

CORRECTED VERSION

EDUCATION AND TRAINING COMMITTEE

Inquiry into the approaches to homework in Victorian schools

Melbourne — 28 April 2014

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Witnesses

Mr P. Roberts, Director, School Services, and
Mr A. Ross, General Manager, National Partnerships, Independent Schools Victoria;
Dr M. Cotter, Principals Association of Victorian Catholic Secondary Schools; and
Mr G. Butler, Deputy President, and
Ms S. Saitlik, Board Member, Victorian Principals Association.

The CHAIR — Let me go through the things you need to know about sitting in on a public hearing of a parliamentary inquiry. I welcome you to the Education and Training Committee’s inquiry into the approaches to homework in Victorian schools. It is important for you to recognise that all evidence at this hearing is protected by parliamentary privilege — and some people welcomed that this morning, as a matter of fact. Any comments you make outside this hearing may not be afforded such privilege, however. You see that Hansard is here today recording the proceedings. A transcript will be available in approximately two weeks for you to make adjustments to typographical errors. I ask Mr Roberts to lead off with his opening remarks for us today.

Mr ROBERTS — Thank you very much. ISV is Independent Schools Victoria. We were established in 1949, and today we represent and promote the interests of and provide services to 209 member schools. Our member schools educate more than 132 000 students on over 300 campuses across metropolitan Melbourne and in regional and rural Victoria. The independent sector is incredibly diverse. Our membership reflects a variety of religious faiths and ethos, with schools affiliated to Anglican, Assemblies of God, Baptist, Brethren, Catholic, Christian, Coptic Orthodox, Greek Orthodox, Jewish, Lutheran, Islamic, Pentecostal, Presbyterian, Seventh-day Adventist and Uniting churches. There are inter, multi and non-denominational schools, as well as schools for students with learning difficulties and individual needs.

Member schools follow different approaches to education, including Montessori and Steiner education philosophies. Independent schools are located in all regions of Victoria and range in size from over 3000 students on multiple campuses to in some instances less than 30 students. The communities that these schools serve are spread across the socioeconomic spectrum, with many recent arrival families who may not have English as a first language.

As a consequence of this diversity, the range of approaches and philosophies in respect of homework is also diverse. There are independent schools that have a highly structured approach to homework, where tasks are set and recorded on a daily basis, assessments are made and feedback provided to students and parents. By contrast, there are also schools that have a less formal approach to homework. The overriding approach to homework in an independent school will be determined by the school’s philosophy about homework and its role in achieving specific outcomes. A school takes into account the views and expectations of its community when determining the approach to homework and may ask the following questions: do our parents believe that homework is useful? Are our parents prepared to support the school by supporting the homework program? Do homework tasks add value to the learning that is occurring during the day at school? What are the overall benefits of having homework?

Independent schools are also likely to have different approaches to homework for different sections of the school. For example, at the junior primary school level a strong focus on literacy may result in an expectation that students are reading at home on a daily basis, particularly to and with their family. By contrast, students in the senior secondary years, particularly in year 12, are expected to work for 2 to 3 hours each evening in completing tasks, summarising notes and practising skills. The challenge of course is how to move students from the simple literacy tasks completed in grade 2 to 3 hours per night of intensive study in year 12. Generally schools are moving students to a more structured approach to homework through years 5 to 8, with an emphasis on developing study habits that will prepare students for their senior secondary years.

The other challenge for schools is in ensuring that any homework task is meaningful as to a student’s learning, is followed up by the teacher, can be successfully completed and does not reinforce in students the notion that they cannot learn by themselves. Homework tasks — particularly from upper primary school, when they are more formalised — should be structured in such a way that only the student is completing them, and that while parents can and should provide support and guidance, they should not be completing the tasks on behalf of their child.

Schools need to be mindful of what is happening at home when setting homework tasks. There may be many other activities that need to be balanced with homework, such as students having part-time jobs or participating in sporting or other activities. Many families, particularly those associated with some of the faith-based schools, have several school-aged children at home, and being able to create the best

environment for those children to complete homework may be challenging. In addition, there are many families in the independent sector where both parents are working, possibly in the evening and on weekends, and the parents' capacity to support their children's homework may be limited, particularly if the parents' first language is not English.

In summary, the range of views about and approaches to homework in the independent sector are as diverse as the sector itself. All independent schools are providing education based on their particular philosophy, and the approach to homework should align with that philosophy.

The CHAIR — Thank you very much. Would anybody else like to make some opening remarks at this point?

Mr BUTLER — I suppose we have got a written response that sort of summarises our view. I did send a copy along to Michael. I am not sure whether — —

The CHAIR — Yes, we do have that.

Mr BUTLER — Are you happy for me to talk to that?

The CHAIR — I am happy for you to talk to it. I would just like these opening remarks to be fairly succinct.

Mr BUTLER — All right. You can give me the signal when I should stop. The Victorian Principals Association has 950 members, and we are representative of over 1100 Victorian government primary schools. Our response, which I provided earlier, runs through our collective views on the various components of this inquiry.

We believe that homework has the potential to complement and consolidate classroom learning, and it provides an opportunity for students to take responsibility for their learning. We believe that homework should always be stimulated and relate directly to the classroom-based learning. We have neurological reasons for homework, which relate to rehearsal and repetition of new material and how it can assist in the retention of learning. We also believe that homework contributes positively to self-discipline and life skills through encouragement of good study and organisational habits. We are very much in favour of independent, student-generated homework, which allows students to follow their individual interests to a greater degree than school-generated homework alone. Independent homework may include reading, writing, drawing and research for interest and enjoyment.

We believe that parents do have a role to play with the management of homework, but it needs to be very well balanced with extracurricular activities, family life and a non-school-based focus. I will not go on too much at the moment, because it will be repetitive, but I am happy to respond to questions along the way.

The CHAIR — Perhaps we could open up some questions in terms of your association's view on the role of teachers, particularly where different cultures have different viewpoints on academic achievement; for example, the cultural view that 3 hours homework in years 5 and 6 is good practice — that it will lead to greater success, better university entrance scores and all of these sorts of things. How do you deal with those cultural differences from the sort of orthodoxy that prevails amongst the teaching profession?

Mr BUTLER — We would have a very strong view that principals and teachers need to work closely with their local communities with regard to homework.

Ms SAITLIK — Do you want me to give an example from my school?

Mr BUTLER — Yes, if you could.

Ms SAITLIK — To give you an example, when we collectively go through the process of policies such as homework — and my school has only recently gone through that process in the last 12 months — we have a subcommittee of our school council which is our education committee. That is open for anybody within our community to join. We have anywhere from 18 to 20 members and generally have

good representation across cultural backgrounds as well. That means that that voice has some say in what we are doing and has an understanding of what the expectations are.

The most difficult factor when you talk about cultural diversity, as you did, Jan — and I can speak from some experience — is making sure that our community is in touch with the fact that for homework to work well within that home environment it needs to be something that is of practice or something that is reinforcing a life skill. It could be something the students have learnt during the day that they can go home and talk about and perhaps reinforce that skill at home. It is not a place for new knowledge to occur. We have found that to be incredibly successful with our parent community.

We have a lot of students who sit various scholarship programs to get into various independent schools and accelerated programs. They will quite often come and speak to their classroom teachers about additional work that their students could be doing, and they tend to source that independently. We of course will support that.

On the other level, when you talk about some of those students who are not necessarily requiring that enhancement, for those who require additional assistance, our teachers, working with our community, will run some sessions before school where the teacher is present as such to reinforce that best practice of known knowledge or to assist with that.

Those sessions are not mandatory. It is up to the students as to whether or not they would like to attend, and that has been very positively received by our community. It is tricky; it is challenging. It is very much about the department, which our guidelines are directed by, placing professional trust in us as professionals and principals to work with our community effectively to make sure that the expected department guidelines are in process in regard to what we do as a school and hence the way in which we manage that.

The CHAIR — I am interested in the before-school activities. Could you elaborate on them? When do they start, and how often do they occur?

Ms SAITLIK — It is only for our senior school, which is our year 5 and year 6 students. It very much comes from the data where ongoing assessment is occurring all the time. These students might be students who might perhaps have some difficulty completing their normal homework expectations because they are struggling a little bit with the curriculum or the new concepts. Generally they are maths oriented and maths number oriented, hence our teachers virtually offer some workshopping before school. It is then part of the student's individual learning improvement plan as well. It becomes a commitment by the student and the parent that they will attend so that we can make sure that that home-school relationship is positive and that our students end up trying to be the very best that they can be.

The CHAIR — Does being a mathematics teacher go hand in hand with that extra commitment before school?

Ms SAITLIK — I think probably more than anything it is about a need. It is about us as a school and a school community wanting every child in our school to reach a certain benchmark so that they can successfully progress to their next level and also in some cases be their best. Within the structure that we have, we can offer at the moment additional literacy sessions in school time but we cannot fit in always, with our crowded curriculum as such, the additional maths sessions, so our teachers' commitment is to do that before school.

The CHAIR — Typically what would that be? An 8.30 start?

Ms SAITLIK — It is an 8.15 start and it happens twice a week.

The CHAIR — Dr Cotter, I understand you might have some opening remarks.

Dr COTTER — I do; I have some written remarks. I am representing the Principals Association of Victorian Catholic Secondary Schools.

The CHAIR — Yes, and you are most welcome.

Dr COTTER — Thank you very much. Whilst I come from Mercy College, Coburg, I have done some research based on my colleagues' opinions and practices in their schools, so I will read from that. Approximately 100 Catholic secondary schools operate across Victoria and educate a range of students. Catholic secondary and primary schools in Victoria educate one in four Victorian students. These schools are either congregational or regional in their governance, with the Catholic Education Commission of Victoria operating as the sector's governing authority. CECV, as that governing authority is referred to, governs so as to empower schools to be autonomous entities. School curriculum design is determined as per our VRQA requirements. The question of homework is determined at the individual school level, and the PAVCSS, which I am representing, supports this and holds a general view on homework that it should reflect the individual culture in schools.

Homework is generally believed to be of some benefit to student learning, and this is context dependent. Homework is believed to serve a purpose when it consolidates or extends student learning, skills and aptitude. Homework should enhance a student's capacity to understand and apply concepts, skills and knowledge.

Parents are of course important partners in promoting and supporting learning. They are commonly minimally involved in homework activities due to the explicit connection to in-school specialist subject activities that tend to dominate the secondary curriculum. The academic success of students in Catholic schools in VCE, VET and VCAL, as well as consistently strong performance in NAPLAN, acts as evidence supporting individual school approaches to homework. In 2012, which is the most recent data available through the Catholic Education Office Melbourne, students in Catholic secondary schools achieved a VCE median study score of 31.2, with a 93.5 per cent year 12 retention rate being achieved and post-school destination data of that same cohort of students revealing 88.1 per cent of graduates from Catholic schools were in employment or undertaking further study after the completion of their secondary schooling.

Current approaches to homework are as diverse as the range of schools across the Catholic sector. Schools customise the expectations and protocols regarding homework to the strengths, areas for development and culture at the local school level. This ranges from nightly reading to increase literacy, summary note taking based on the lessons of the day, completing practice problems to build confidence in application style learning to creating products and conducting experiments and undertaking research.

Technology has varying involvement in homework in Catholic schools. The use of technology in relation to homework varies from the use of an individual device to complete tasks using software for word processing, presentation or spreadsheet development, as a few examples, research on the internet or viewing online resources in a flipped classroom model for learning.

Where students have internet access out of school, which is not for all students, collaboration with peers and accessing teacher assistance in using online resources are common. Online resources are also used to supplement individual learning programs for students needing additional assistance. Access to and use of technologies make some elements of learning easier for students who would otherwise not be able to achieve to their highest potential.

Assessment is commonly submitted online through either restricted access social media forums managed at the school level or school-based intranets. Reporting to parents on student learning also commonly takes place via school-based intranets. Two-way communications between teachers and students and teachers and parents is facilitated through a range of online avenues.

Continuing learning outside the usual school day is generally believed by teachers to be of value to student learning in the broadest sense. Whilst secondary students, particularly those in the senior years, are often focused on preparing for external assessment, homework also teaches and consolidates learning of non-subject-specific types. Organisational skills, independence in exploring new ideas, confidence in problem solving, time management and communication can all be by-products of realistic and balanced

school-based approaches to homework. The tension in the setting of policies for homework is accommodating and responding to individual needs.

The non-school instructional hours for young people of all ages need to include a balance of continued academic pursuits stemming from school-based learning, leisure activities and cultural and sporting time as well as community service and family interaction. Homework plays a part in all students' lives, but the length of time and complexity of tasks and outcomes can be expected to vary according to school age and learning pathways and of course the individual students.

The CHAIR — Thank you very much.

Mr BROOKS — Thank you all for coming along. It is great to have assembled here a group of people like you to help us. One of the issues we have discussed this morning is inequality for a range of reasons, whether they be social or socioeconomic reasons, for kids not having the support — or scaffolding, which was the term that was put to us this morning — in them doing their homework. I am interested to know from each of the different sectors represented here what sorts of strategies, policies or programs are put in place to support kids who come from any one of those backgrounds where those factors are at play to help them with their homework, if you are aware of them.

Dr COTTER — It is common. Using my school context as an example, we have a rich cultural diversity and our library service provides a physical space and place and proximate teacher and teacher aide supervision of students.

Mr BROOKS — After hours?

Dr COTTER — After hours, yes. That is a usual affair, and it works around the working hours of the non-teaching personnel, essentially. The library closes up at 5.00 p.m. as a usual process, but students are welcome to stay there and either do independent work or access support from the range of people who come in and out of that with some regularity, so teacher aides, teacher librarians and specialist classroom teachers. That is cross-age, as well. Occasionally the bigger girls might go and collect a younger sibling in a local primary school and walk them back, and the little ones will sit and do some activities whilst the older ones are doing them as well.

The CHAIR — Do you have a volunteer cohort to supplement that at all?

Dr COTTER — We have tried to create that. That is increasingly difficult. Most parents work full-time. We try to access volunteers when they are available, but they are increasingly not.

Mr BROOKS — Before the other sectors might answer that, is that funded by the school or is it just something that the teachers — —

Dr COTTER — It is funded by the school. The teacher element of it is voluntary. The teacher aide is around their working hours.

The CHAIR — This is a question for anybody. Are you aware that schools may or may not be promoting homework as part of a package of goodies on offer from the school, in that they are very strongly in favour of homework on the basis of the more homework the better? Is that one of the product offerings?

Mr BUTLER — No. It would be more common in primary schools for there not to be so much focus on homework because the research data would indicate that it does not give you as much effect as other key factors in education. The quality of the teacher in front of the class is by far the strongest indicator of success. Strong school leadership is also another key factor. Homework is well down the list of most effective strategies.

We would also argue the other way and say it promotes very good organisational skills for students and allows for repetition and rehearsal. It is also a great chance for children to learn independently. They are

guided. The homework tasks should always be related directly to classroom-based activities, and the homework could well be research, information gathering or pursuit of further interests at a tangent to the classroom work. That would probably be the best way to describe the balance. There is an acknowledgement that there is a need for regular homework time, but it is not something a school would market itself on.

The CHAIR — By saying regular, what do you mean by regular? Is that once a week or once every day?

Mr BUTLER — For example, the guidelines say 20 minutes per day for prep to year 2, 30 minutes per day for years 3 and 4 and 45 minutes per day for years 5 and 6. They are common times. That would vary from community to community, but an essential part of the homework would be regular reading, a focus on inquiry learning topics and that sort of thing.

Ms SAITLIK — Yes, literacy and numeracy. It includes rehearsal and repetition of whatever the students are doing. For example, our prep students may have some take-home reading that they may do. They may also have some sight vocabulary they would be expected to do every evening. If the support of their parents was not there, we instigated a program where they had year 6 reading buddies. As you can imagine, the teachers were able to work out who was doing lots of reading at home — perhaps their *Little People* — and who was not and then organise a program that was held during lunchtime so that, when we talk about equity, that child then was not feeling as if there was not anybody there for them with regard to everyone else having their take-home diary readers marked off. Due to various circumstances, their parent may not be in a position to do so.

We were able to instigate a program where they were able to be buddied up with a year 6 student who would play a similar role. Obviously it is not the role of a parent, but they would at least have that role where they are reading and their sight vocabulary was listened to. Of course as the students get older — once they get into the senior school of a primary school — where the teachers are very much trying to prepare them for secondary college, it becomes more the role of a teacher. It means there is extra emphasis on the work they have to put into these students, and teachers in our schools, for example, and in all primary schools might have those students come in for some of lunchtime to work with them. It just happens like that in primary schools with dedicated staff, and I am sure at a secondary level exactly the same thing would happen to support students in various ways where there were inequities.

The CHAIR — Very interesting. Gentlemen, are there comments on this front from either of you?

Mr ROSS — To get back to the issue of equity, in the national partnerships program that finished at the end of last year, in the independent sector the development of homework clubs came into play. They were able to assist children whose parents perhaps did not speak English at home or whose English was not good enough to help the children with their reading and so on. Homework clubs were established, and the Centre for Multicultural Youth was the model for the Learning Beyond the Bell program. That is a terrific model. We had advisers who were assisting some of the independent schools to establish homework clubs.

Mr BROOKS — Are they continuing, or have they folded now that funding is gone?

Mr ROSS — That is a good question. At this stage, yes, they are continuing. They rely upon volunteers from some of the universities, and students who are doing education as part of their training — the pre-service teachers — are asked to volunteer in some of these homework clubs. They do that with great effect. Trying to have somebody who is there ongoing who can develop relationships with the children is really important so that the young children who go into the homework clubs are able to relate to the same person each time. That is really helpful.

In some of these homework clubs the parents were encouraged to come in as well to be with their children when they were doing their homework and to develop skills with the parents and improve their English. In some homework clubs the parents were asked to come, and either soup or some fairly basic meals were provided until 5, 5.15 or whatever it might be. In some schools the parents themselves were providing some of the meals, and that integrated the home and school with the children at the club.

The CHAIR — Was this happening within the school precinct, was it, or was it a library?

Mr ROSS — Yes, usually in the school precinct, wherever there was a facility.

Mr ELASMAR — What sort of support do schools provide for homework? Is there any support at all?

Mr ROSS — In some of the national partnership schools where the parents were not able to speak sufficient English to come with confidence to parent-teacher interviews or information sessions, for example, interpreters were available. It is a matter of each individual school trying to provide whatever support it could. Building relationships with the families was really important in the national partnerships program. That was one of the key initiatives.

The CHAIR — Could you tell me a little bit more about the longevity or otherwise of the national partnerships program? You have been speaking about it in the past tense.

Mr ROSS — There were several national partnerships. One was for low-SES schools. That was to be seven years. It finished at the end of last year after five years. The literacy and numeracy national partnership finished the year before, although there was some additional commonwealth funding during 2013 for an improving literacy and numeracy national partnership. In our sector, that ended up being other schools in addition to the ones we were already supporting in literacy and numeracy. Effectively all the national partnerships in schools finished with the introduction of the Gonski funding and the ending of the national partnerships over 2010 to 2013. We are hopeful that homework clubs will continue once the schools have the skills to set up the infrastructure to maintain that. The costs are fairly minimal. It is knowing what to do and how to do it.

Mr ROBERTS — I think in reference to your question, Nazih, about whether schools are able to provide someone within the school as part of their role — do we take that on? That is the issue of leadership you mentioned before, Glenn. The principal is okay, and they are working with someone in the school. Can the school take on this role of working with parents, of working with students and of creating an environment where we can run homework clubs or some sort of assisted homework provision in the school?

Mr ROSS — There is another school that engaged its past students to come back and support the homework club and actually be in the school to act as motivators and inspirational role models for the students, particularly in the senior years. They would come in and tutor the students on weekends.

The CHAIR — You said ‘engage’. Is that on a voluntary basis or are they —

Mr ROSS — Voluntary.

The CHAIR — Perhaps anyone can answer this. In terms of the role of somebody who is studying to be a teacher and volunteering in this role, can that be formalised in some way so it looks more like an internship?

Dr COTTER — It depends on the university. The Australian Catholic University has a formal requirement of all of its undergraduate education students — either a secondary dip. ed., a master of teaching or a primary dip. ed. — to have a number of hours that are accredited to them like a university credit subject. The ACU certainly does that.

The CHAIR — That sounds noteworthy. Can you expand on that?

Dr COTTER — I have limited knowledge of the mechanics of it. If you are studying at ACU doing any course, there is a requirement to do community connections-type volunteering of around 35 hours over the duration of your course, and that is a requirement in order for you to graduate from whatever course you are doing, whether that be a teaching or a non-teaching one. A number of the students do go into schools because, if students are just out of school, they are familiar to them and they feel capable and confident to do that. There are a range of other ways of doing it as well, such as soup vans and those sorts

of things. In addition to that, the education students at the primary level are required to do a homework club connection, which you were talking about. The flats behind the ACU Fitzroy campus have a homework club set up, which I think is almost exclusively staffed by ACU students with ACU academic personnel supervising the other side of it. In addition to that they do an additional element of work working with students in another school setting.

The CHAIR — That is a marvellous example.

Dr COTTER — It is. It is fantastic. They do a great job. In the secondary context for us, one of the real benefits of it is that the university students are a little bit young and groovy compared to the average teenager. It is not an old person. They could be 30, but they are old if you are 16. There is an element of ‘This is a young person who thinks that studying is cool, so why would I not do some of that with them?’.

There is an example at our place. We have a student who has got some real challenges in her learning pathways this year and has a student teacher who is also doing volunteer work with us. She will sit and do anything with her because she is really cool and funky and she knows what young people want, not like my teachers who are old and boring! She has come to school on a regular basis because this young person who is a student teacher is there. It has some real personal and pastoral benefits to it as well.

The CHAIR — I can imagine. On that basis, if the funky and groovy factor is important at that point, is there any room for the volunteer cohort to come from retired teachers?

Dr COTTER — Yes, and it does. Just from the Catholic schools perspective, the school I am at is actually a Mercy school, connected with the Mercy sisters. They actually have a Mercy outreach program which tries to draw in retired academic professionals and teacher professionals to do volunteer work — one-on-one tutoring with senior students in specialist subjects — and you sign up to that if you would like that access in your school.

The CHAIR — It sounds amazing. We need to do some extra dimensioning of what volunteers do for our economy when we think about these sorts of things.

Mr BROOKS — I was going to ask what drives the development of homework policy. In particular I was thinking about the discussion that was occurring before around schools and school councils developing their homework policies. We had the benefit this morning of having a couple of professors in talking about the book they have written, so it was a fairly research-based discussion, so I am wondering about the school level. In my time on the school council we did not do a homework policy, which might be a good thing. What drives that? Do the parents or the school council drive the homework policy? What do they base it on?

Mr BUTLER — I would say it is an element of strong school leadership. The principal and the senior staff within the school would be recognising a grumbling, an inconsistency, in confidence in the school’s homework policy as it currently is. There is a bit of a rumble and then schools respond to that by calling in the interested parties. We talked about education subcommittees. There might be 18 or 20 parents and a good group of teachers as well. They would discuss the various issues around the problem with homework at that school. All of those concerns would be aired, and then we would talk about the department’s guidelines — the current guidelines for homework. You put the local community’s concerns into a statewide context — ‘Oh, lots of schools have these sorts of concerns’. It is quite healthy to have this kind of tension from time to time, and the way in which we would best deal with it is to develop a homework policy.

I would table Ormond Primary School’s homework policy. It is one page. It is written in simple language which explains to the community the consensus of what the group that developed the policy was thinking. Because there are so many parents involved in the formation of the policy, it has great traction. There is a good deal of current community ownership in this kind of policy, which makes it durable for about three years. In three years there will be another cycle of grumbling, but I am going to say healthy grumbling, about it, and then you revisit it and take into account emerging situations — for example, pervasive IT and multimedia.

Three years ago it probably was not as prevalent as it is now. People have greater access to tablets, and most parents would work hard to make sure that their children have access in some way to IT. No doubt the use of IT in the homework setting would bring about a need for a modification to a homework policy. As times change, you keep on revisiting these things. There are new groups of students and parents coming through school, so you have to go back there again and go through your processes of involving the community in the discussion.

Ms SAITLIK — However, in saying that, I guess from a VPA point of view — Glenn is at Ormond Primary School, and I am at Mont Albert — we are in quite high socioeconomic, privileged, middle society areas, hence we have parents that no. I want to be involved in education committees such as those and feel that they have the professional bias to be able to contribute.

That is far more challenging for some of our colleagues in the west, in the north and in rural areas too, where sometimes the parents who have got limited English, which we have heard about today, will not put themselves forward to contribute. Hence they do not necessarily perhaps have a voice, because they do not believe that they have got the knowledge or skills, which sometimes is most unfortunate. Some of our schools, particularly in the west, have issues just getting people to come on board onto school council — having parent members on school council — because these parents do not believe that they have got the abilities to contribute.

To some degree some schools have really got to sell what they are doing in regard to that home-school community partnership. If there was a policy that ever needed that home-school community partnership, it would be something like homework, where everybody needs to be on board. It is a fine line. I have 20 members on my education committee, but I could say that to some of my colleagues who would be lucky to be able to run an education committee and be able to discuss policies such as this, because they do not get the participation from their community.

Mr BROOKS — With the homework club model we saw here with the national partnerships funding, how would you construct something like that in the government system at those schools where there is a high level of need — in any sector where there is a high level of need, I suppose?

Mr BUTLER — If we were to take a rural-remote situation?

Mr BROOKS — Rural-remote, or northern suburbs with a high level of need.

Mr BUTLER — I think remote is a problem in itself because people have to get on buses and go home after school, so doing things before and after school would be problematic. Without access to technologies, that could be limiting as well. If the homework was done utilising multimedia, that might work to overcome problems with distance, but there could be socioeconomic pressures there as well. In a suburban setting I think — utilising the secondary kids, volunteers, all of that sort of thing, expertise within the community, semiretired people — you would work basically on getting the community into the school first. The homework would not be what you would be talking about. Homework might be an activity that happens after you have built a stronger community link.

I think a lot of strong school leaders would work very hard to develop those links with the community, such that the community felt confident about coming to school. The old way of doing that was feasting and having celebrations around different cultural groups and inviting everyone into the school to share in that sort of thing, and then you might have some project that all of the community could be involved in. It might be, 'Let's raise some money for a playground', that sort of thing, but the whole community would pitch in. Down the track you might tackle homework as an issue that we are all concerned about — 'How best could we utilise the expertise within the community?'. You could make it very multicultural, and it would probably have great traction, but you would build that up over time. It is about building the culture of your school.

Ms SAITLIK — And engaging the community.

Mr BUTLER — Making everyone belong to that school. It is a very long-term thing.

Dr COTTER — It is actually in many ways not about the homework. Lots of what you are talking about is actually about commitment to learning and commitment to school, understanding that, even though in your parents' cultural background — whether that be in Australia or whether that be internationally — they might not have had access to education, the support for that and the belief in how important that is as a life enabler needs to be built around those relationships between people. Homework is a by-product of, 'Let's all be part of a learning community'.

Mr BUTLER — Relationships are the most important thing.

Dr COTTER — Yes, that is right, and the pastoral care. The girls in our school who come to homework club every single night without fail and have sad faces when we go, 'The library is closing early tonight — sorry, girls', are the ones who want to spend time in the company of other people who care about what they are doing.

Mr BUTLER — There is a culture of learning in that kind of school.

Dr COTTER — Absolutely, yes.

Mr BUTLER — The culture of learning is what is unifying in a very diverse community. The kids come together for a common purpose. They go home, and there are different family things.

Dr COTTER — Yes, that is right.

Mr BUTLER — There are pressures to fit in with your family and follow your family's interests, but when you come to school, school is very unifying for children.

Mr ELASMAR — I have only one thing, which is not a real question but an explanation as a father. My daughter used to come home from school — school finished at 4 o'clock — at 6 o'clock because she was doing drama or music or whatever. Then she had to go and play sport — basketball, tennis. By the time she came home and finished other things, she would start doing her homework at about 10 o'clock. I know the homework policy is for everyone — it is not individual — but how should we look at this when we also consider out-of-school activity, which you spoke about in your opening remarks, given there are those who do not have any out-of-school activity, and we encourage out-of-school activities. How should we handle this when we talk about homework?

Dr COTTER — I think it is very personalised, Nazih. Certainly in our school, and this is also my experience across Catholic schools, the students who achieve the best — and by achieve I do not mean the highest ENTER — and have the most successful secondary education are those who get themselves involved in drama and sport, have family connections have a part-time job and do all those things. They learn the balance of things. In secondary schools where students have study periods — even though they think they are free periods — the ones who are most successful use those in a really focused way. They find a quiet spot, and they sit and they do a whole lot of work. That would be consistent for our dux over the last 10 years. I have been at Mercy that long. They are the ones that are doing everything; they learn the balance. It is a skill in life — in our working lives as well.

Ms SAITLIK — It very much goes back to what we initially touched on. I think everybody mentioned that self-discipline and that ability to manage self; hence if we try to start to do that in the early years the best we can, hopefully that can continue to be facilitated in the secondary years when things get a little bit busier and more complex for some.

Mr BUTLER — Yes. I think it is important to discern between being very busy and fulfilled and being busy and stressed. I think the high-achieving students have very busy lives, and they connect with lots of different people in different ways, and they manage to get things done. I am sure they put themselves under quite a deal of personal pressure, but they know how to celebrate their various successes as well.

Mr ELASMAR — Is the homework being given something they have learnt at school?

Dr COTTER — Our view would be it should always improve what is happening the next day and the day after that. It should never be busy work. Using the maths example, if you have already achieved the ability to apply an equation and you have already done it seven times in class and proved your competency, there is no need to do another 10 at home. It should be the next stage of that learning.

Mr BUTLER — In a primary setting the worst possible homework tasks are the ones that come in commercially produced booklets — ‘Here’s the grade 3 homework book’ — because each page bears no real relevance to what was happening in the class. That is just busy work. Some schools would be encouraged to take on that approach — ‘Here’s the grade 3 homework book’ — so that there is consistency across the school, but it creates so much tension because the parents would have to teach what was in the book because the children are not rehearsing what they have learnt in the class. I would say the publishing industry needs be pushed away from the homework segment.

The CHAIR — There is a lot of filler there, isn’t there — homework for homework’s sake?

Mr BUTLER — Yes, that is right. Busy work would be another way to describe that.

Dr COTTER — For the sake of ticking off homework. Homework should inspire, shouldn’t it? It should inspire you to learn more.

Mr BUTLER — You should be pretty keen to do your homework if it is really well related to — —

Dr COTTER — What you are learning at school.

Mr BUTLER — Yes, that is right.

The CHAIR — With the flip learning model, we have not touched on that. I am happy to capture opinion on the flip learning model, as people see the uptake of technology and the application of that, so that the exploration, discovery and the setting up of what will happen in the class — the next day, perhaps, or the next week — are actually established through these learning regimes and models. Is there a view?

Dr COTTER — It is fascinating at the moment. We just finished our staff professional learning exercise, where a couple of groups investigated that, and they got student feedback from it. We managed to run a year 12 subject called textiles or textile design, but there were only very small numbers in it, so we combined years 11 and 12 together. There is one teacher who is teaching two courses, working 150 per cent of the time trying to make this work, and they explored using this. The girls loved the idea that the resource was available, but one of them fed back the concept that it seemed a bit stupid for her to be watching a video when the teacher was at the other end of the room. That is the balance: when do you watch it, and what is it about watching it? The feedback was: ‘It was great. I could watch it again to make sure I understood it, but when I wanted to ask a question, I could not ask the question of the video; I had to record that in some way’.

The CHAIR — It is almost like technology for technology’s sake at that point.

Dr COTTER — To some extent, yes. I will give you another example. Having taught year 11 English a number of years ago before YouTube was as good as it is now, audio-recording classes for a student who was unwell and could not come to school was fantastic. You could get your iPhone out and record it and she could listen to it. It was only audio, but she had all the handouts; she could listen to it and follow through. She was then more or less doing the class by herself. It was a bit like distance ed in that situation. But certainly a number of our junior students find the online maths resources really helpful. The science teachers for year 11 would do that as well. As an example, why would you cut up a rat now when there will be something on YouTube which does the same thing? It certainly consolidates.

Ms SAITLIK — I think we just have to be very wary of access in the home environment. Particularly in relation to homework, we have to be sure that technology is accessible at home before things are set that are related to ICT.

The CHAIR — Yes, in your personal experience you have people who would have more disposable income to support their children's education than in other regions.

Ms SAITLIK — We have to be careful, though, not to make an assumption that that is everybody.

Mr BUTLER — Yes, there are variants within the community.

The CHAIR — Of course, that is right.

Dr COTTER — And the DER funding for schools last year — the digital education revolution — was great in that it gave us one-on-one devices for students, but it does not give us one-on-one internet access at home. Your iPad is great, but it is only as useful as your internet connection when it is 8.30 at night at home, which is a struggle for some of our parents.

The CHAIR — Indeed. Our time together has now come to a close, but I want to thank each of you today — Mr Ross, Mr Roberts, Dr Cotter, Mr Butler and Ms Saitlik. Thank you very much for your attendance today, for the valuable input you have given us and for sharing as you have. Thank you for your submission as well.

Witnesses withdrew.