TRANSCRIPT

ECONOMIC, EDUCATION, JOBS AND SKILLS COMMITTEE

Inquiry into career advice activities in Victorian schools

Melbourne — 19 February 2018

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Witnesses

Ms Sue Bell, President, Victorian Association of State Secondary Principals, and

Mr Colin Axup, Principal, Suzanne Cory High School, and Committee Member, Victorian Association of State Secondary Principals.

The CHAIR — Welcome to the public hearing for the Economic, Education, Jobs and Skills Committee's Inquiry into career advice activities in Victorian schools. All evidence taken at this hearing is protected by parliamentary privilege. Any comments you make outside the hearing are not afforded such privilege. Hansard is recording today's proceedings. We will provide a proof version of the Hansard transcript so you can correct any typographical errors. I invite you now to make a 5-minute statement. That will then allow us some time for questions. Before you start, can you state your name for the Hansard record.

Ms BELL — My name is Sue Bell, and I am the President of the Victorian Association of State Secondary Principals.

Mr AXUP — Colin Axup. I am the Principal of Suzanne Cory High School and a Committee Member of the Victorian Association of State Secondary Principals.

Ms BELL — Thank you for the opportunity to speak today. Colin is currently a principal and I was a principal last year of quite large state secondary schools. The beauty of having Colin here today is that he has also been a principal in a rural school. We think it is very important through VASSP that we tell you the voice of country principals as well as metropolitan principals, because in the area of careers they live in quite different worlds.

I think first and foremost in state secondary schools there is a passion and a dedication to career education for students. It is a focus that we attempt to start in Year 7. In a crowded curriculum it is difficult to have it flowing through as strongly as you would want, but increasingly I think we are getting there. Obviously it intensifies as it goes through the year levels. Students spend quite a bit of time in a whole range of different subjects that might be called careers education, pastoral care or home group doing those sorts of activities in schools, looking at themselves and their capabilities and then broadening that out to what sorts of jobs are out there in the world.

As you know, the world is changing very quickly and the world that their parents have grown up in and found their employment in is going to be incredibly different. So the advice that students get from home is sometimes narrower than the advice that actually need about going out into the world. We think there are a lot of really positive things happening in state secondary education in terms of career development. There are some remarkable projects, as we referred to in our submission. There is Birchip P–12 School, where the principal has drawn together the whole community in the town and organised all the businesses in the town to take students on work experience, so every child actually gets to have work experience through that connection, through those relationships.

I would like to take a moment just to talk about a project that VASSP has been working on that our previous president Judy Crowe started. It is called the Ourschool project, and it is a project to link students with the alumni of their own school. Colin and I have both had the pleasure of working for a number of years at Melbourne High, where that is just part of the norm. Each year past students come back to the school and speak and impart their knowledge about the world of work. But that is not the norm for students in every school. This project is running this year as a pilot with eight schools, and so far over 1400 students have had sessions with younger and older alumni from their schools. There are even alumni who are aged in their 70s who actually come back and talk about work, but obviously much younger people as well. That has been incredibly well received by those schools. They have actually been quite excited about it, and it changes on a daily basis. So, for example, some of these people in their 70s are now finding that they can offer scholarships. They bond together and form a group that offers a scholarship to students. So there are lots of terrific things happening. It is about how we can build on the terrific things and normalise that in all schools.

The CHAIR — What kinds of support should the Department of Education and Training provide state secondary schools to improve career advice activities?

Ms BELL — I will start and then throw to Colin. I think one of the issues is finding the correctly qualified and the right person for the job. I think in the past we actually offered scholarships for people to do the graduate diploma of careers education and I do not know that that is the case anymore, but it is really important with the high-level advice that careers advisers need to be giving that they are qualified, so qualified in the latest knowledge about what is happening in universities and TAFE, qualified in interpersonal skills about how to counsel students who might be lost along the way, a whole range of those skills. So how do we actually find the right people to do the job? In some big secondary schools that is probably not difficult—there are lots of people

who are interested in that sort of thing—but in small countries schools, what do you actually do, how do you find the right people? Colin actually had a bit of a plan about how he has done it in his school.

Mr AXUP — I think part of the issue is around finding the qualified people, and it is not just a rural issue; it is a city issue as well. Suzanne Cory High School is a relatively new school. In some respects from a careers education perspective it is probably an easy school to manage but it took us 18 months to find someone, and in fact the only way to find someone was to offer to pay for their graduate certificate, as in to go to RMIT, because we just were not getting anywhere. Here is what I would argue is a highly desirable school to go to, and you have trouble attracting someone. So that is the first issue, and you can see that across all secondary schools, because there is such a discrepancy or difference if you like in the careers educators. They are either teachers or education support staff, so they are employed under two different systems, if you like, and each has its advantages and disadvantages. The disadvantage of employing teachers as your careers adviser is they cost more, and that is a staffing decision that a principal has to make. For example, after all this time we now employ 1.5 FTE careers counsellors, but they are ES, so I can afford that. If I employed a teacher, I would not be able to afford that, and we are a reasonably well-off secondary school in that respect.

In the country at Stawell—I was at Stawell Secondary College as the principal—we had trouble finding someone. The only advantage we had was the then UB, or now Federation Uni, was downsizing and closing campuses, including the one in Stawell, so there were a whole lot of people looking for work. I was lucky, but 12 months later when she went on family leave, we were back to the 'How do we backfill the position?'. It is that difficulty of finding someone. In the country as well, we were lucky. In the Wimmera, we were considered a large secondary school, with 450 students, but most of the other schools are smaller and substantially smaller. They simply cannot afford a dedicated careers adviser, so when Sue and I were talking—and you ask about a role for government or for the Department—it is about does the region then provide the careers counsellor to actually work with the schools and therefore, to be brutally honest, to pick up the tab for the wages of that person to go from school to school? So colleagues of mine in the Wimmera would have maybe 30 Year 12s or 50 to 60 Year 11s and 12s, so it becomes that management and because it is a local decision for the principal to decide how they spend their money, therefore you will see those variations.

The CHAIR — Some submissions have recommended that the Victorian Government make career advice a compulsory part of the school curriculum. What are your views on this and why?

Mr AXUP — What are we taking out?

Mr CRISP — I think it might have been Sue who used the words crowded curriculum and on this particular committee over the years—it has turned over—like the Chair says, we are interested to see how the heck, what is the process of principals balancing off all these needs?

Mr MELHEM — And what would you take out? I mean, that is why you are the principal.

Ms BELL — I took out woodwork at my school last year and my name is still mud. It is very difficult. I think what you can do is have threads through the curriculum. In science, when you are talking about sustainability and you are able to use your Polycom to talk to a scientist somewhere else, part of that conversation is about sustainability and at the end you will also say, 'So you are a scientist. What does that mean you do?', so that the kids get to understand what those jobs are and how people actually get into them. I am not sure what that statistics are, but I think many young people tend to go into the areas of work that their parents were in, because they understand it, they have been exposed to it. So how is it that you can thread that through? But do we mandate it? That is a very difficult thing. You want everybody to have the same level of access at the highest level, but how do you actually bridge that gap? It is a very difficult one.

Mr CRISP — And then to build on that with Colin, you talked about the smaller rural schools and you talked Polycom. Can that work together? Do you see that there is a concept of delivery that could use the technology?

Mr AXUP — Polycom was very useful for us. We ran VCE classes, Polycom classes, within the region. It is hard to do practical subjects by Polycom but we managed, in that respect. So it was a useful tool and I would think that it would still be possible, in that respect. It should be a component of the careers education process. It should not be a replacement component because there is nothing like having a real-life person in front of you to

actually have that conversation. You could say, 'Oh, yes, but you are on Polycom', but we all know having those conversations are not quite the same, in that respect.

In terms of what do you take out, I think an example might be with the competencies that we now report against in the curriculum. With the competencies we overlay what we currently do, so we are embedding them in existing subjects and, as Sue said, one of the answers is to how do you take the aims of careers education and connect it to what we are already doing, without having to set up yet again a separate subject or something else to fit into that crowded curriculum.

Mr MELHEM — Just on the curriculum, and I have asked this question earlier to previous presenters, the reason we went to school and kids are going to school is to prepare them for life and to get jobs, be a productive member of the community and be able to look after themselves. It has become more and more so now in the last 100 years, where it is more important than it was in, say, the previous century. So obviously the career advice to me is very important. I am not sure if I am using the right terms, but I think that let us say at a wealthy school or a high-end school or whatever terms you want to use, maybe they do it a bit better than the less wealthy school in lower socio-economic areas and middle-sized schools. And I understand there is pressure on you as principal. You have got a set budget, you have got to meet the curriculum, and to me career advice I think is very, very important. I am going through it now with my son, who has got into university, and my daughter who is doing Year 11, so it is hitting home. I have had to address one and am working on the second one. She picked a subject two weeks ago and last week changed her mind and said, 'I don't want to do that. I want to do something else'. It is very confusing. So it is a long question. What is the best way to address that and balance it, making sure we are providing first-class career advice, in particular in the bottom 70 per cent of the school system, which is another description I can put on it?

Ms BELL — It is a very complex thing and schools spend a lot of time and energy in it. I can talk specifically about my school, Wantirna College. From Year 9 onwards, once students were starting to select electives, there was an annual meeting with a careers adviser or a team to look at what they felt their interests were and where they were heading—not that they knew what they would be when they have grew up, but general interests—and any subject selections were made along that line. But very often kids change their mind, and schools need to be quite vigilant in making sure that you check back with them when they are changing subjects to make sure that they are still on path and they are not cutting off any of their options. So particularly in mathematics and sciences, which are prerequisites, it is really critical that that career advice is not just from Year 12 into university or TAFE but it is from much earlier on and it is, not funnelling, but building an awareness of the young person as they are moving through that they are heading to something out there in the world that will not necessarily be their only job but will be one of many that they have over a period of time, so how can they be resilient and flexible and choose the right sort of pathway for them. So it is a very difficult one.

The other thing is that the world of work has changed. A lot of our parents were tradies, people who might own their own plumbing business, but they felt that their child perhaps should go to university, and that was difficult for them to reconcile. So a lot of the students were first in the family to go on to university, and that was kind of a big leap for the family. Schools obviously have to provide advice that is relevant to the local community but is also aspirational because times are changing and the child of parents who did not necessarily complete Year 12, now needs to complete Year 12. It is a different world.

Mr AXUP — On the issue about the level of the school, you are talking about the population of the school, if you like, at different socio-economic levels. If I take Stawell as an example, I had students from families of generational welfare dependency through to families of professionals—you know, the doctors, the accountants and so forth, running big organisations. So it comes back to, 'Do you have a good careers adviser?'. I will always drag it back to, 'Do you have a qualified person?', and then as Sue said, that person needs to work on the knowledge of, 'Who am I dealing with and what are the issues I'm dealing with?'. Therefore that gives you the pathways to have the discussion.

For some of the families in Stawell the concept of working full-time was an alien concept in their family, so just getting them into a job would almost be seen as a success, whereas with others it was like getting to university was the aspiration, and then apprenticeships and so on and so forth. It comes down to, 'Do you have a careers person?'. We can talk about curriculum, we can talk about all of those other aspects, but do you have that warm body with the expertise and the time to provide that advice, one on one, in small groups, to work consistently with them over a period of time to give them that advice?'.

Ms BELL — And engage parents in the partnership, in that conversation.

Mr MELHEM — When would you start that—year 7?

Ms BELL — I think you need to do some awareness raising in Year 7 that they are heading towards the world of work and what are the competencies and skills that they will need there, but once you get to subject selection, I think that focuses people's attention.

Mr AXUP — If I look at my current school, there are too many of my students and their parents who have already made up their minds about what they are going to be. I find that is the reverse problem, if you like. You then have to try and explain to them and educate them about what are the other opportunities, because the world does not necessarily need to be full of doctors and lawyers.

Mr MELHEM — So what the Prime Minister said about lawyers is right. That is the only thing he is right about.

Mr CRISP — Colin, I just want to go back again to the model for our small rural secondary schools. You talked about needing a warm body in the school doing that, but we are not going to be able to do that, so it is how to bridge that. I just want to be clear; do you see that as the region's role to work with those smaller schools? Is that the best way forward? I am trying to work out how to come up with a model that works for those smaller schools. I guess I am confirming that you are saying that the principal is not going to be able to do this himself because they do not have the resources in a smaller school, so it is a job for the region.

Ms BELL — I think you can have alternative ways that schools can choose to do it. They might have a person that they could give a small time allowance to do it and the rest of their time would be teaching or doing other support work. But when they cannot do that—I do not know if you are aware of the SSSO model for the psychologists and social workers in schools. So they are now regionally based and then they are allocated as needs to a school. I think what Colin was putting forward was something similar to that. But if that was what the school thought would work for them, you would need a group of principals from a group of schools to work collaboratively to make that work.

Mr AXUP — I suppose it is almost a thought bubble thing in effect. The difficulty, as I said earlier, is finding someone. Of course if you advertise part-time, like a part-time fraction, you will probably make it even more difficult to find someone in many respects, but that becomes dependent. As a small school, if you can get the group of schools that you are servicing, then it becomes easier, but that is something that needs to be, I would argue, managed by the region to provide that. When you look at the regional schools, they have travelling libraries. I will use this example: defence recruiting has a mobile careers service; that is what they do. Why can't we think a little bit differently and ask, 'Why don't we provide that concept? Why isn't there a travelling careers service?'.

Ms BELL — In a big green bus.

Mr AXUP — Not necessarily, but that is the concept. What that suggests is that the Department, the government, is looking at it and then saying 'This is what we need to fund', which will make me terribly unpopular because I want them to spend more money.

Mr MELHEM — Just on that, how do you rank, from 0 to 10, the importance of having the resource of a career adviser in schools, public and private? How important?

Ms BELL — Ten. I think that is a given.

Mr MELHEM — So it is only a matter of resources. I am going to go back to the principals. Earlier some of our presenters told us that to a large extent principals had to make decisions about how important the service is; it is not about whether you need it or not; the question is resourcing and whether you allocate one full-time, or half a full-time person, or 10, is a real issue. So basically resources need to be made available and funding should be made available by the system. Is that right?

Ms BELL — That is correct.

Mr MELHEM — And you give it a 10 out of 10.

Ms BELL — It absolutely needs to be. In the past, in our annual budgets that we got from the Department there was always been an understanding that there would be a careers person who had less face-to-face teaching time and a librarian who had less face-to-face teaching time. Now that principals are in charge of their own budgets it is not necessarily laid out that way, but it is still a rule of thumb that you will give some considerable time allowance to a careers person, and that needs to continue. Whether it becomes more clear in the budget line, that might not be a bad thing.

Mr MELHEM — Let us go back then to whether you make it mandatory or not. I think we debated whether you actually mandate that you are going to have the service but we do not necessarily mandate how you deliver it. So going back to the principals being given a bucket of money, it is nice to have, but should we then be seriously thinking that the service should be delivered?

Ms BELL — Yes, please.

Mr AXUP — Probably the best example currently is the equity funding. As a principal we have to account for the equity funding, as in we have to fill in online and explain what we are spending the equity money on. That means we are given whatever the school gets in equity funding and the principal makes a decision about how that money is spent, but we then account for that particular line item of equity funding. So if you like, of all the money we are getting in the SRP, that is quite a particular one in terms of what we have to report on. The argument would be if we were given specific money around careers education, I could envisage that we could report against that as well. So you are mandating—I do not like the word 'mandate', because that makes any principal start to shudder.

Mr MELHEM — That is why I am asking you the question.

Mr AXUP — You are mandating that we must provide careers, and a comment is made that every school will have different needs, so the cookie-cutter approach will not work. But if you fund and expect it to be accounted for and you demonstrate what you are spending that money on that is career focused and providing careers, then you have achieved your aim, plus you are getting some visibility, if you like, of return on your investment.

Mr CRISP — Several submissions claim that schools place too much emphasis on ATAR and university entry. How valid are these claims? Then the second barrel to that question is: how can the Victorian Government encourage community to view vocational education and training as a valuable pathway for students?

Ms BELL — I thought that was an interesting question—we had a heads-up that it was coming—because in my school roughly 60 per cent of students went to university, but the rest of the students went to TAFE and were very excited about going to TAFE. So I think the problem over the last couple of years has been the increasing cost of TAFE for students, but on the other hand I was in the Knox area—so we had KIOSC, the Knox Innovation, Opportunity and Sustainability Centre. I do not know if you know it, but it is sort of the precursor of the Tech Schools of now. It was based at Swinburne at Wantirna, and our brief partially as a trade training centre with the federal government was to deliver TAFE courses in the growing areas for employment in Knox. Over the three or four years that it has been going it certainly has built that, because with vocational education, if you were to talk to kids, they would think 'I don't want to be a sheet metal worker, but do I want to be a lab technician in a nice bright, clean factory environment of the modern type?'. Yes, because the world of employment has changed, but parents do not necessarily know about that sort of employment now. So how do you actually expose people to that?

So I actually think that there is a lot of value in the 10 Tech Schools that the government is bringing online to do that, because Knox had a very clear need, because of the industries based in Knox, because they were that high-tech, medically based sort of industry, but Geelong will be different, Ballarat will be different. So you need that sort of system that can actually look at the industry in the area and help kids understand what employment is available through TAFE, through vocational education, and what we found at Wantirna was a lot of our students would do that and then would translate into a degree later on and increase their qualifications. So it was a stepping stone and a different pathway to further education.

Mr CRISP — Do you want to comment on what has been raised in the submission about the emphasis on ATAR?

Mr AXUP — I am not sure it is schools that are putting emphasis on ATARs. In my context, where 99.9 per cent of my Year 12s go to a university, we are a selective entry school. It is an academic school, so that is where they are heading. They come to us because they have got a pathway to a university, and the parents as much as the students are fixated on an ATAR. So I spend most of my time in fact talking that down and going away from that. So I do not think it is actually fair to say schools are advocating that it is all about the ATAR. I mean I think part of the problem is in December each year, when in effect the VCE results come out, you are essentially publishing league tables, which brings with it its own challenges.

I am sitting here as a school that is one of your top-five government schools, and I do not like it, because it actually sends the wrong message to the students and the parents, but that is the system we live with. So it is about managing it, and that is where good careers advisers—I keep coming back to this—will give good advice, and it is actually not about the ATAR; it is actually about what course you want to do, what you are interested in. So, for example, when I talk about the success of a year at Suzanne Cory High School I talk about it in terms of the percentage of students who get their first, second or third university course preference, which is ATAR-neutral, because a student might desperately want to do a particular course that needs—I am going to say 'only'—only an ATAR of 85. Sorry, in our context that is almost like being near the bottom of the cohort, if you like. So it is about the education. It is about the message we send as schools as much as anything else.

I will flip to the Stawell scenario, where it was probably about a 50-50 split—VCE-VET/VCAL—in terms of what they were doing, and that is again about providing opportunities and that good careers advice. The pressure on schools around VET is, though, an expense. It is expensive, and schools bear that cost, so you have to be prepared to do that. But I think most schools just do it because we know it is the right thing to do, because you have to provide options—you have to provide options.

Mr MELHEM — There are certain schools that are worried about their ATAR and their ranking and it is a real issue. So what can we do to change that, because I agree with you, I mean, the ATAR is not everything? Correct me if I am wrong, but if you do not get the course you want, you just do the first semester and then you might try again in the second semester or do a year of whatever course you get and then you can jump back on and do whatever you want; that is in practical terms. So that it is again proof that ATAR is important to aim for something but is not everything.

Ms BELL — I think you will find most state government schools work on the pathways idea that there are different ways to skin a cat, there are different ways to get into the course that you want, and that is what career advisers do. They will talk that talk the whole time so that you do not have students destroyed when they do not get the ATAR that they want, because you do not want them in that sort of state. You want them thinking, 'Okay, I didn't quite make it that way there'. So that is where things like the Ourschool alumni program that we are running works really well, because those young people come back to their school and they can say, 'From our school I went on to become X, Y or Z, and this is the pathway that I did to get there'.

It is very difficult, though, because as a parent who is not involved in education, how do you judge a school? And if you do not know the educational lingo, you do not understand education in primary schools and secondary schools, you judge it on facilities, you judge on the outward-looking things. Once you get to that tertiary level, you tend to judge it on the score that is in the newspapers, which is your ATAR. So it is about changing perceptions in our society.

The CHAIR — On behalf of the Committee I would like to thank you for your time and your contributions.

Ms BELL — Thank you.

Witnesses withdrew.