

TRANSCRIPT

LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL LEGAL AND SOCIAL ISSUES COMMITTEE

Inquiry into the State Education System in Victoria

Melbourne – Wednesday 8 May 2024

MEMBERS

Trung Luu – Chair

Ryan Batchelor – Deputy Chair

Michael Galea

Renee Heath

Joe McCracken

Rachel Payne

Aiv Puglielli

Lee Tarlamis

PARTICIPATING MEMBERS

Melina Bath

John Berger

Georgie Crozier

Moira Deeming

David Ettershank

Wendy Lovell

Sarah Mansfield

Richard Welch

WITNESS

Davina Forth, Executive Officer, Beyond the Bell.

The CHAIR: Welcome back to the Inquiry into the State Education System in Victoria. With us this session we have Davina Forth from Beyond the Bell.

Davina, just quickly before we continue, I want to say that all evidence taken is protected by parliamentary privilege as provided by the *Constitution Act 1975* and further subject to the provisions of the Legislative Council standing orders. Therefore the information provided during this hearing is protected by law. You are protected against any action for what you say during this hearing, but if you go elsewhere and repeat the same thing, those comments may not be protected by this privilege. Any deliberate 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.

Just before we continue, I think you heard who we all are. Would you state your full name and the organisation you are representing, please.

Davina FORTH: I am Davina Forth, and I am from Beyond the Bell.

The CHAIR: Okay, thank you. I know we have only got a short time, but would you like to make a very quick, short opening statement, or do you want to go to questions?

Davina FORTH: Sure. I would love to just start by actually extending some thanks to everyone for having me up here to participate today. Coming from a small rural setting down on the South-West Coast, I am really appreciative of getting the chance to talk about the thoughts and experiences from our region, so thank you.

I am a past primary school teacher myself. I taught for seven years in rural Victoria and northern Queensland. After exiting education I studied a bachelor of psychological science and a masters of cognitive development and educational practice. That led me to become EO of Beyond the Bell in 2022, and I have had just the most amazing time in this space, working in a collective impact framework.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Thanks for your time. We will go straight into questions. Deputy Chair, would you like to start?

Ryan BATCHELOR: Thanks, Chair. Thanks, Davina, for coming in. It sounds like a great organisation. I wonder if you could give us some practical examples about the typical types of interventions you are doing and how they are changing the lives of the people who are engaging with them.

Davina FORTH: Sure. Under our collective impact framework, we are a background support organisation, so our main role is to enable other organisations to do the work they do better and upscale. We work under a shared framework, bringing organisations together for a targeted response to emerging issues that we see in schools in real time. The beauty of collective impact is that we are very able to respond to issues as they arise.

Ryan BATCHELOR: What sorts of issues are you typically responding to?

Davina FORTH: At the moment we have a lot of wellbeing issues in schools, a lot of school refusal and high suspension rates, so it is all about engaging students in school and making them feel comfortable and supported, as well as early transition for new families entering schools for the first time.

Ryan BATCHELOR: You are a backbone organisation, so you are bringing other people together, effectively. One of the things that we are tasked with and have got to do is to figure out – we come across a whole lot of great organisations. There are probably two questions in this. One is: how do you measure your impact and your success? And the second is a reflection on replicability and scalability: how much of what you are doing can other people do in different sets of circumstances and at a different scale?

Davina FORTH: Okay. I will answer the second part first, if that is okay. The collective impact framework has been really, really well researched around the world. It is used in Canada extensively, and it can be replicated in any place and any setting. It does not have to be a rural context, it could be regional or it could be metro as well. It is just about having a strong backbone support organisation that does that really solid work around shared measurement and bringing the right people to the table at the right time for the right reasons.

The shared measurement point of view, so –

Ryan BATCHELOR: How do you know your interventions are working?

Davina FORTH: That is a great question. We do a range of in-house surveys, so before and post surveys. We do a lot of quality assessment. We do a program called most significant change stories, which is a highly regarded way of assessing the most significant impact of a particular initiative. The only area that we do fall down in data with is actually what is accessible from the state.

Ryan BATCHELOR: What do you mean?

Davina FORTH: If I put in a data request to DataVic, a lot of the time the response I get back is that that is not data that they will allow to be accessible.

Ryan BATCHELOR: What sort of data are you looking for?

Davina FORTH: A lot of it will be around absenteeism rates –

Ryan BATCHELOR: For schools or individuals?

Davina FORTH: No, schools. What I am looking for is not particular schools; it is an LGA response, so I am looking for things like wellbeing access, suspension rates, real-life outcomes for students – not just year 12 attainment, which we can get from the census, but actually how we are tracking through the year. Where are those areas where students are starting to become disengaged and falling down? It is more about –

Ryan BATCHELOR: Are you being told you cannot get that because the data does not exist or because you are not allowed to have it? There are two reasons you cannot get data: one is that it does not exist, and one is –

Davina FORTH: I have been knocked back for both those reasons for different datasets, yes.

Ryan BATCHELOR: Okay. Sorry to interrupt.

Davina FORTH: No, that is fine. I understand the protections around all the data. Schools do not want to be compared or made to look like they are falling down in areas, but it is not really about that at all for what we require data for. It is about targeting initiatives at the right place at the right time to make sure that we actually have a baseline that we can then compare to later on.

Ryan BATCHELOR: Thanks very much. Thanks, Chair.

The CHAIR: Ms Bath.

Melina BATH: Thanks, Chair. Thank you very much, Davina, for coming in. Your recommendation 2 talks about policymakers, decision-makers and the Department of Education undergoing training in community collaboration skills et cetera. We heard from Gippsland and Latrobe Valley that there often – not always, but often – can be a disconnect between the regional department and the school community or the school family. Is that where you were heading? What did you mean by that?

Davina FORTH: Yes, I think one and two there kind of sit together. What I found myself, being a teacher and now working in community services, is that there is a disconnect in knowledge about what both organisations do as separate entities.

Melina BATH: So the school –

Davina FORTH: The school not fully aware of what the community services sector has to offer and how they wish to support, and the community services sector not really knowing how to connect with schools. So that is a lot of our work, actually bridging that gap and being a conduit for communications between the community services sector and schools.

Melina BATH: And in the middle of that is parents, who sometimes do not know back upstream what is happening in either organisation and are scratching their heads trying to get their young person to school because they are school refusing.

Davina FORTH: Correct, so it takes a village.

Melina BATH: Okay. On that, you said you began in full flow in 2022, and some of your initiatives that you have been working on are student wellbeing. With COVID, the isolated learning and the closure of schools for X many terms, what impact have you seen on the students or communities that you have been working in, and what are you doing to bridge that or to improve that? The next question is: what do we need to do?

Davina FORTH: Sure. The impact from COVID I do not think we have fully grasped the scope of even now. Students have lost that connection with school as a community and are struggling to get that back again. Not only again are we seeing low social skills; the young students who entered school for the first time in grade 2 or 3 missed foundation year, that really vital time, so it is playing catch-up now from two years worth. It is the same when you see the cohorts who were in grade 4 and 5 who then missed out on years 7 and 8, that transition period. There is a lot in it. Not only that, then a lot of older students who had not been at school for two years are saying, 'Well, I didn't need to be then. Why do I need to be now?' So there is a whole lot –

Melina BATH: There is disengagement.

Davina FORTH: A whole lot of disengagement. What we have done around that is we are working really closely with a program called Standing Tall, which is a mentoring program, and it has community members volunteering an hour of their time a week to come and spend time with a student. It is really just about building a relationship with someone that is outside of their social circle, encouraging school engagement. We are also working extensively with the Live4Life program. At the moment we have Live4Life in Glenelg and Southern Grampians in our district, and we are working really hard at the moment to get it funded to come through to Moyne and Warrnambool. Live4Life is currently on the mental health menu for the Department of Education. In my view it should be funded in every community. It is just the most amazing program for mental health and wellbeing.

Melina BATH: Okay. Just in a very short space of time, why is it so amazing? How does it connect with the community, and is the community embracing that?

Davina FORTH: Yes. It is a full community approach. So it is not one school; it is all schools in a shire plus community, and it is student-led as well. The mental health first aid training is from community members, and they train up an entire community to be more aware about mental health and wellbeing. In the schools they have youth and teen mental health training, and then young people in the schools are upskilled in their own mental health and wellbeing as well.

Melina BATH: And Beyond the Bell is involved in that?

Davina FORTH: Yes.

Melina BATH: Could you provide any anecdotes or any reports or any evidence you have seen from your patch, from your region, to the committee on that? You are saying it is working well.

Davina FORTH: Absolutely.

Melina BATH: What have you got to back that up?

Davina FORTH: I can definitely take that on notice and send you through reports for that. It is very well documented.

Melina BATH: Thanks very much, Davina. Thanks, Chair.

The CHAIR: Thanks, Ms Bath, for your questions. Mr Puglielli.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Thank you, Chair. Thank you, Davina, for coming in today. I was just going to begin with, I think it is, recommendation 4 in your submission, around ensuring the development of future interventions and initiatives through a place-based approach, tailoring strategies to the unique needs and characteristics of specific communities for more impactful outcomes. Perhaps could you expand a little bit more on why that is important, and maybe if you can give some direct examples where you have seen that to be the case.

Davina FORTH: Sure. I actually have a little document here, which is a government document, *A Framework for Place-based Approaches*. This is a 2020 document which starts by saying:

Interventions planned, funded and coordinated centrally by government are not enough to deal with the complex challenges that some Victorians face.

In this context, 'place' can provide a valuable focus point for government. It can help to:

- support civic engagement by enabling communities to apply local skills and strengths, and have a sense of ownership over decisions that are made
- think holistically and systemically by helping to understand how systems impact on people's lives, and bring together players from different portfolios and sectors to develop solutions
- support preventative, cost-effective responses by building resilient communities and targeting investment based on what works locally.

That is the entire key to a place-based approach. It is using what we already have and bringing communities together in their own system to respond to the issues in that place. We work across six LGAs in the south-west. They all have incredibly different challenges and issues that need to be addressed, even in their local LGA – that do not go to Warrnambool, that do not go across to Southern Grampians. It really enables us to have approaches that target the point of need for each community.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Thank you. If possible, for one of those LGAs, are you able to go into a bit more on-the-ground detail of what you have done?

Davina FORTH: Sure. We have a really wonderful program called Stepping Stones to School, which is delivered by OzChild. It works across at the moment Southern Grampians, Glenelg, Moyne, Corangamite and Warrnambool. Facilitators there actually go and support a family in their transition from kindergarten into school. In each separate location it is a different support mechanism and it is a different lot of schools, and the whole system is just a little bit different. Having facilitators trained from the place to be able to support the families in that place is pivotal to making sure these families have a positive and really, really productive start to their schooling life.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Perfect. Thank you. I am happy to cede the rest of my time.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Mr McCracken.

Joe McCracken: Thanks very much for coming along. I should declare I used to be a Colac Otway councillor as well, so I am pretty familiar with the program and the impact that it has. Also having been a teacher in the area too, I have some familiarity with the work that you guys have done. I know a few of the programs. Can you just talk us through the Level Up program and the graduate teachers professional learning program, just to give a bit of an idea about the things that you guys are involved in?

Davina FORTH: Sure, absolutely. Level Up is a program that is just in its final stages at the moment, and it was hinged off career pathways and exiting into a profession or into tertiary or higher education. For high school students, it brought together seven different organisations to support school engagement as well as pathways. There was more than just open days; there was more dedicated career pathway advice, there was a lot more engagement with community and industry coming into schools to talk to students about what it actually looks like to be part of that industry, what the pathways are and what the ultimate pathways are as well – just because you start here does not mean you are going to stay here, and that is not a failure. So really supporting students to understand that school goes in many different directions, and it might be a vocational major or into a TAFE, or it might be tertiary, it might be something completely different – and they are all positive pathways.

So just really supporting the young people in the district to know that there are many different ways to be successful and it does not necessarily hinge off an ATAR. It does not necessarily hinge off going to university, especially in our regions where there is a lot more of a vocational focus; we have a lot of dairy and a lot of industry. So how to be successful and what success looks like is really individualised. The students all reported that they felt really empowered, that they had a better idea of what was available in the district and that they realised they did not actually have to leave to be successful. It was a really uplifting program that we are really, really proud of. That worked across an amazing organisation called the Neal Porter Legacy, South West LLEN, Glenelg LLEN, Standing Tall in Warrnambool, Standing Tall in Hamilton, skills and job centres and TAFEs.

Joe McCracken: The other one was the graduate teachers professional learning program.

Davina FORTH: Yes. Our pilot year was last year, and it is continuing this year. So this program –

Joe McCracken: How has it gone so far? Alright?

Davina FORTH: Really, really well. We have actually had a lot more engagement this year and we have had graduate teachers contacting us to see if they can be involved, which has been really, really amazing. This program looks at supporting those graduate teachers in the early years and it is a direct response to the fact that there has been a huge attrition rate with the teachers in our district. In one of the meetings I had with one of our local principals, I said to her, ‘At the moment, what’s the biggest issue?’ and she said, ‘Tomorrow I don’t have enough teachers to put in front of my students, and that is stressing me out.’ So from that we put together this program with Deakin, and it is about supporting those students in their first four years and about bringing together a community of practice so that they can talk and hinge off career advice, and using our professors, even the teaching faculty, to come in and support them in professional development as well.

This year we are also looking at building a component that helps those graduate teachers move in the AITSL standards from being provisionally registered to fully registered, which is a huge thing. I know we have got a few teachers here. It is a massive, massive amount of work to do. One of the reasons why we have built that in is that quite a few of our schools have a teaching principal and a graduate teacher, and that is the entire school. So there is just not a support around these first-year, second-year, third-year, fourth-year teachers to come together and actually have the ability to have someone to lean on to talk to, to build a curriculum and to scope these things out. So that is what that program is for.

Joe McCracken: Basically you are filling a gap that is existing that has not been covered by the department or whoever else.

Davina FORTH: Correct.

Joe McCracken: Yes, okay. The last thing I will say – and I know I have got a couple of seconds – is about funding. How are you guys funded, and how would it be easier for you?

Davina FORTH: That is a fabulous question. We have state funding for our capacity – so organisational funding is from state. It is a three-year funding cycle. We are incredibly grateful for that support from the Department of Education. It would be amazing if that could actually be more than a three-year cycle. We know that systems change takes at least nine years to see a local level of change and more than that to see a systematic change. So to be able to have continuity in our work and actually build that scope, a longer funding model would be amazing.

Joe McCracken: Can I ask just quickly: how much funding are you getting at the moment from the state?

Davina FORTH: Our last lot of funding was a million dollars over three years.

Joe McCracken: You could do more with more though.

Davina FORTH: Oh yes. We are currently 2.6 people who do all of the work at Beyond the Bell. So if I could have a double team we would have an amazing reach and be able to do our work more succinctly across the entire region.

Joe McCracken: And reach more people.

Davina FORTH: And reach more people to do this, yes. The region is vast; it is a huge, huge region. We have a lot of philanthropic support for individual programs, but it is not for capacity. So it is not for us to run our organisation, it is actually just for programs that we run in the community.

Joe McCracken: Thanks.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Joe. Moira.

Moira DEEMING: Thanks for coming in. It sounds like a fantastic program. There are obvious benefits to the students themselves, and obviously it is very practical. I am just guessing, but I am sure it is true, that there are secondary benefits for the local community by virtue of the fact that you are engaging locals, so that students and community groups and members know each other and they can know and be known by actual real locals in the community rather than that top-down approach.

Davina FORTH: Absolutely.

Moira DEEMING: I just want you to talk to that for a little bit.

Davina FORTH: Sure. I think that is multifaceted as well. Having local people coming into the schools to do work, such as the mentors from Standing Tall. There are many, many success stories from that where young people have actually gone to work in the businesses where the mentors first met them in a school. Having that connection back into community means that we are getting local jobs filled by local people. It also means that the young people feel more comfortable in the community. They know people. They see them. It is amazing. You see young people down the street and they are like, 'Hey, how are you?' because they know who you are. So that connection is really, really important on a local level. It also means that we are more responsive to local issues that are happening in real time rather than sort of just a generalised program that comes in that is a one-size-fits-all-type approach.

We do a little bit of work at the moment with the implementation of the Stars program in Warrnambool College and Brauer College, so making sure local community is central to that has been really pivotal in that approach as well. We also sit on the Koorie education roundtable for the district – so, again, making sure that the right people are in the right rooms at the right time and that, even on a local level, we are not sort of telling people what needs to be done. We reach out and we get a full approach. On that, we actually also focus a lot on youth voice. We have something called the Youth Conversations project, which was the largest research project in the south-west that ran in 2019. We are running that again this year. That was 711 youth voices talking about what keeps them engaged in community and education; what they hope for their future; and at the time there was a COVID response question as well. A lot of the programs that run in our district were actually targeted from that research that came out then.

Moira DEEMING: Fantastic. I am happy to cede my time. That is great.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Dr Heath, are you still on Zoom?

Renee HEATH: Yes, thank you. I have just got a couple of questions. You have got a graduate teachers program.

Davina FORTH: Yes.

Renee HEATH: What were the biggest gaps that you found with those graduate teachers?

Davina FORTH: A lot of the teachers spoke about, especially where they were from small schools where they were the only teacher other than a teaching principal, having that community of support around them – so someone to bounce ideas off, someone to have as a support network that was greater than the one person, which is where we have gone to this year with having communities of practice as well as workshops and support.

Renee HEATH: Awesome. Is there a recommendation around that for other teachers coming out, do you think?

Davina FORTH: Should there be?

Renee HEATH: Yes.

Davina FORTH: Absolutely. I think that it is an amazing opportunity for teachers to come together. It is something that I wish I had had, being a regional teacher. It would be a fantastic initiative to have, especially in rural and regional communities where you have small schools and maybe a smaller pool of staff.

Renee HEATH: Yes. I do not know how to ask this question, but did you leave teaching because you were not supported, and was this a response to what you experienced yourself?

Davina FORTH: No. I left teaching more because I realised that there was a whole lot of wellbeing and cognitive development that needed to be done around young people for them to be able to learn efficiently and effectively, so I actually just streamed out into the psychology world for that reason, not because I wanted to leave the profession.

Renee HEATH: Yes. Has there been an improvement in school refusal or a reduction in school refusal since these kids joined this program?

Davina FORTH: Yes, absolutely. I have heard schools saying they had not seen students for quite some time, and once they were engaged in one of these programs they are actually coming to school – maybe to begin with only coming to school on the days that those programs happened, but then eventually building on to actually being present in the classroom, coming to a session and then going, ‘I’m going to go to maths now.’ It is an amazing thing to see actually because previously they were not coming to class at all.

Renee HEATH: Yes. And what have been the common needs that you have found with students?

Davina FORTH: So students, when I talk to them – I try and go to schools weekly to talk to students. They talk about issues around bullying, they talk about issues around vaping, and there is just a general feeling of not having connected back with school after COVID. It is multifaceted, and I think that it starts with students – it starts with understanding exactly what is happening for them and why – and then building supports around that.

Renee HEATH: That is awesome. Where do you find these mentors? Are they volunteers? How do you connect them with your program?

Davina FORTH: The Standing Tall group are just amazing at gathering people. There is a lot of social media that goes out. They also have nights where presentations and community members come along. We have also got a few bigger organisations in Warrnambool who will send two or three staff members. There is actually buy-in from community to support this program.

Renee HEATH: That is fantastic. Thank you so much. Good on you, and that is all of my questions.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Dr Heath. Thanks for that. Just a quick question in relation to – I know Beyond the Bell has been successful in regional areas. I also want to ask: with those successful programs, how are they measured? Do you actually measure the outcomes?

Davina FORTH: Yes. At the moment a lot of our measurement is qualitative, so it is based on what we are hearing from schools, from young people and from the organisation and the community. Our larger programs such as the Level Up program had pre and post surveys built in as well, so we had a quantitative approach there as well as qualitative. Programs like our Stepping Stones to School have a full system in place there around school readiness skills, and it has a toolset there that is a full assessment of school readiness when they begin the program and school readiness when they are leaving the program. There is an actual continuum that we can measure the success of that program through as well.

The CHAIR: Do you actually cost each program as well? I ask that because you mentioned that one of your recommendations is to promote and share the resource expertise, and you also mentioned that LGAs have different needs and different challenges.

Davina FORTH: Yes.

The CHAIR: How do you then measure the cost with sharing your resource expertise for each program with different LGAs with different challenges and different needs? If we are going to promote this across the state,

how are you going to envisage running the program and being equally balanced and fair once it is divided equally across the state?

Davina FORTH: It is a question of equity, I suppose, rather than equality – so looking at what is actually needed in each LGA and what programs need to be supported to bring the young people up, in an educational sense, in that area. When you look at staffing Stepping Stones for School, for example, we look at what the population is. There is a cap on how many young people each facilitator has in their case load, and then it is costed back from there.

The CHAIR: Also, because it is regional, how do you see it in relation to movement across the share and across metropolitan, because the challenges of metropolitan are quite different – LGAs are smaller and their populations are more dense. The challenges might be different as well.

Davina FORTH: Absolutely. You would have to really look at the populations that are being looked after within the model. So the way that collective impact works in a rural setting would be quite different to a metro one, and I would not be able to comment on exactly what that looks like in a metro setting. I am a rural girl – always have been – and it is really based on the cohort that you are looking at.

The CHAIR: Just quickly on the funding you have received so far – it is fantastic you have received that funding and we would like it to continue. How do you actually split it up in relation to program needs and funding each program? How have the costs been divided so far?

Davina FORTH: What the funding model looks like at the moment is that we have our capacity funding, which runs our organisation as it stands, and then we will have submissions to different philanthropics for program costs and program running. It is really just based on the individual program. We get it to a stage where it is ready to go, but then we need to source funding to actually launch. It is a little bit of a clunky approach, but you have to have something to present to a philanthropic that you need funded before you can do it. It is not an ideal situation, but it is the way we work.

The CHAIR: I do not have any questions. We have got a few minutes if anyone else wants to –

Michael GALEA: All good, thanks, Chair.

The CHAIR: Ms Bath.

Melina BATH: I think you have been fabulous, and thank you very much for the work that you are doing and the connections you make into your communities as well. Thanks, Chair. We look at the village to raise the child. Has there been any anecdotal evidence so far in this short time about what it is doing to the older people in the community that you are connecting with or the businesspeople? I know you mentioned a pathway for careers, but has there been any sort of feedback from that community to you?

Davina FORTH: I suppose in an individual project sense, especially when you look at the Standing Tall mentoring, those mentors often speak about how they feel they are putting back into the community and they feel like they have made more contacts and they have a social aspect that they did not have.

Melina BATH: A purpose or a greater purpose or an additional purpose.

Davina FORTH: Absolutely. Organisations talk about how they feel like they are contributing to society as well. It is only an hour a week, but it is still releasing a staff member to do it. It sort of empowers the community to feel like they are putting in and they are making a change as well.

Melina BATH: All of those volunteers would go through rigorous checks, working with children et cetera.

Davina FORTH: Absolutely. There is a full interview process, working with children checks and a very good child safety and wellbeing policy built into that too.

Melina BATH: Suitability et cetera, which is fabulous. Thanks, Chair.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much. In that case, thank you so much, Davina, for coming in. I hope the program continues with success and expands. We will gather all the information and look forward to bringing recommendations forward moving forward. Again, thank you so much for coming in.

Witness withdrew.