

CORRECTED VERSION

EDUCATION AND TRAINING COMMITTEE

Inquiry into the approaches to homework in Victorian schools

Melbourne — 28 April 2014

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Ms G. McHardy, executive officer, Parents Victoria.

The CHAIR — On behalf of the committee I welcome Gail McHardy, representing Parents Victoria, to the public hearing of the Education and Training Committee inquiry into approaches to homework in Victorian schools. All evidence taken here today is protected by parliamentary privilege, but your comments outside the precincts of this hearing would not be protected. You will note the proceedings are being recorded by Hansard. In about a fortnight a transcript will be available for you to check for typographical errors. If you have opening remarks, I welcome those at this point and invite you to make those remarks.

Ms McHARDY — Thank you. I am one of your constituents, from your neck of the woods.

The CHAIR — From the Eastern Metropolitan Region?

Ms McHARDY — Yes, I am a parent out that way.

The CHAIR — That is good to hear.

Ms McHARDY — I am going to keep my introduction quite brief because you have the submission and I think it is very clear in our submission what Parents Victoria has articulated. I suppose the most important message I want to convey to the committee today is about utilising parent associations and the local community group within a school as the vehicle to make sure that parent community messages can be shared more widely with parents, who then become the drivers of those messages in the wider school community and in their local area as well.

It is the nature of schools today that they often lack an individual perspective but I think as time moves on people are wanting to get that stronger sense of community back. In saying that, we see parent associations as that strong vehicle to do that, and so much so that I have a great example from this morning when I talked to a parent association member in the Whittlesea area. They were explaining their parent association to me and how the principal has brought members from the leadership team of their school to talk about when they graduate students from each year level, from year 10, year 11 to year 12. I think it is really important that school communities utilise that vehicle to have those conversations, and that is just an example. I have a couple of others to share, hopefully, in response to questions.

The CHAIR — Fantastic. Does the association have a position on the notion of homework?

Ms McHARDY — Parents Victoria only represents parents in public schools in Victoria. It is our understanding from our members and over time our policy has become that if a school is going to have a homework policy, that has to be collaborated on and communicated with the school community over a period of time. It is not something that is there for 10 years and does not get looked at again for another 10 years. It is something that is ongoing, and the school needs to revisit the policy and take a temperature check of where their families — the school audience that is — are at any given time. It is the nature of schools to change all the time. The style of families change and the ability for families to have the appropriate resources to do what they need to do changes. In some of our school communities there are language challenges, issues around disability, employment and socioeconomic impacts outside the school facility that can affect a child's learning and may be either potentially disadvantaging the child or not working in harmony with what the school is hopefully doing to advance that child's progress.

The CHAIR — Do the parent associations initiate exchanges and seek out other parents who may not necessarily affiliate so that a whole lot of exchanges, collaboration and sharing of ideas can take place over time? Is there that sort of outreach outside the natural cohort?

Ms McHARDY — My involvement in the organisation spans more than 22 years. It is a really interesting question that you are asking. When I entered the organisation as a parent the collaboration and the communication was probably more open, but over a period of time parent associations probably became a bit undervalued and were not acknowledged enough for their potential. There was an introduction of what we call class reps — and this is nothing against class reps in Victorian government schools. There are always trends of what works in some schools and what schools tend to sign up to or sometimes promote.

Schools may have classrooms reps in schools and they are individual parents who nominate to be the class rep of that particular year level, predominantly in primary schools. Depending on what their roles and responsibilities are they are one avenue of opportunity, but from a parent association's point of view it is not a collective of parents where you might get differing views and perspectives. We advise our parent associations — both the members of the organisation and those who are non-members — when I do regional visits or school visits and give them the 'how-to' to communicate more widely. That includes things like having a Facebook page for their parent club or having a column or a page or an insert in the school newsletter where there is the opportunity to share some of these topics.

We encourage parent associations and school councils to work in cooperation so that, for example, if there are new policy matters afoot or the homework policy is being reviewed or there are parent-teacher interviews, we would make suggestions and give ideas to the principals. That is predominantly our target audience these days, because we are finding that for parent associations to be effective they have to have the support and motivation of their school leader. That is what we have found very much in the last three to five years in particular. We are working strongly in trying to grab the attention of principals and say to them, 'You have a cohort of people here that, yes, have the ability to talk as a focus group, a bit of a think tank, an advisory panel — whatever you would like to call them — and then you can also work together to more widely distribute that communication about what you are thinking and get a temperature check about how people react to that'.

The example I gave you before in a north-western regional college is of them taking a temperature check. They may not end up doing what they are proposing to do. It might be a temperature check on the language of the policy. The school's documents are always written in educational language, and sometimes a parent reads them and say, 'We have no idea what that means'. That is not to minimise the ability of a parent — not at all. It is just that sometimes people in the education space have a tendency to speak in the latest lingo. For parents, some of those things have to be fleshed out a bit more.

The CHAIR — Sometimes school councils can be quite political, and with that comes agendas, entrenched thinking and a whole range of things. How do you deal with that so that you serve the broader interest of the parents within that school community?

Ms McHARDY — That is a complex and tricky one at times. It depends on the school community. We advise our parent associations to have a very open communication conduit between school council and parent associations. We advise them to do a parent association or club report to the school council so those views can be expressed. Sometimes that traffic can be one-way or two-way — it depends on the local community. Then when it is raised by our members or non-members who come along and want have a discussion about how they can improve the relationship, we give them suggestions about how they may want to communicate those discussions, ideas or challenges. When people come to our organisation, sadly, it is often about the challenges and about their having a poor experience. We try to turn that around to a positive experience and say, 'Here is an opportunity where you can correct this'. Maybe it is a misunderstanding about what the school's intention was. We always term it working in a 'quadrella', which means school management, school governance, parent community and student community working on the same page. Then you are working together.

Mr BROOKS — Gail, we have been talking with the other witnesses today around a couple of issues. One of the big ones was quality homework — making sure it is meaningful. You have picked that up in your submission. The other issue was equity, and you have picked that up as well. You have given an example on page 3 of your submission.

Ms McHARDY — Yes.

Mr BROOKS — You have then mentioned in the next paragraph that it is often left up to the local communities to fund and sustain practices in relation to parental engagement, which is effectively one of the issues of inequity. What is the alternative? What do you want? What do you think government — the department — should do in terms of encouraging better parental engagement, supporting schools in relation to parental engagement, particularly with homework as a follow through on that one?

Ms McHARDY — For school communities, the difficulty is that the politics always seem to interfere with that arena. That is not what families want. When we go on school visits or to regional sessions, often we have to give a bit of background on the current situation. For example, do people know who the minister is? Often people get federal and state politics confused. From the parents' perspective, a public school is being funded to do their role, and the parents rely on the school to communicate all the information. That is probably the biggest frustration for families: how much communication they get, the type of communication and the topics the school wants to talk to them about.

Some parents get quite offended when there are issues that are not discussed with them, because the school says, 'That is school operational business; that is not parent business'. But parents would argue quite differently about that. They would say, 'If you actually talked to us about that, we might be able to assist you and aid you in poor decisions you might be making about that into the future'.

But in answer to your question, it is very vexed because with Parents Victoria in particular, every conversation I have with the current government — and previous governments — is all around effective communication. Yes, we have glossy brochures and things like that, but sadly there has to be a lot more one-to-one communication because, even with internet and social media and all the various platforms, there are still a number of people in our community who do not have access to those things, so you have to do a myriad of things to cover off all bases. That is why we always talk about, even with school communities, doing the audience analysis so schools understand who their community is, at what levels, and, where are some of the opportunities — we always talk about the opportunities — for having the conversation about these really important topics.

You only have to tune into your commercial radio daily to hear some of the topics that come up. If education is on the radio waves, often the sorts of things that come up are about what a school is or is not doing. It is often about what it is not doing, which is sad because schools are doing some great things. But we hear some good ideas, and I think I even cited an example of where recently I heard a parent who rang in to talk about — and they were even speaking to our organisation about it, too — where they actually planned the homework over a period of time, giving parents an opportunity, where it did not have to be done on a daily basis or a weekly basis; it was over a month or over a school term. The plan was set, and then families could work it to their plan and what met their needs. To me that sounded quite sensible, in that school community sense. If that worked for that community, that is brilliant. But not all schools have the opportunity to do that, through choice or because they have not really got an understanding about what works for their community. It is very difficult as a parent, because you do not want to be disrespectful to the educators, but sometimes you have to question: are people listening to the people? You have to ask that.

The CHAIR — In terms of the notion of communication, I have tried to manage my reactions when people have a throwaway line or say, 'We've put it on the website', which is a one-way communication and so largely it denies people an opportunity to ask the dumb questions, even if they are FAQs. It just sets up a situation where people might be looking at a few screen loads of eye-glazing stuff but with only very little that might be relevant to them or that they can comprehend. It does not cater to different cultures and different points of access and ability to access. Something that is contentious and which affects families and households in such a significant way — probably an almost visceral way — is homework, because it is an extension of the demands of the school imposing itself on family life. Do you feel that in a general sense there is enough discussion or feedback and input about something like that, that it has migrated out of the school community into the home, irrespective of what the consequences are or the impact on the home?

Ms McHARDY — I think again about that reciprocal communication conduit, that sometimes it is not necessarily two-way. Even though it may be having an impact at one end, sometimes it does not necessarily feed back to say what those impacts are or how there could actually be further contributing factors or having not good impacts on the student down the track. Because if there are pressures and mum and dad, or grandma, or whoever is the carer of the child, are not reacting well, that can also then have some — for a child, in our experience when we have these stories shared with us, how they then value their education or not, or how they participate in that space going into the future, sometimes they are reliant

on how some of those things play out. If there is tension in the home, for example; that has a long-term effect on that child. I am not blaming parents for that, but if you are a family and you are under a lot of pressure and you are passing ships in the night, where someone is going off to do shift work or you are a single-parent family, all those sorts of things, or you are a family that has three or more children — it is a common discussion amongst your own social networks at times in your life.

I remember from that stage in my life when I talked to my friends some of my buddies would say, ‘Oh my goodness, I’ve got to sort out all the paperwork tonight, because there are so many levels of demand on my time with my child’ and hubby may not have been a person who was in that space, who was supportive, for a whole range of reasons — because their learning experience was not good at the time. That is a changing sea at this time. As time evolves, a lot of parents take on different roles; more dads are taking on roles today in my view. We are seeing a different generation coming through, but again they probably still have the same challenges we faced, but without those people sharing those challenges no-one would know.

That is why I would say to schools that it is really important that when they have parent information evenings or opportunities where they can talk to families they have that discussion — ‘What are some of the areas where you find it most challenging? Is it about the resources we provide to your children? Are we telling you too much? Not enough?’. Some schools will say that they do this, but I do not often feel that. When we have those communication opportunities, they are always an add-on — they are 5 minutes or 10 minutes at the end of a session when you are being briefed on a particular thing that is happening in the school. I think it would be great if our students had the opportunity to facilitate some of those discussions for their own independent learning and also interpersonal skills of communication. It would be a fantastic exercise in some schools to be able to do that and to have conversations about this topic.

The CHAIR — Are you aware of where schools set out to have conversations in a forum where they invite parents in to talk about things such as homework? Are there forums as people shape their thinking on this?

Ms McHARDY — Over a period of time there would have been occasions when that does and does not happen. I would be encouraging all Victorian government schools to do that more frequently than not at all. Even with students — and I do not know if they have been a witness to this process — we are very supportive of VicSRC, which is an organisation representing students in government and non-government schools. When they have their student congress they talk about different areas and come up with resolutions. It was fantastic — in one of their resolutions they talked about a proposal for schools to develop a resource so that when students have missed out on particular chunks of work, students could fill in that gap and that would be like a learning tool. You can go to their website, and I am sure you can find it. I have got the document, and I can leave it with you to have a look at if you like. It does not go into the exact details, but it does talk about the proposal to develop a resource around that. I think a student to student and family to family.

Mr ELASMAR — Homework is difficult in rural areas, can you tell us the reason for it?

Ms McHARDY — By rural areas do you mean families having access to certain things to support projects?

Mr ELASMAR — Something like that.

Ms McHARDY — Okay. Again, pretty much across the whole state parents have the same ifs and buts about it all — the dos and don’ts. They are all pretty much on the same page in our experience. In the most recent project we did, we went around most of the state — and it was quite a long time ago; it is 14 years ago now. We do temperature checks with parents today. Be they rural or regional, they still say the same things. They still say they are happy to have lots of reading in those junior years, up to grade 2. There was a little bit of a push on with a lot of project work, and some parents were a bit nervous about that because often parents questioned who was actually doing the projects — those sorts of things. I think if schools were really diligent in talking about the parameters and protocols — who does the actual work — that would make things a bit clearer in that regard, but again it comes down to the homework policy. But I do

not think there is much differentiation between rural and regional other than with tasks that are set when they do not have the resources to support those tasks. We know they all believe that homework needs to be purposeful.

Mr ELASMAR — Okay. We heard before from the department and the witness before you about homework clubs. There are a few of them — about 300. What is the association's view on them? Are they beneficial? Should they be in public places? What is the association's view on this?

Ms McHARDY — We think it should be flexible to both. It could be from school provision as well as external provision, and the reason I say that is that CMY, which is the acronym for the Centre for Multicultural Youth, runs the Learning Beyond the Bell program. They keep in contact with us. We do not engage with them all the time, but they keep us on their radar. Where they conduct those groups, that is fantastic. They are providing a service to some people who may not necessarily access it directly through the school. Libraries offer some avenues as well. If you have not been out to the North Melbourne Football Club, there is also the Huddle. They have opportunities there where students who are disengaged may come into that space or even just local community members who might want to participate in the space. Again, you would have to go to those people for the detail about that.

As an organisation all that stuff is fantastic, because again it is giving an opportunity for people to access all the different levels. It should not just be specific to a school as such. In the mind of a government school — or even an independent school's mind — they might think, 'If we have the stronghold on this, this is our opportunity to get more of the community in'. I would like to think that the community has an option to go wherever they choose to go that is accessible for them. I think that addresses the question that you asked in that regard.

Mr BROOKS — Gail, in relation to the development of homework policies at the school level, do you want to comment on what sort of resources parents commonly draw on? There are obviously the DEECD guidelines that I think you attached to the submission. Are there any other resources in terms of expert or knowledgeable sources of advice on homework policy? In your experience what other sources would parents draw from?

Ms McHARDY — In our experience the public generally uses Google and does a bit of an internet search on what is trendy and popular at the moment. That is the tendency. That is the beauty of the likes of Google, because people will use the internet for that if they have got access to it. With smart phones in particular people have things at their fingertips, but again we have to be careful that we do not assume that everybody does that. We still see it as the responsibility of a school in relation to its learning space and what it does there, and sharing that story with the families that have enrolled in that school. That is not just at the entry point, be it primary or secondary; it is an ongoing conversation.

Our organisation talks to school leaders and to teachers who come along to our sessions for information — and some really proactive teachers do that. They come to any of our sessions or to our annual conference to listen to what parents are saying because that is probably their temperature check. It is good to know that those people are checking in to see what they need to do to their own systems and their own school improvement in that space. In particular, where we have seen good practice we will make a point of grabbing those examples. We do that ourselves. We research the internet and grab good examples from schools. If a parent has rung us and told us of a good example or there is an opportunity to share that with the department, we will push that. We are not saying there is a need to mandate it for every school; we are just saying that this is what some schools are doing, and if they had some additional funding, they could sustain a program that is successful. That is probably one of the biggest other bugbears: where there are things that are working and if schools need some sort of support or assistance or additional staff, be it homework clubs or whatever, probably the biggest difficulty and challenge for schools is how they sustain and maintain that type of service.

The CHAIR — Do you have a conference as an entity?

Ms McHARDY — Yes.

The CHAIR — With that conference, do you call for papers on things like homework and how homework may or may not be assessed and the feedback from the teacher themselves? Have you covered any of that territory as a cohort?

Ms McHARDY — What we have done in the past, prior to my time and during my early years in the organisation, was run position papers and fact sheets on topics of interest in education. Over the years we have obviously gone to more online mediums to assist and support parents. We did an online conference, and over the years we have done assessment reporting, homework, et cetera. That has come up in discussion in those online platforms. We have also had opportunities at our annual conferences. We try to have a theme each year, and what theme we run with depends on the opportunities available. For example, if the department has a new whiz-bang thing they are doing with schools — one year it was a device you held in your hand and we had questions and answers and the parent audience would press the particular multiple choice answers — then we would feed that information back and use that in our contributions to the department on particular topics.

We have tried to be innovative, and at the moment we are looking at doing things like using the Polycom conferencing facilities a bit more. We would like to use them in particular. We are also using something called Blackboard Collaborate. That is another area in which we are working. It is the nature of the world today that not everybody is keen to be able to go to things physically if they can access things through their school through technology. We are looking at trying to engage and have those discussions to get a temperature check from our own membership.

The CHAIR — In terms of getting the temperature checks, finding out what the latest thinking is and the theories that people want to support and adhere to, because you have been involved in this for such a long time, have you seen change, dynamism, evolution in terms of approaches to homework?

Ms McHARDY — Homework would be one that probably remains the same. The only difference is that schools might modify their program about how their students may report to and from the school about their homework. Platforms and all that sort of stuff about the tools and technology — that would be the biggest change in that period of time. But as far as just the attitudes to the value of homework, it has been pretty much the same across that period.

I am just thinking about Facebook — we also have a Facebook page — particularly in the reaction to media. Obviously there are journalists and announcements are being made about particular things in government and so forth. Again, Facebook is another way for people to put their views or comments and so forth. There are different little things we are doing, and whereas in years past it would be reliant on a letter, a fax or a phone call, now there is an array of things: a phone call, an email, text messaging, the Facebook page, our website — you name it.

There are loads of opportunities, so I suppose from the organisation's point of view we provide an access point where people can share that view if they feel they cannot do it in an open space at the school level. Sometimes, if people go to the school with a view, they are then seen as being either a troublemaker, vexatious or having a hidden agenda. Some families will come to us in that regard and say, 'I really have a concern about this'.

But we hear some fantastic stories. Another one that I have started to hear about is inclusion officers. Again, this is not something that has come to complete fruition yet but we were very excited to hear about a parent association being on foot and doing that. But their first challenge and barrier was about making sure they had a fully operating parent association. Our experience in some schools is that these things are not being encouraged or valued. Who knows what that is about? I have been around a long time and there are a whole lot of issues in that. That is probably why I mentioned earlier in the discussion about targeting our school leaders and principals, because we believe that if we get them onside about the benefits of having a parent connection, everything will just fall into place.

Mr BROOKS — I was just going to make a comment. What we have heard this morning from some key academics in this area is that parental engagement is critical in terms of the homework reference we have, so those things you have just been saying are quite — —

Ms McHARDY — The difficulty in that parental engagement space — and this is my personal view, not the organisation’s view — is that over a period of time there have been people watching this space. Particularly in our state system we were very proud of that community connection, but then there was a shift away where when it came to school business or parent business you come in the gate or you come in the gate on particular terms. That is all shifting back because as a society we are seeing that we have lost that connection and we need to get back into that space. I think people are now starting to realise that we may have made some wrong decisions, and there is even a discussion around autonomy and all of those things.

Obviously an organisation like ours still has some views around principal powers, autonomy in schools and the funding of public schools. That all has an impact too. But we are more interested to know, in the parental and family engagement space, about how the government supports and is proactive about that. There does not seem to be any written evidence. There is research evidence, of course, being done in other places and it has been very effective, and that is why we put in our submission about the Catholic sector. They saw what the government sector was doing but then they ran with it, and they have continued to run with it. That is great, but we would like to see that in our sector too.

The CHAIR — What are some of the biggest issues that you see will not go away with regard to homework and self-directed learning of the pupil, which parents need to deal with and accommodate? Where are the biggest gaps? What is the thing that is coming back — —

Ms McHARDY — Student inclusion, student engagement, parental engagement and particularly student wellbeing — they are the things that come up time and time again, and not just into the organisation. The calls come into us more when there is a bit of a glitch. Maybe there has been a breakdown in a relationship between a family and a school. The positive side of things is where we have parents who are really proactive and saying, ‘We want to get this happening at our school’, and they will talk to us as an organisation for support. That is fantastic. But when we go into other places and talk to stakeholders, it is things about student vulnerability, family vulnerability — the socioeconomic factors that are impacting on families, which is impacting on education into the future. They are the big-ticket items.

The CHAIR — Has there been any mention of bullying in terms of how students can approach things outside a school?

Ms McHARDY — In our view — I do not like to use this term — bullying has been done to death. It is ongoing, and the students tell you that too. The students say, ‘How much more are you going to talk to us about bullying?’. They believe there should be programs and supports, and that we should make sure there is support for students. Again I direct you to the VicSRC. They talk very strongly about how we can support students around that space, because the VicSRC are finding the adults are imposing things on young people. Young people actually know a lot of the answers, but they do not get the opportunity to advance those answers with the appropriate supports and funding to do so.

That is a space that has a lot of organisations and people over it. It is still a problem and an issue, but we need to get family engagement and get students’ confidence to lift. I do not have all the answers, but from our experience in that space a lot of it is because of how that is responded to. It may be a timely response to a young person’s concern. But if a family has said, ‘We have an issue here’ and the school has not managed that appropriately for whatever reason, that has an impact. That then can exacerbate into school refusal, and that is a whole other complexity. It is certainly a huge issue, but we find that it is how it is responded to in the first place that is important.

The CHAIR — That sense of immediacy.

Mr CRISP — You talked in your submission about support that can be given in developing school homework policies. Do many schools take up that offer?

Ms McHARDY — I gave an example earlier from a north-western regional college where they have actually gone to the parents association and said, ‘This is our thinking. This is a draft proposal on a particular thing’. I do not want to go into the detail, because I do not want to share my work here. But it was a fantastic example, because they have taken it to the parents association of that college to get a bit of a temperature check with them. In particular it is around the language: how they are talking to the parents about what they are intending to do. That is the biggest issue. They would then give advice. That college came from a space where they did not have that relationship. Now they have a fantastic relationship, and the principal and the teachers see them as an advisory group, which is great. Then when those ideas are fleshed out a bit more, the schools take it a bit wider and so forth. We are definitely underutilised in that space.

The department taps into us quite a lot, and we contribute a lot of information to them. We often have to repeat ourselves, particularly around parent-teacher interview times and school reporting times. I give this example every time. Schools could have the homework policies slotted into the school report — little examples like that. Or they might do a little presentation in the waiting area as parents are starting to wait. You are always waiting to go into a room to meet a teacher. They could have a slideshow thing happening or all the videoconferencing stuff around televising into spaces at school, for example. There are all those little examples. They might have a session with new parents coming into the school, but it might be a handover from the old parents, who say, ‘These are our experiences. Let us do an FAQ here now where you can ask us questions and we can then direct you to the appropriate people’.

The CHAIR — How often is that done, that handover?

Ms McHARDY — Drouin college, out Gippsland way, used to do that quite a lot. I always put it into the regional visit suggestions. We have ideas and suggestions — primary school suggestions and secondary college suggestions — and these things are an accumulation. Some schools are doing some fantastic things, but again it is how people promote them and how we share.

The CHAIR — It is my understanding that there are a lot of things about homework policy given at the time of parent-teacher interviews and in the enrolment process at the start of the school year. Are you saying that we should take more opportunities there for the school to communicate, reiterate, underscore, emphasise and clarify that it is an ongoing dialogue, not just one piece of information that is given on the assumption that it arrived home in the first place?

Ms McHARDY — Exactly. The other thing, too, is that with the school newsletter we always say ‘your welfare coordinator’, or the go-to person. Schools should get really quite savvy in that space. They obviously have to decide as a team who that person is going to be from one year to the next, but they should have a go-to person who is trusted by the community — it might be one or two people — because not every parent is comfortable going to the front office. It is just not a reality. How do you have those conversations and find out what people are comfortable with unless you have those conversations? We make those suggestions about your school news, your websites, your intrasites or your Facebook page — whatever you want to call them. You can search on Facebook. Merbein P-12 parent club has a fantastic Facebook page where they make little announcements. It is brilliant and that is the school being smart; it is utilising an opportunity. I think there is lots of room for improvement.

The CHAIR — What you said about going into the general office environment, with all that open space where is no privacy, is interesting. I am thinking of what a church group set up in basically a cradle-to-grave consultation process. The way that they accessed the counsellors was through a series of doors that were alternative entrances from the main entrance. That issue that you have raised, that people feel intimidated by some of those big, modern, open spaces that have do not have privacy, is the same sort of thing. If people are in a setting where you get a critical mass of more than 10 or 15 people in a room, people do not want to even put up their hands to ask a question, so how do you actually get them interacting with you and asking questions but still look at the economies of scale at the same time? It is an ongoing quest, is it not, to get this feedback?

Ms McHARDY — Totally, and that is why we value the family convenors in the Catholic sector in that sort of space. I was invited, which was lovely, to look at a resource that was developed for the Catholic sector in relation to a parent resource where they were identifying how schools in the Catholic sector can do that better at that local level.

Mr BROOKS — What was that called, Gail?

Ms McHARDY — Synergistic were the consultative group that worked on that resource. You would have to go to the Catholic Education Office to access it. When they launched it last year, the intention was for it to go online for Catholic schools. All that stuff is fantastic and people in the government sector were doing some stuff around the FPL work, which was Families as Partners in Learning. We have resources, with some fabulous stuff there at a federal and state level, but we as an organisation want to see that being practised every day in schools. You cannot make people do that. I have principals asking me all the time, ‘What do I have to do about parental engagement?’. It is not rocket science; it is about having conversations and working out a plan about how you are going to do that with your local community. I cannot make that happen in your local community. You have to know your local community.

It is really interesting. We give them suggestions and ideas and we say, ‘This school tried this’ — and you will have fabulous stories. Last year when I was down in south-western Victoria I had a principal from the Portland area saying that he had a dad who was a farmer and was on school council. He said, ‘Look, I don’t want to do this anymore, but what I would like to do is come into the school community. After assembly can we have not a meeting but just a coffee and chat?’. That principal said that that was the best quality engagement he has had with his parent community. That father brought in about 80 people who stayed around just to have a chat.

The CHAIR — That is impressive.

Ms McHARDY — You have to ask the question. It is about how and who in the dynamics of these school communities. If schools were smart, they would identify people who are the talkers — you can hear that I am a talker — and it is about how you do that. When my children were in prep, I used to run a family prep picnic, with the permission of the school. There was no expectation on the teachers to come to it; they came voluntarily. We did it offsite. Families came together and it was just an opportunity for families to meet each other and to get a bit of an idea about, ‘If my child gets invited to play, will I or won’t I?’. It was an opportunity. How do you create those opportunities? Parents cannot facilitate that all the time. People in the schools can sometimes be the people who can help that.

The CHAIR — I guess with the pressures that teaching professionals and principals have on them, with crowded curricula and so on, it is difficult to find the time for some of these sorts of communication strategies. Perhaps we could suggest that in teacher training colleges they have a unit on marketing and communications, so that they leave as better communicators, in a commercial sense.

Ms McHARDY — I am glad you raised that. Only Deakin and RMIT and I think Vic Uni have invited us. It is not every year, because they do not have it in their budgets to do it. They do not have a unit on communication, but a couple of universities over a number of years have given Parents Victoria an opportunity, and I have spoken to future teachers and that is very valuable. It is only one session and the feedback I get is really good, because they do not get that opportunity unless they do it in placements. I say to them, ‘When you do your placement in schools, ask the principal if you can attend a school council meeting and a parents association meeting, because they’re your insights into how a school community is either working or not working’.

The CHAIR — That is really invaluable stuff. It is a really nice way to round off our session today. Thank you very much, Gail.

Ms McHARDY — Good. I hope it has been helpful.

The CHAIR — It has been; it has been very thought provoking. We really value what you had to say. I commend you for your work.

Ms McHARDY — Thank you. We work hard.

The CHAIR — It sounds amazing, what you have done in your commitment over time.

Ms McHARDY — Yes, it has been a long, long time. The executive is voluntary and it is hard to maintain, I have to tell you. Because of the nature of the world today, everyone has priorities but it is nice to get that feedback, when people say, ‘Keep up the hard work’, because we do work really hard on very limited resources — and we are open for donations at any time.

The CHAIR — I have to say bravo for your work and all strength to you in doing it.

Ms McHARDY — Thank you.

Committee adjourned.