then you leave, and also of course there is an element of child care because, for example, in collège, which is middle school, you start at 8 and finish at 6 at the latest, which is good I guess if you have got a working partner and whatnot. But it is incredibly academic. It is incredibly severe.

I mean, for teachers it is great. I love the fact that I could just go in when I had classes, whether it be 10 o'clock or 1 o'clock, and then leave. There were no meetings at all, so there are no departments. Every teacher is their own God in their own classroom. For teachers it is great; for students it is –

Aiv PUGLIELLI: So for teachers it is great, good. For students and the broader schooling are there any things you would want to bring across?

Darren ZHANG: I mean, one thing I did appreciate, but then again, I am quite an academic sort of nerd. I guess I am that top student sort of person. So I mean, I love the incredible focus on general knowledge, having that vast knowledge of the arts and the humanities and science. That is important to me, but I think for most kids having a vast culture générale is probably not in the interests –

Aiv PUGLIELLI: School lunches were pretty good, to my understanding – bring them over?

Darren ZHANG: I mean, school lunches – yeah, yeah, yep. School lunches – I mean, I did not want to say that, but I mean, the 2-hour lunchbreak, yes.

Ryan BATCHELOR: Agricultural policy influence there probably.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Okay, yes.

Darren ZHANG: Yes, the 2-hour lunchbreaks – I mean, I did enjoy my three-course meal for, what was it – €2. And, yes, kids were allowed to go home because there was the expectation historically that you went home and your mum cooked you your meal, because your mum would probably have gone home as well. That is behind that sort of culture there. I guess working in France was just so shocking in terms of – I mean, some aspects were great. Like I remember I walked through the corridors in my middle school in France and there was absolute silence. You could only hear the teacher's voice as you were going and maybe that one kid who was asking a question, but absolute silence, and that is one thing. Yes, I do have that wish, when 25 per cent or more of my class time is telling kids to calm down and whatnot.

But the reason why it works in France is because there is an absolute fear of teachers, like students are so scared of teachers. Even in university I remember when I was teaching at Assas, which is I guess historically the far-right law school. That was also the top law school in France. Anyway, with these first-year students there was a colleague who would get there 1 minute late – to his class at this law school. You would not be allowed in. Your mobile phones had to be switched off. It is like absolute authoritarianism, but you do not question your teacher in France. It is a completely different culture. The teacher is God in the classroom.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Yes, full-on. If I have time, I will come back to you, Trisha, but thank you.

Trisha JHA: Yes, thanks.

The CHAIR: Joe.

Joe McCracken: Interesting. My question is to Trisha first up. The Department of Education has claimed that explicit teaching is a core component of teaching and learning in Victoria and other systems are moving to that. What do you think is actually happening in Victoria?

Trisha JHA: That is a really great question. There was a news story a couple of months ago when the Melbourne Archdiocese Catholic schools announced that they would be moving to a whole-system approach to explicit teaching across the curriculum. I believe that that was claimed by the Department of Education that it is a core component. I had written this submission, looked at some of the pedagogical documents, so I was a little bit sceptical of that. It is in here somewhere where I talk about the Victorian teaching and learning model. It is on page 26. It is an acronym salad basically, but you have got the Framework for Improving Student Outcomes, you have got the Victorian Teaching and Learning Model, then there are Practice Principles that sit under that, you have got the Pedagogical Model, the High-Impact Teaching Strategies, and more recently there are High-Impact Wellbeing Strategies.

Now, the High-Impact Teaching Strategies were out when I was teaching. The Pedagogical Model I think came out in my second or third year in a state classroom, and the Practice Principles were not out at that time, so I did not have firsthand experience of that. What I would say about the High-Impact Teaching Strategies is that there are a lot of them on there, and they are derived from John Hattie. One of them is actually explicit teaching. If you link some of the other elements of an explicit teaching framework, they can be incorporated into explicit teaching. When you add those in, maybe half of the 10 strategies could be considered linked to explicit teaching. But, as I have just said, the HITS document is not the only document that makes up the teaching and learning model. The other one that I think is really important is the Pedagogical Model, and the pedagogical model is very much, when you actually dig into the research behind it, an inquiry-based model.

Hang on, let me just read it. First of all it is engage; then it is explore, where the teacher presents the tasks and helps students expand their perspective; then the explain comes after the explore. That is textbook – not explicit – teaching. This is the pedagogical model that is being – I should say none of this is compulsory for Victorian schools. None of this model is compulsory, but if you wanted to figure out a pedagogical model and you logged on to the Department of Education to see what they are telling me to do, that is what you would see. I would also argue that this has kind of been recycled in the last few years as though it is something new. In my university ITE textbook – 2016 is when I started my degree – it had the citation ‘Department of Education 2009’. So it is not what we would call a new, cutting-edge model.

I have dug into it. It is based on something like inquiry in the secondary science classrooms. It is a really, really narrow framework that is based on two academic papers, that somehow has become the pedagogical model for the whole state. I find that bizarre. Obviously those two documents in some way I think are contradictory. I make that observation that the high-impact teaching strategies are okay. They are not bad as far as some of the things that you could use, but they are also not showing how to use them properly, so you have got no idea. If you just think, ‘Oh, setting goals is important’ but the goal you are setting is, ‘We’re going to do an inquiry learning project about whales,’ then you are unlikely to have the same amount of impact as if you explicitly went and taught, ‘Okay, our goal is to learn why whales are mammals,’ for instance.

Joe McCracken: It sounds like it is an extremely confused way of trying to instruct teachers in what might be the best way to teach. Would that be fair to say?

Trisha JHA: Yes. I think that is right. If you added up the PDF documents of all of these, I am sure it would come to 100-plus pages of pedagogical guidance. That is just from the VTLM model alone and ignores whatever is in the policy library and all the other stuff. So it is both convoluted and not very helpful.

Joe McCracken: I can get that sense very clearly. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thanks, Joe. Melina.

Melina BATH: Hello. Thank you very much for being here. I think I am certainly outclassed in my academic understanding right now. I will direct it to you first, Trisha, and then hopefully we have got time, Darren.

When I started teaching back in around 2007–08, there was a new program out in the school that I was at, and it was about maths education and a way the region took certain teachers and they became the specialists and they

came into our schools and we went to other schools and all of this. At the end of it, if someone had asked me what would have made a really big difference to my maths teaching, I would have said, 'Time with the exemplar maths teachers I already had in the school.' I think you reference it in your report – how are initiatives by the Victorian government assessed? Is there good assessment? I do not know the answer to my experience. How do the department go back and forensically look at whether there were aims and whether they were achieved in advancing teacher understanding in teaching maths?

Trisha JHA: For maths specifically I could not really tell you, but yes –

Melina BATH: I am just saying 'in general'. In general, how are things assessed in your opinion?

Trisha JHA: That is a really great question. I am just thinking about some of the programs that were live when I was teaching. One of them was the middle years literacy and numeracy strategy, which I think was probably – I am not 100 cent sure – one of the Education State initiatives. That particular program has been in place for quite some time now. I think it still exists. But if I went to the Department of Education's website and I tapped on the research and evaluations tab, I would not find a single evaluation that has been published of a school-based program for the past decade.

Melina BATH: Say that again.

Trisha JHA: If I click on the Department of Education's webpage for research and evaluations, there are a few documents there, but not one of them relates to a published evaluation of a school-based program for at least the last decade. I did not really bother going further back than a decade. That was something that really shocked me, because when I was starting research and I was based in Sydney still, the New South Wales government had just created this body called CESE, the Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation, and the role of that body is that essentially it is a one-stop shop where all of their initiatives, the ones that are evaluated by CESE – some might be evaluated by other bodies as well, which are not published, but the ones that are at least evaluated by CESE – are published. You also have your statistics about education, school numbers, student numbers and attendance. All of that sort of stuff is all in the one place, whereas when I tried to get some of that information for the Victorian state system to inform my submission, I was clicking a million different websites trying to find a million different things.

Melina BATH: So there is a lack of transparency, and other regions or jurisdictions, you are saying, have a platform where the public can go and assess that, not just teachers.

Trisha JHA: That is right. I would also just add that there may be things that are available in a teacher-only part of the Department of Education, and obviously I am sure that there are tons of things that have been independently evaluated in a commercial sense. For instance, one example is the tutoring program that was announced during COVID, which is still going on. I think it is funded to the end of 2025 at a total cost of \$1.2 billion.

Melina BATH: But if we are talking about initiatives to grow teacher capacity or to implement –

Trisha JHA: Well, we do not know. At least for the public – I mean, I am sure I could probably put in an FOI request and try and find out, but the problem that I mentioned earlier, the autonomous system, is that an autonomous system can work, but if you are not actually providing the information there for teachers to find out, 'Oh, you know, this is MYLNS, the middle years literacy and numeracy strategy. This is how this school did it, and they had this outcome. And that school did it' – oh, you know, that school is a little bit like mine – 'That's a town away. Maybe I will go talk to the principal there and see what they did.' It really inhibits the ability of parts of the system to learn from each other. That is a situation in which autonomy I do not think is particularly effective, because we are not giving schools the ability to –

Melina BATH: A recommendation then, from your perspective?

Trisha JHA: Honestly, look at CESE, copy, paste, and also let us start releasing some of the things that have already been done. I do not know what has been evaluated and what has not been. The tutor program for instance – New South Wales has done four separate evaluations on their tutor program, and their tutor program I think ended in 2023. Ours is funded to the end of 2025 at a cost of \$1.2 billion, and we do not really know beyond a 350-word summary from the Deloitte report what has actually happened.

Melina BATH: Darren, I will put my question on notice to you. I am sorry; I have run out of time.

The CHAIR: Do you want to say it?

Melina BATH: Well, I am interested in the education review office. Does that office – I am just seeking to understand – enable a review of external people walking into the classroom and reviewing it, or is it more a whole-of-structure of school?

Darren ZHANG: I guess, unlike the reviewers here in Victoria, I remember inspectors – not inspectors; I guess they are not called inspectors – or the area officers now are going into classrooms sometimes, and the teachers always have to have all the lesson plans and all that on their desks and whatnot, but it is not like a French-style inspector, who are just there to inspect the teachers. That is the French style of inspectors. Area inspectors do the school governance and all that, but they occasionally do go into classrooms as well.

Melina BATH: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Melina. Ryan.

Ryan BATCHELOR: Thanks, Chair. Trisha, in answering Joe's question you talked about autonomy as being not particularly effective when it comes to our approach to reading in the system. Obviously, there is an issue there with school councils or principals, what they have got to do, how much responsibility they have and how many things they have got to deal with. Beyond reading, what else do you think should be determined centrally rather than at a school level?

Trisha JHA: That is a really great question. My general approach to this is to say the stronger mandates and system guidance should be according to where the strongest evidence is. If we are talking just about teaching and learning, I think that reading is kind of a no-brainer. Would I then suggest that we start mandating other parts of the curriculum where the evidence maybe is not as strong? Probably not. I think that there are lots of ways –

Ryan BATCHELOR: What about numeracy?

Trisha JHA: Numeracy is something where the evidence base is not as conclusive and strong as it is for literacy; I will be out there in saying that. However, explicit instruction is a pretty evidence-based approach to it, and explicit instruction requires a huge amount of planning in terms of the underlying curriculum. I kind of made a criticism of, I guess, the sample – I would not even quite call it a scope and sequence – that is made available from the Department of Education for the teaching of maths, for instance, because it basically says, 'Here's your strand. Here's your topic', but it does not say, for instance, if you are teaching Pythagoras, what is the kind of prior knowledge that you need to be drawing on and how you actually sequence the different skills within teaching that element of numeracy. I think one of the ways that the Department of Education can take a massive load off schools is even in providing those really in-depth samples, scopes and sequences, and how that might actually look at lesson level. That is the conclusion that the ACT inquiry into literacy and numeracy has drawn. At least in conversation with the chair, when he was asked about how they would do this in practice, he said, 'Well, we're actually going to talk to our schools. We're actually going to look at our data. Where are the schools that have got some of the best outcomes here? And we're actually going to learn from them and ask them, "What do you guys do?" Let's get the people in the room that are already doing the great stuff and actually use that as a platform to disseminate this information to schools at large.' I think that is really one element, because there is lots of data on this, but I think numeracy and mathematics is a real weakness for Victoria. We have got a comparative advantage in reading; I would not say it is a super strong one. But the PISA results, for instance, the most recent ones, showed that the proportion of Victorian students that are low achievers has gone from one in five to one in four over one PISA cycle. Now, that just brings us into level with the other states and territories, but considering Victoria's really strong track record I think that is really disappointing, that decline. So I think that that element is something where a lot more guidance can be put in place.

Ryan BATCHELOR: How do you think principals and teachers would react to more prescription in what they had to teach?

Trisha JHA: I think that we need to be careful. When I say ‘prescription’ I think there is stuff that can be portrayed as best practice or evidence-informed practice, which is not to say that at the next meeting the principal has with their SEIL or their department representative, the department representative should be like, ‘Okay, bam! You need to do this now and you’ve got no time, no support, no buy-in from the school.’ That is not what I am suggesting at all. What I am suggesting is that we narrow the scope of the stuff that we actually provide and make sure it is meaningful and useful, and that essentially schools are encouraged to use this because it makes their jobs easier. Now, I think there is a really tough balance to strike so that it does not become just another ‘Oh, the department is telling me to do this. Aren’t they really annoying and out of touch?’ and that sort of thing, which is a constant complaint from schools – and I am very, very aware of how change-sceptical and change-fatigued teachers and schools are.

Ryan BATCHELOR: But you fundamentally think that is the right approach for certain elements of the curriculum?

Trisha JHA: Yes, and I think you have to kind of bring people with you. And I think the ACT model is helpful in this in the sense that it is not us, the Department of Education, telling you, ‘Go use this scope and sequence,’ it is actually, ‘This is best practice based on what we know about these successful schools.’ So it is not top-down, it is peer learning, if that makes sense. There needs to be some element of mandate, or at least strong encouragement, but the way that you do it is to make it easier.

Ryan BATCHELOR: They are very different, right? Strongly encouraging and mandating are worlds apart to some people. Should we be strongly encouraging or should we be mandating?

Trisha JHA: Are we specifically just talking about mathematics and numeracy or are we talking more generally?

Ryan BATCHELOR: And/or literacy.

Trisha JHA: And/or literacy – with early reading instruction I think we should probably be examining the feasibility of a mandate, but of course I would also argue that it is easier to get people over the line with something that allows them a little bit of flexibility rather than having a really, really rigid approach and then having them check out.

Ryan BATCHELOR: Thanks, Chair.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much. Thank you. That brought us to time. Again, thank you both for coming in. I think –

Aiv PUGLIELLI: We have still got Renee.

The CHAIR: Oh, sorry. If you have got any questions, I will actually give you –

Lee TARLAMIS: I am fine.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Is Renee there as well?

The CHAIR: Renee, have you got any questions? I did not know – clearly you popped back in.

Renee HEATH: No, I am okay, but thank you so much for an amazing presentation.

The CHAIR: There will be some questions on notice I am pretty sure. We will submit them to you and look forward to your response. Thank you very much for coming in. The submission you provided and all the answers today I think we will take on board and they will definitely go towards our recommendations down the track.

Witnesses withdrew.