

# TRANSCRIPT

## LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL LEGAL AND SOCIAL ISSUES COMMITTEE

### **Inquiry into the State Education System in Victoria**

Melbourne – Thursday 9 May 2024

#### **MEMBERS**

Trung Luu – Chair

Ryan Batchelor – Deputy Chair

Michael Galea

Renee Heath

Joe McCracken

Rachel Payne

Aiv Puglielli

Lee Tarlamis

#### **PARTICIPATING MEMBERS**

Melina Bath

John Berger

Georgie Crozier

Moira Deeming

David Ettershank

Wendy Lovell

Sarah Mansfield

Richard Welch

**WITNESSES**

David Baker, Manager, Policy, and

Desiree Smith, Clinical Educator, Orygen; and

Lucy Demant, Policy and Advocacy Manager, Youth Affairs Council Victoria.

**The CHAIR:** Welcome back to the Inquiry into the State Education System in Victoria. Joining us for this session we have Desiree and David from Orygen and also Lucy from the Youth Affairs Council Victoria.

I want to quickly introduce the committee to you before we continue. I am Trung Luu, the Chair of the committee. The Deputy Chair is Mr Ryan Batchelor. We have Mr Joe McCracken, Ms Melina Bath to my right, Mr Richard Welch, Ms Moira Deeming, Dr Renee Heath and Mr Lee Tarlamis on Zoom as well.

Thank you for coming in. Just quickly, I will read this before we continue. 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 with a proof version of the transcript following the hearing. The transcript will ultimately be made public and posted on the committee's website.

Again, thank you so much for your time. Just for the Hansard record, could you please state your full name and the organisation you are representing today.

**Lucy DEMANT:** Hi. I am Lucy Demant. I am from the Youth Affairs Council Victoria.

**David BAKER:** David Baker from Orygen.

**Desiree SMITH:** Desiree Smith from Orygen.

**The CHAIR:** Welcome. Before I open it up to the committee to ask questions, I invite you to give a short opening statement, and then we will go from there. Thank you.

**Lucy DEMANT:** Thank you for having me. I want to talk about how our secondary schools are currently not equipped to create the safe, supportive and inclusive environments needed to ensure all young people are supported to thrive. So young people are attending schools with overstretched resources, teaching staff who are not getting the supports they need and canteens selling our kids soft drinks and highly processed sugary foods which we know are linked to obesity, cancer and mental health issues. We are seeing growing rates of misogyny, violence, transphobia and racism exacerbated through social media with no blurring from the schoolyard to home. We are seeing a lack of gender-affirming environments for trans and gender-diverse young people and unsafe school environments for those young people from both teaching staff and students alike. There is a lack of supports or inclusion for disabled young people and high levels of bullying are experienced by disabled young people. What we are also seeing is a lack of understanding about the relationship between trauma and symptom behaviours, leading to unnecessary and damaging punitive responses.

We are also seeing this separation from primary school to high school with parent engagement. At the moment in high schools a lot of high school parents and carers are only getting two 10-minute online parent-teacher interviews a year and surface-level kinds of communications, so there is a real gap there. The idea that education is one size fits all is not fit for purpose, and as a result we are seeing many children experiencing 'school can't'. So we need to reframe this language of school refusal to 'school can't', as we know these children are experiencing a range of factors, including anxiety, mental health, lack of inclusion and safety, which makes it not a deliberate choice. We know that 'school can't' is most prevalent amongst disabled young people, particular neurodivergent and those with mental health challenges.

We know the solutions exist, and we will hear some from our colleagues at Orygen today, but our work tells us that the Victorian government must invest in trauma-informed and student-centred learning environments so schools can identify and support high-need students early. Our educators are amazing, our schools are amazing, but at the moment they are desperately lacking the supports and resources they need so that all young people can thrive.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, Lucy. David.

**David BAKER:** Great. I too would like to thank the committee for the opportunity to present today on the importance of supporting students' mental health in school. As we know the majority of mental health disorders onset during adolescence and into the early 20s and the rate of mental health among our young people has been increasing for more than a decade now – in some instances the evidence suggests for 20 years. There is a great opportunity in our education system to be identifying where those needs exist that may have been missed through the health system but also to be providing a broader structure of mental health support for students and enabling the schools and the teachers with the skills to be recognising where that need is. There is an opportunity for the education department and the health department to work together because there are benefits for both and there are benefits for the students in their long-term outcomes and their engagement with lifetime learning. Desiree is here today. She has experienced working in schools and also has led the development of modules that are part of the –

**Desiree SMITH:** School mental health menu. Hi. Thank you very much for the opportunity to come and speak to you today about how Orygen is supporting the Department of Education to address and work with them to build the youth mental health or the wellbeing of students. So Orygen have been working alongside the Department of Education across a few initiatives now. Part of the student mental health and wellbeing toolkit that the department have, has three initiatives – one of those being the school mental health menu, the mental health practitioner initiative and building mental health and wellbeing for primary school. So Orygen have been working across two of those initiatives. With the school mental health menu, Orygen have been fortunate to be able to offer two programs to schools on that mental health menu. One is trauma-informed care, and the other one is to be able to build their capacity to deliver the brief intervention toolkit. Those programs that we offer really focus not only on delivering an evidence-base and interventions but also on building school capacity to sustainably do those practices. Orygen have also developed school implementation toolkits. We use those to be able to then work with schools to build their capacity to sustainably practice.

The other initiative is we support the mental health practitioners in schools. Currently there are 350 mental health practitioners in schools across Victoria, both in the mainstream schools and specialist schools. We have been able to develop a wraparound support for those practitioners. One is a practice advice line that we offer clinicians to be able to call us at any time to provide support, secondary consultation. The other initiative is being able to offer the practitioners activities to build their skill and competence in delivering interventions directly with young people. This year we have been fortunate to be able to offer mental health practitioners group supervision. We have currently 250 mental health practitioners registered for that initiative, and we are running 25 groups across the state.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you so much for that. I will quickly have one question before I throw over to the panel. I totally agree in relation to parent engagement. It is a vital part of how a school and students move forward. I know it has been dropping, having five kids myself. Just one question to you, the issue regarding all these new programs, all these counsellors and the confidentiality of counsellors not involving parents: does that drive that barrier wider with engagement or doesn't it? I just want to ask you that question.

**Lucy DEMANT:** I know Orygen will be able to talk to this a little bit, but there are a couple of things I think we can say there. Parent engagement just in creating a sense of a school community – so that we are all in this together and that parents are being informed about what is being taught at school, being informed about the importance of Respectful Relationships. Even though that should be done, it is not always happening. So there is a broader thing going on. That kind of sits outside of creating this community.

In terms of the confidentiality, it depends on where that young person sits – are they over 16, are they under 16? Having trusted workers in schools – and we are really strong advocates for embedding more youth workers in schools to build up those trusting relationships with young people – and then they can also work with the families as well and provide outreach support to families. So there is a way of navigating those barriers but we

see that embedding the services – as Orygen are doing and doing some great work in that space – embedding more services in schools to engage the young people in schools as a first port of call.

**Desiree SMITH:** Yes. Thanks, Lucy. But it is also building the school's capacity to be able to engage and work with families. One of our resources that we have developed on supporting schools with school attendance challenges is around that collaboration: how do we work as a team to be able to support young people? And talking about confidentiality in terms of working specifically with a clinician or a youth worker or a psychologist, we are bound by confidentiality, but there are ways in which we work with young people to work around that, and one is to recognise that families are part of the system that young people have. So how do we navigate bringing families into those conversations as well? And of course there are things like risk. If a young person is at risk, we need to breach confidentiality. And that is something that the workforce, especially the mental health practitioner workforce, are aware of, and so they will escalate if there is a young person at risk. Part of our work when we work with young people is laying that foundation right at the beginning of the engagement and making clear to young people what we can talk about together but when I would need to tell somebody else about what is happening for them as well.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you. Just before passing it on, I think for those workers actually the ultimate decision comes back to them, so they need to be aware of the situation and trained in that aspect. That is just my comment. Deputy Chair?

**Ryan BATCHELOR:** Thanks, Chair. Thanks, everyone, for coming in. Lucy, I might start with you and your first recommendation on the language around school refusal and why it is important that we shift it. Could you expand for us a bit about why you think reframing these issues is important for young people?

**Lucy DEMANT:** Yes, absolutely. When we talk about the language of school refusal, we are positioning the problem with the young person, so the child becomes the issue. Actually when we use the language of 'school can't' we understand that it is not a deliberate choice not to attend school; we start thinking about those underlying factors. So as I mentioned, we know 'school can't' is prevalent among both the neurodivergent and those with mental health challenges, so we are thinking now about whether it is the failure of the school system and the supports provided rather than a failure of the young person. And when we are thinking about what is leading up to 'school can't', we are seeing a combination of negative experiences, so these young people feel unsafe and excluded at school – and this was also true for LGBTIQ+ young people.

In the case of disabled young people we are thinking of things like denial of reasonable adjustments and necessary supports, significant bullying from both teachers and students, harassment and humiliation. We know that disabled young people in Australia face higher rates of school-based bullying compared to their non-disabled peers. So we need interventions that are focused more on equipping the schools to support these young people, early intervention – because once those school-can't behaviours start emerging we have missed that window for early intervention and prevention. So we need more youth workers in schools to build up those consistent, trauma-informed, protective relationships with young people so that they can identify them, work with them and support them before we get to that point of 'school can't'.

**Ryan BATCHELOR:** Thanks so much. I might just move over to David and Desiree. It would be useful for the committee to understand a bit how the prevalence of mental health disorders and illness amongst students has evolved and changed in the last decade or so, if you have got any evidence you can give the committee about what is changing in what we are seeing amongst our students and if we can understand a bit from your perspective of what the 'why' might be.

**David BAKER:** I can start. There are a number of factors that are informing the increased experience of mental ill health among young people. If we track back, obviously the experience of COVID lockdowns in Melbourne was a contributing factor. But that exacerbated existing problems, and so we need to also look more broadly from the young person to social determinants. For example, loneliness has been increasing among young people. That is a contributing factor, and it has a two-way relationship with mental ill health. Then there are the expectations placed on students around their need to perform at school and how much rides on their experience too, academically, and then they are also working on the social environment at school. So it is balancing all the expectations and pressures on students within the schools, and then that can manifest in a number of different forms of mental ill health. The most prevalent disorders are around depression and anxiety, and those symptoms can also lead to lower prevalence mental disorders and more severe symptoms. Desiree?

**Desiree SMITH:** As I mentioned earlier, we support the 350 mental health practitioners working in schools on the practice advice line and in the other initiatives. Some of the conversations that we have had with those MHPs have been around risk and complexity – just how challenging it is for young people with the several different things that they are grappling with, such as with our young people that are neurodivergent, navigating schools, the complexity of their family systems, engagement of schools, feeling disconnected and, as David said, feeling isolated. Also, as their mental health challenges or difficulties increase, where do they go for support in navigating the system?

**David BAKER:** I would also add that at that time, that adolescent period, a young person goes through a lot of developmental changes. It is physical, it is emotional and it is cognitive. In that period of puberty there is lots of change going on that they have to navigate. That is alongside the environment they are working in socially but also their learning environment.

**Ryan BATCHELOR:** Thanks.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you. Dr Heath.

**Renee HEATH:** Thank you so much for your presentation and for your submission. There is a mood that I have been sensing over this inquiry that I would just like to ask your opinion on. First of all, do you think that stress is a mental health issue?

**Desiree SMITH:** That is a really good question. One of the things that working directly with young people around is what is the impact on that experience for the young person and is that causing distress. Then if it is causing distress, thinking about that from a mental health perspective. What is the impact then? Stress can lead to distress and become a mental health concern, so it is really around the young person and their capacity to be able to manage that may determine whether it becomes a mental health issue.

**Renee HEATH:** Okay. My understanding is that small levels of stress, for instance, small levels of cortisol, adrenaline or epinephrine or those things can actually enhance your focus, help memory and help you learn, whereas long periods of time and increased levels can be detrimental to learning. But I am wondering if, with a lot of these programs and a lot of the mindset in schools, people are trying to take out stress rather than teach young people how to handle it properly. Stress is not isolated to school; unfortunately it goes on through life. And if we are trying to prepare kids for life, shouldn't we be trying to help them adapt really well to incredible stress, even such as rocking up to school when you feel you cannot or these sorts of issues? Sorry, to be very direct there.

**Desiree SMITH:** No, that is okay. I think it is all around building young people's resilience. How do you cope? It is not just about dealing with mental ill health, but it is also around how we promote mental wellbeing as well. How do we support young people to develop skills to be able to bounce back or deal with stress going forward? How can they be able to navigate those spaces, as David was saying, around those developmental milestones and then develop those skills into adulthood as well – so those positive coping strategies.

**Lucy DEMANT:** I was just going to say absolutely everything that you have said Desiree and also supporting young people that when they are feeling stressed, so with the mental health packs or youth workers, linking them to the right supports and knowing who to turn to, how to help-seek when you are identifying that – okay, I notice that I am feeling a little bit flat, or I am feeling a little bit stressed – how can you support yourself? Then when you are experiencing a range of other issues, knowing who to turn to and where the right supports are. So that is all about that kind of holistic response to young people that we need.

**Desiree SMITH:** Yes, and that is why supporting our mental health practitioners to be able to support young people to navigate those spaces is really important, and around developing, as Lucy was saying, those help-seeking skills but also recognising when that stress is at that range where, 'Yes, I'm managing, but what are some of the things that indicate to myself that, okay, I am maybe not managing and it's starting to impact the way that I'm' – this is my word – 'functioning', really. So it is around working with young people to recognise that time so they are being able to put things in place before it starts to lead into more mental ill health.

**Renee HEATH:** Yes, okay.

**David BAKER:** Yes, and in addition to recognising in individual students the skills to recognise how they are responding, we also have to recognise that every student is coming from a different experience, and for individuals, they have different, broader contexts that they are living in that will have other stress factors as well. It is not just the stress they experience at school, and healthy stress as well, but for individuals, that ebbs and flows as well. Some weeks they are going to have really great weeks where they are feeling up, they are feeling strong, but then something else happens in another part of their life, and then that changes how they can respond to stress. It is recognising that student A does not always respond to stress the same way throughout the year, and within a classroom you are going to have a range of different responses. It is always changing. So it is giving teachers the skills to know how to press students to achieve or to be working hard, but also responding to how they are at different times during the week and within the group as well.

**Desiree SMITH:** Yes, and I think that is a really important point, David, around being able to recognise that young people have systems as well, what is happening in those more broader systems and really building teachers' capacity to be able to understand that and be able to reframe the way that they may approach, so they are getting the best outcomes out of young people.

**Lucy DEMANT:** And just quickly on that, because that was so beautifully said, thinking as well that these supports are also around identifying those young people who have, as we are talking about, all these other things that are going on at home, whether it is housing instability, homelessness, family violence, familial substance use issues or substance use issues themselves. It is about being able to connect with those young people really early and provide them with the supports that they need, and also support teaching staff to understand that their behaviours are symptoms of what is happening outside of school as well.

**Renee HEATH:** Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Thanks, Dr Heath. Mr McCracken.

**Joe McCracken:** Thank you. It has been an interesting conversation so far. The Youth Affairs Council – I note that you said before the contact that parents have is sometimes only two lots of attending interviews online, which if you are trying to create a partnership between parents, students and teachers, is quite challenging. What do you think would be an ideal model going forward in that space to change what currently exists?

**Lucy DEMANT:** I am definitely not the expert in what that type of model would look like, but I think we can start by bringing parents and carers into the school for a start so we are having those individual interactions, we are having communications that are regular and open between parents and carers and teaching staff, we are inviting the parent and carer community into the school for different events as well. I think all those forms of engagement, including basic things like working bees – all the stuff that happens in a primary school setting. We have also heard a lot from services of the drop-off of information that happens in terms of student need. In primary school there is a lot of discussion, and primary school is not our space, but this is what we have heard from services. There is a lot more interaction around particular student needs, and I know there is a lot more that needs to be done in that space, but this information is not then carried across to the secondary school setting, so it is almost like having to reset and start again. If the parents or carers or young person do not feel comfortable advocating for their own needs, this adds a whole new layer of complexity and barriers for that young person's learning and positive schooling environment.

**Joe McCracken:** Yes. I mean, I used to teach in a country school, and a country community is a lot more, what I would consider, connected, because you can basically have a parent–teacher interview in Safeway.

**Lucy DEMANT:** Yes.

**Joe McCracken:** It is true.

**Melina BATH:** You can have an MP interview in Safeway.

**Joe McCracken:** It happens. I guess my comments relate probably more to communities that you might consider less connected. How would you bridge that gap when there is a lesser sense of community,

particularly given different schools are different as well – what do you think would be a way? I mean, I know you mentioned working bees.

**Lucy DEMANT:** That was just a –

**Joe McCracken:** I know.

**Lucy DEMANT:** I think communication is a massive one, and I also think bringing parents and carers into the messaging that young people are receiving in terms of, say, Respectful Relationships. It is having this open conversation so we are seeing consistent messaging at home and we are seeing consistent messaging at school, and also ensuring that young people have a voice within all of this, so asking young people: ‘How would you like to see your parents or carers more connected with the school? What does that look like for you?’ We cannot forget that this is who we are talking about here, so we need to be asking them what they think as well.

Just on that rural piece, it is interesting because I think there is a balancing act as well. What we are hearing about in the rural communities where schools are so short-staffed is that a lot of the wellbeing issues are being picked up by teachers, which students are really uncomfortable with because they are having to talk to their teacher about something that they might want to keep quite distinct.

**Joe McCracken:** It can depend on the relationship, though.

**Lucy DEMANT:** Yes, totally, and so much of this is relationship-based. That is what I think the mental health practitioners and youth workers do so well: they create those relationships with young people, and then teachers can continue on with the job that they are there to do rather than having to navigate this world that at the moment they are totally not equipped to do. It is embedding those supports. When we say ‘embedding’, we are not talking about outreach to the school a couple of sessions a week. We are talking about embedding the workers into the school two to three days a week. We use a couple of case studies in our submission, the BRACE program and Empower, which we were so disappointed to hear on Tuesday has been cut. At a time when schools are needing resources so desperately, we are cutting programs that see youth work in schools.

**Joe McCracken:** Add it to the list.

**Lucy DEMANT:** We were devastated, because the work that those youth workers is doing is just phenomenal in providing that wraparound support.

**Joe McCracken:** Thanks for that. I think my time is up.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you. Mr Tarlamis?

**Lee TARLAMIS:** Thank you, Chair. Lucy, you spoke about the importance of working with young people, around how they see services being delivered and how they see families being engaged in the process. How much of the programs and the work that you do incorporates that co-design for people?

**Lucy DEMANT:** You should have a look at our website. We have got a lot around youth participation. It is really important to us. In most work we do we consult with young people. We listen to what they are saying, whether that is through consultations or surveys. We have a whole youth participation wing that is run by peer facilitators. Our affirmative consent project is peer led and peer designed by young people. I think there are a lot of learnings for that within schools, particularly within the Respectful Relationships space. We are hearing with Respectful Relationships that teachers are not feeling equipped or that they have got the capacity or the confidence to deliver the program. They are also getting pushback from community, which again is that piece around speaking and bringing parents and carers along with the messaging, particularly in the current climate. Yes, there is something very important around ensuring that programs are co-designed and peer-led where possible.

**Lee TARLAMIS:** I assume that would also deal with issues about the medium in which it is being delivered and ensuring that marginalised communities and those that do not have digital are addressed.

**Lucy DEMANT:** 100 per cent – yes, absolutely.

**Lee TARLAMIS:** Would that be the same for the work of Orygen as well?

**Desiree SMITH:** Yes, that is. Our team have developed a toolkit to support schools to be able to increase student voice in programs as well. Definitely in our training that we do, in terms of trauma-informed care in schools, it is around how we work together to improve student voice and choice in how we deliver and work with young people around trauma and trauma-informed care.

**Lee TARLAMIS:** Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, Lee. Ms Deeming?

**Moira DEEMING:** Thank you. Thanks for coming in. I have got a couple of questions, one I would just like to have you answer on notice. I was very shocked to hear that there is bullying of disabled students by teachers. I have not heard about that; that is pretty shocking. If you could provide more information about that. You also said that there is a lack of gender-affirming environment for trans students. I am curious about that, because as far as I can tell, that is mandated. You also said in response to Mr Luu's question about informing parents that one of the issues was whether the children are over 16 or not.

**Lucy DEMANT:** Yes.

**Moira DEEMING:** Yes. But it is actually a mature minor model in schools, not whether they are over 16 or not. So I thought that was an odd answer. Given that resisting gender affirmation of a student at home could actually be classed as family violence, I would just like to know how parents are supposed to feel like they are on board with this if they do not agree.

**Lucy DEMANT:** Absolutely. There are a few things I can pick up immediately there, thank you. In terms of the bullying that disabled young people –

**Moira DEEMING:** Oh, no, those can be on notice, it was just the last one.

**Lucy DEMANT:** Yes, I am just going to refer you to the Youth Disability Advocacy Service. I am happy to follow that up with you afterwards.

**Moira DEEMING:** Great.

**Lucy DEMANT:** In terms of the model in terms of the over 16 – so I am thinking about youth workers who work, say, in schools and out of schools, and they work usually around that model of over 16, under 16. But within schools I would definitely turn to Orygen to provide a more informed statement on that.

**Moira DEEMING:** Sure.

**Lucy DEMANT:** LGBTIQ+ – absolutely that is one of our biggest concerns, when young people are not feeling safe at home. We know that that leads to high risk and homelessness. There are high rates of suicide with LGBTIQ+ young people, yes.

**Moira DEEMING:** So on that – declaring a child a mature minor in order to affirm their gender at school – they can withhold that information from the parents on the basis of them being unsafe because that might be family violence. But then those children are still sent home every single night to parents who have been deemed unsafe to know about this incredibly important psychological change in their child. I just cannot work out – either they are safe or they are unsafe. If they are unsafe, why are they even going back to that house?

**Lucy DEMANT:** Yes, and there is a massive, massive piece of work in that around what messaging are we giving to the community at the moment and how are we supporting those young people? What are we doing to keep them safe? Absolutely. We have got some amazing organisations who work in that space, and I can definitely link you with them afterwards.

**Moira DEEMING:** Great. Thank you.

**Lucy DEMANT:** I am happy to do that. That is not my area of expertise, but I am happy to link you up with some really good people in that space.

**Moira DEEMING:** Thank you. And for Orygen – sorry, if I could just continue – you talked about mental health practitioners and youth workers. Can you please tell me what their qualifications are?

**David BAKER:** Lucy could talk to youth workers, because that is their area.

**Moira DEEMING:** Well, that can be on notice for you, yes.

**Lucy DEMANT:** Yes, sure.

**Desiree SMITH:** I can speak to the mental health practitioners. That is an initiative of the Department of Education, but in my experience with supporting mental health practitioners, they are psychologists, social workers, mental health nurses and mental health occupational therapists. So occupational therapists, mental health nurses and psychologists are AHPRA-registered, and then you have got your social workers, who have a separate accreditation body.

**Moira DEEMING:** And they can all be classified as these mental health practitioners?

**Desiree SMITH:** That is correct.

**Moira DEEMING:** Okay, thank you. Also –

**The CHAIR:** Mind if that question is put on notice?

**Moira DEEMING:** Yes, I will put it on notice. So my question was: you talked about once you have gained the consent of a child or they have been declared a mature minor, they are in the confidentiality space, right? So you are keeping their information confidential based on the mature minor status. But you also said that if there is a risk of danger, like serious imminent danger, that you would have to inform someone. Who do you inform? Is it the parents, if the child has got a mature minor status? Who do you even inform?

**Desiree SMITH:** That would be the mental health practitioners in schools. The Department of Education would have a policy around what the escalation of that risk is.

**Moira DEEMING:** But you do not have advice for the schools about that? Like, that is not part of what you do?

**Desiree SMITH:** Our advice to mental health practitioners that find themselves in that position would be to ‘escalate that risk to your leadership team’.

**Moira DEEMING:** Right. Okay. Thanks.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you. Ms Bath.

**Melina BATH:** Thanks, Chair. Thank you very much for your insights today. Lucy, can I go back to you. You mentioned the youth workers being cut in this year’s budget. Could you expand on that and explain the value of them? And with any of these questions, if you send all of them to the secretariat, they are shared amongst everyone. So continue. Thank you.

**Lucy DEMANT:** Yes. Great. Thank you. I am talking specifically about the Empower program. That employs youth workers, and through that program they were embedding some of their youth workers – I am talking here specifically in Swan Hill – into schools two days a week. And you will see in our submission, we list a range of things that those youth workers are doing with young people. But that is gone now.

**Melina BATH:** So specifically in that space in that area, or is that just an example that you used?

**Lucy DEMANT:** That is just an example.

**Melina BATH:** So it was in the regions?

**Lucy DEMANT:** Yes.

**Melina BATH:** So they have cut services to youth workers in the regions.

**Lucy DEMANT:** Yes, the Empower youth work program.

**Melina BATH:** Thank you. Is there any other additional information that you can think of post this now, post this announcement, the ramifications of that?

**Lucy DEMANT:** Absolutely.

**Melina BATH:** Because I am a regional MP, and part of this investigation is about the disparity between regions and socio-economics, so we would appreciate any work on that.

You mentioned also neurodivergent and disabled students and that bullying from teachers and students is adding to this school refusal. There is a report – it is one of the submissions, from Voices for Special Needs; they are in the Latrobe Valley. One of their points is about disengagement from school. The organisation is aware of many students with disabilities disengaging from school, hiding at home in their rooms due to severe experiences of treatment within the school setting or even witnessing severe incidents. They go on to say that they want a couple of things, and I want your collective feedback on this. They want evidence-based communication responses to parental inquiries in a timely manner. So I think their statement there is that parents are seeking information from the school and the school leadership is not providing that in a timely manner or in a way that the parents need, that really important communication. They also say they want a benchmarked communication policy with parents specifically for children with disability. Now, I think the education department has a policy on this. They are saying it is inconsistent and obsolete. So, I guess, does it need a refresh – how we speak, how the department and how the leadership in schools speak to parents? They are two of the things that they are raising.

**David BAKER:** If I start on that. They are all important issues that you raise, but at least from Orygen's perspective they are not something that we can speak to. The communication between schools and parents or schools and families and carers is not our area of expertise, so we cannot go into what the education policy is or how it needs to be improved.

**Melina BATH:** I guess in relation to Lucy, your comment about the fact that you are seeing 'school can't' because of some of those tensions.

**Lucy DEMANT:** I think, just following on from what David was saying, we can report on what we are hearing from young people and what we are seeing, what services are telling us, but same – in terms of those models, that sits with the education department.

**Melina BATH:** The education department, which we are catching up with later on today. Can you talk about the Navigator program? I think it is in your submission. We know the CCYP have stated that there are some concerns about the Navigator program. I just would like to understand: how is it working? What is your interaction with it? Do you have any other comment on that?

**David BAKER:** No. I have to take that question on notice. I do not have the submission in front of me. But I will just take the opportunity to respond around the challenges for students attending school. Orygen have been working on that, and Desiree could speak to it.

**Melina BATH:** Thank you.

**Desiree SMITH:** Earlier this year we released two resources to support schools in working with young people experiencing school attendance challenges, and we have a guide for school that we have developed which really talks to how we work collaboratively with parents, with schools and young people to address school attendance challenges as they are emerging so that we can prevent them becoming more serious school attendance challenges such as school refusal.

**Melina BATH:** Any of that deep dive that you can do, before we finish, if you have got any additional evidence or the like, you can provide that to the committee as well.

**Lucy DEMANT:** I can just say one thing in terms of the Navigator program. Services report really good things about the Navigator program. What they do report is that it is not suitable for everyone. Again, it is this idea that we need different options and different models for different young people's needs, basically.

**Melina BATH:** Flexible.

**Lucy DEMANT:** Flexible, and particularly in rural and regional areas, which you would be so familiar with, this lack of alternative education flexible learning options – in some areas none. We are seeing some great stuff particularly with Hester Hornbrook, which is now having a hybrid model. We need to be pushing these models out so they are available for all young people.

**Melina BATH:** We heard that in Bendigo too, Lucy – I think it was Bendigo – that commentary around, post COVID, students really disengaging and feeling that their education has washed past them and that need for flexible delivery.

**Lucy DEMANT:** Yes, and student-centred.

**Melina BATH:** Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, Ms Bath. Mr Welch.

**Richard WELCH:** Thank you. Thank you for coming in. I am going to ask some devil's advocate questions. I think if we are going to ask them, you are the right people to ask them to, really. So far I have been a very short time on this committee, but it is an education committee and really all I have heard about is mental health. I have not heard about education. Here is the first devil's advocate question. You have heard about recent studies on rumination and the facial scar experiment. Have you seen any of that?

**Desiree SMITH:** No.

**Richard WELCH:** Well, I encourage you to do it. But the long and the short of it is: are we turning normal rites of passage into being understood as trauma?

**David BAKER:** That is quite a broad question, and we would need a more specific focus to be able to respond to that, because trauma is quite a complex subject.

**Richard WELCH:** Yes, I will narrow that for you. It follows on a little bit from Dr Heath's comment as well. Some stress is actually healthy for you. We talk about resilience, and the best way to develop resilience, like any muscle, is to test it and exercise it. As we seek to remove stresses from our students and our children, are we actually denying them the opportunity to have early life experiences of discomfort, unpleasantness and going through difficult periods? I can give you a practical example. One of my schools starts the year in November the previous year because they want to smooth it out and it not to be too traumatic for them going through and starting the new academic year, because starting the new academic year is very stressful, when it is simply a rite of passage. One day you are going to start a new job and you are going to be put on the spot in that moment as well, and if you have not experienced it – that is the sort of the context which I am talking about.

**David BAKER:** I would take the opportunity to address that bigger question around trauma, because when we talk about abuse, neglect, these are serious issues of wellbeing and welfare. To address them as a kind of rite of passage, like a stress that everyone can experience –

**Richard WELCH:** But where do you draw the line in that? Where does stress become trauma?

**David BAKER:** I cannot speak directly to it, as I am not clinician-trained, but there are very clear definitions around trauma, abuse and neglect that you could refer to. Your other question, you might have to remind me, was around rites of passage?

**Richard WELCH:** The difficulties of youth and adolescence – you know, you can sometimes describe them as rites of passage, as part of your maturing process.

**David BAKER:** I think there is just a risk of terming them as rites of passage.

**Moira DEEMING:** You are referring to exam stress, right, not physical stress?

**Richard WELCH:** Yes, I am not referring to abuse.

**Moira DEEMING:** Exam stress I think is what he was talking about.

**David BAKER:** Or rites of passage and exam stress. Anyway, exam stress I think we need to look at it around the context of expectations of students and in the school environment and the expectations that are placed on them within their environment by the schools, possibly family expectations, and the young people are having to bear this themselves. Rather than having expectations put on them, it is about creating a supportive environment in which they can thrive and in which they can achieve their maximum capacity and output.

**Richard WELCH:** That is probably where I am playing. How supportive should that environment be? A certain amount of them having to do it themselves and cope with it themselves is part of that maturing process.

**Desiree SMITH:** If I can just add, I think that there is something here too around the language and saying that trauma and stress are the same things when they are actually not. With a young person who might have an experience, that experience they feel is traumatic because they have distress in relation to that experience. I think that we need to be really mindful around language, and one of the things that we do at Orygen in all the work that we do is be really mindful around what language are we using and how can we be strength based and build young people's capacity. In relation to supporting young people around exam stress, this is something that we are actually working on in collaboration with the Department of Education next term and the mental health practitioners around how do we support young people to build their own capacity to be able to manage life stresses. As you said, students have to manage tests and exams, but how can we support them to be able to manage that in a healthy way, really working with our mental health practitioners and building schools' capacity to be able to be strength based and build their own internal resilience to manage so it does not then become stressful or distressing and lead to those more serious mental ill health concerns.

**Richard WELCH:** The second one is: some of the earlier answers spoke in a language where families were a stakeholder and we had to integrate them, rather than them being the stakeholder, because a child and a family should be in my view considered as the stakeholder. I think some of the language that a lot of parents would feel uncomfortable with is that we must have consistent messaging and we must teach the parents. We have talked a lot today about how we need to individualise education for different individuals. But have you yourselves ever thought about perhaps a family first approach, where you are adapting what you are doing to that particular student's family's values, as opposed to them adapting to your values?

**Desiree SMITH:** I think that I can talk to that in the context of the school attendance challenges resources, and it is all around how we can work in partnership and how we can develop a shared language and values, and

**Richard WELCH:** But don't you see, even in the language you are using there, you are appropriating the family's role? You are sharing it. You do not own the child. You are not sharing it. You do not get to share it. The parent is giving you the child for education. That is conceptually where I am coming from in the question. There seems to be a presumption that you are an equal stakeholder to the family.

**Lucy DEMANT:** I was just going to say: I think for us, particularly in the youth work profession, we work with the young person and identify their goals and needs with them. Often that is an inclusive approach, but we are led by the young person and what they are telling us. If they are telling us that what is happening at home, particularly with LGBTIQ+ young people, is creating a really unsafe environment and they are getting discriminatory messaging at home that is leading to significant mental health challenges, we are not trying to take the role of the family, but we are just supporting that young person and what they are telling us their needs are. Does that –

**Richard WELCH:** I agree that there are cases where there is significant harm potential. I am not in any way disputing that. But there would seem to be a trend that, as we address those, the regulations skew to the lowest common denominator of that problem so that, even in an acceptable range of discussion topics or differences of views, they all get trapped into that paradigm that any difference of opinion or value is harmful and that the parents must adapt, rather than the system, and make it inclusive to those values.

**Lucy DEMANT:** When we are thinking about consent education, often it is around not saying that messaging – 'You have to think like this' – but informing parents so they understand why those education models are being delivered, so just bringing them on board in that sense. And again with alcohol and other drug education, for parents to know that there is evidence behind particular approaches with substance use in schools and supporting young people around either misuse or dependence. So it is not so much saying, 'This is what

you should do with your child,' but rather what the evidence says is the best practice approach to reducing harm or those types of things. I think that is probably where the differentiation is.

**Richard WELCH:** Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** If you can put that on notice and forward it to us, that would be great. We have just run out of time. Also, thank you so much for coming in with your submission and answering all our questions. I am sure there are a few questions on notice that we have got which you will be able to answer when we submit those, but again thank you so much for your time.

**Witnesses withdrew.**