C O R R E C T E D V E R S I O N

EDUCATION AND TRAINING COMMITTEE

Inquiry into the approaches to homework in Victorian schools

Melbourne — 30 April 2014

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Witnesses

Ms Y. Kelley, and
Mr M. Barr.

The CHAIR — I will just go through some of the formalities in welcoming you to the public hearings of the Education and Training Committee's inquiry into approaches to homework in Victorian schools. I offer you a warm welcome. It is important for you to note that any evidence that we take in this setting is protected by parliamentary privilege; however, that privilege is not extended when you are outside of this environment. The material you offer today by way of evidence is captured by Hansard, and a transcript of that information will be available for you to correct any typographical errors, if there are any, in about two weeks, which is the normal turnaround time.

We are very pleased to have you here today as individuals with professional backgrounds and also as parents. We have not had people outside of organisations, institutions or entities, even though we have had very authoritative input from many agencies and parents associations. In terms of inspired professionals who are also parents, as individuals you have been invited to add your special dimension in a direct sense. Have you thought about some opening remarks, or any scene setting that you would like to provide for us before we start?

Ms KELLEY — We have thought about it briefly. We do not have much to add to our submission. As you say, we are work colleagues but we both have a background in education, so from time to time we have had conversations. My two children are still going through school; Michael's have finished. When we read about the inquiry we thought that it was something we talk about a lot so we would put a voice forward. We deliberately wrote an informal submission that is not related to our work at all. I guess our main point is that as educators we are not convinced that there is evidence to suggest that homework contributes to improving educational outcomes, and as parents we have experienced firsthand the stress that homework can add particularly to working families. When you combine the two you have to ask why we are proceeding as we are if we cannot say with certainty that there are significantly improved educational outcomes and when we know it is having a significant impact on working families in particular. That was the purpose — just to put those points forward.

The CHAIR — May I inquire if you are still a teaching professional?

Ms KELLEY — No, we both work with education as our focus but we are public servants and we work in a public sector agency, not a school.

The CHAIR — Thank you. Mr Barr, would you like to start with some opening remarks?

Mr BARR — No, we have talked about it, and what Yvonne has said reflects both of our thoughts.

The CHAIR — I think probably the best way to deal with what you have to offer us today is for you to give us some examples. We are all cognisant of the stresses that parents have nowadays and of how equipped they feel about being able to make a contribution to homework, especially in secondary school life. Perhaps you could give us some insight into what it is like with a really crowded family life, with parents working and not getting home until late when the priority then is meals and other things.

Ms KELLEY — I have always worked full time. I have two children; one who finished school last year and is now 18, and a son who is 13 and is in year 8. Throughout their school life I have worked full time, which has meant that they have gone to after-care after school. You work all day and then you get in the car and you rush to get to after-care, because you are told that you will be charged $15 a minute or whatever if you are late. You pick up your child and you bring them home. When they are little you pretty much get 2½ hours of awake time with them when you get home. You want them in bed by 8.30 because they have to get up and do it all again the next day.

In that 2½ hours you have to cook dinner and eat dinner. A lot of people are putting their kids through music lessons so the kids have to do music practice. There might be sport. My kids play basketball so there would be a training session sometime in the week. You have to get them in the bath, you have to make them clean their teeth — and these are not things that they are busting themselves to do. Really you are spending 2½ hours in processing your children; that is what it feels like. Then you have to add homework into that. They may not care about the homework, but as a parent you care and you are used to crossing the i's and dotting the t's and vice versa and wanting to get work done, so you put that standard on them.

Really you can spend 2½ hours making your children jump through these processing hoops, including homework.

As a community I think we would all say that that is probably of limited benefit to family life and limited benefit to children. It would be much better to sit down and talk with your kids about the day and be able to spend time over dinner and do some of the family chores together. We seldom got our kids to do chores because they were under so much homework pressure. We started to take those things on, but you end up regretting that when they get older and you feel like they are living in a hotel.

The CHAIR — Is this where the syndrome of everything being hung on the floor starts?

Mr BARR — Yes, I think so.

Ms KELLEY — Michael has three kids, and his approach was to ignore homework altogether.

Mr BARR — I have three boys. I only left teaching in 2010. For the last 10 years of my career I was the head of a middle school that had 600 children with ages ranging from 10 to 15 years, so I sort of got it from both sides. I agree with everything Yvonne has said about the busyness of family life nowadays. Anecdotally, I have just been reflecting on my career. When I first started teaching all the parents would come to pick their kids up from secondary school. Nowadays the kids are left to go their own way. More and more parents are working — you have got a double income or you have got a single family and one income — and they are not getting home until 5 o'clock. The most stressful time of the day for parents, often, is from 3.30 p.m. If they are working, from 3.30 until they get a phone call from their kids — 'I'm home' — really their work life comes to a halt until that happens. That is what I have been told time and again.

The CHAIR — Can you just go through that again?

Mr BARR — Yes.

The CHAIR — Do you mean that the parents in their working life are mindful of what their children are doing once they leave the school?

Mr BARR — Yes; a lot of parents who are both working have said to the kids, 'Walk home' or 'After sport, walk home' or 'Get yourself to basketball' or whatever.

Ms KELLEY — 'Go to the library'.

Mr BARR — 'Go to the library', or whatever it is. I have read research on this, but I could not quote it to you. They are at work doing whatever they are doing — you guys are conducting an inquiry — and at 3.30 they are going, 'Well, the kids are leaving school now' and they are looking at their phones, and then there is some text message, 'I've arrived home', and they can relax. That is 45 minutes of stress you do not need in the workforce. There are those sorts of things, and as Yvonne said, they come home and have to deal with the stress of getting the kids to do homework. There are so many activities that people do now. If you look at a calendar that a lot of parents go by on the fridge — Monday afternoon, ballet; Tuesday afternoon, basketball; Wednesday afternoon this, that and the other thing — where is their time for homework? That is the big issue, and it creates stress.

I think there are three lots of parents: one, those who love homework and love their kids to get as much as possible; two, those who are very ambivalent about it and will take it or leave it; and three, those who really do not see an educational value in it. That is pretty much it. We were in the middle one; we were a bit ambivalent about it. I had my three boys for dinner — they are all in their 20s now — the other day. I said, 'Okay, let's work out roughly how much homework you did in your entire school careers combined'. We came up with an hour and a half, roughly. That was mainly because we did not enforce it, and they would do it at school in the library, and we just did not want to have the stress of having to sit them down and battle with them the whole time. And, do you know, they have got three good jobs and they are successful.

The CHAIR — That is interesting, because you have had that responsibility of running a middle school. Wearing that hat, if you saw some sort of — if I could use an almost pejorative term in this context — non-compliance by way of homework and not the support coming from the home environment, back when you were purely running classes, when you were not in the managerial role, how would you have felt?

Mr BARR — How would I have felt? I did not really worry about it at all because I tried to set homework and role model it.

The CHAIR — Can you let us know the subjects you taught?

Mr BARR — I taught geography and history. I tried to set homework that engaged the whole family, in the sense that it was not a traditional 'Fill out this sheet'. For example, we would cover a concept in class, on mapping or something, and I would say the homework would be 'Go home and teach somebody how to do it'. It was not 'Write it out', not 'Fill out an exercise sheet' — 'Teach somebody how to do it'. I did that a lot.

Ms KELLEY — But the other thing you used to do in your leadership role was put some rules around homework, like telling other teachers they could not set homework in holidays.

Mr BARR — Yes, and we had homework planning. It was a big battle to fight in the school where I was because it was a private school and parents expected it. The staff — of course there is always a crowded curriculum, which is the issue — felt they needed to do it. So I would try to put rules around it and I would try to modify it: 'You can't set homework on the weekend', 'You can't set homework for over the holidays', 'If you are giving the kids a project, you must give them a marking matrix so they know exactly how they are going to be assessed on it'. Those were the sorts of things that I put in place. There were never any great issues that I can recall where I had to confront somebody or talk to parents who did not agree with the homework, because it never really arose.

The CHAIR — The parents in this private school environment did not feel like they were being short-changed by not having it?

Mr BARR — No, because I always gave them activities, so there was always homework but not busy work. I always tried to make sure it had an educational value for the children. Whereas I would look at a lot of the homework that other staff would give, and it would be what I would call busy work. The other concern that we put into our — —

The CHAIR — Can I just stop you there for a moment. Are you comparing what you set with what other history or geography teachers or language teachers or mathematics teachers or — —

Mr BARR — Everybody. A lot of other geography and history teachers. We used to work in teams, but a lot of them that I am aware of with whom I did not work directly would do busy work.

The CHAIR — What is busy work?

Mr BARR — Busy work is just filling out a sheet for the sake of filling out a sheet.

Ms KELLEY — Drawing a map, spending 2 hours colouring in — —

Mr BARR — Drawing a map or colouring in a map.

The CHAIR — So this is sort of meeting expectations of 'bang for your buck' in terms of 'I'm getting value for my school fees and this is a material representation that those in the home environment can recognise because we are not tracking what is happening in the classroom any other way'?

Mr BARR — Yes, that is right.

Ms KELLEY — My daughter went to a private girls school. It would have been profoundly liberating for me if she did not have the hours of homework she had to do. As she went through her secondary schooling and became a little more disinterested in schooling and more interested in extracurricular stuff, it became 'What do I do? Do I ride her and make sure she does that piece of work?' and we spend 2½ hours a night with her having a tantrum. We did say in our submission that we thought about sending a tape to demonstrate what goes on. It would be of me telling her to do homework constantly. With my daughter it was quite a vexed thing because clearly her marks were fine; that was not an issue. She did not see the educational merit in what she was doing and it was not improving her outcomes at all. It was a hoop that had to be jumped through.

The CHAIR — Did you track that when that started to happen, though?

Ms KELLEY — Yes.

The CHAIR — Was that at a particular age group?

Ms KELLEY — It really started around year 9 for her. In year 7 she used to come home, sit on her bed, get her books out and go through what she had done in the day. It was pretty much the same in year 8, without us asking. But in year 9 there were a lot of other things of interest to her. She played a lot of sport, so she had a full life outside of school anyway, and she had very little interest in doing the work that was required. It just became a constant battle. Yes, I was a parent of a child at a private school, but that was not giving me comfort, that my money was being well spent; it was just causing tension constantly. It would have been liberating for it not to happen.

The CHAIR — And with your younger child?

Ms KELLEY — He has wised up. He is now in year 8 and has worked out that if he does the work at school, he will not have to do it at home. He is fortunate enough to be in an extension class, and I have to say for the record that he got there by default; he did not sit an exam and get in. We asked a favour of the school, because my son is incredibly reserved and he chose that school to go to with his best buddy, and his best buddy got in the extension class by sitting an exam. We rang and said, 'That's not going to help us. What can we do?'. They said, 'Send his NAPLAN and we'll consider it', and they put him in. He is not a student who has done extension work in the past at all; he has had to work hard to keep up. But he has worked out that if he does the work in class and applies himself, he will not have to do it at home. So we seldom see any homework, and when we ask him about it he says, 'It's because I'm more organised'.

We went to a parent-teacher night and one teacher said, 'He's missed this and this', and we have gone home and said, 'Your science teacher said you haven't done that; you've got to do it', and he has done it. But I do not think he is not doing his homework; I think the evidence shows that he is doing the work, but he is organising his day better so that he does not have to do it at night. He would rather do other stuff on the computer, he would rather talk with us, he would rather play games with us, he would rather play his musical instruments. He has worked that out for himself.

The CHAIR — It must have been marvellous for you to hear him say, 'I'm well organised'. Colin, do you have something to say at this point?

Mr BROOKS — Yes, Chair. What you are saying is pretty much the same correspondence as in the evidence we had from professors Horsley, Walker and, yesterday, John Hattie. It is very much the same theme. What I am interested in is drilling down in a bit more detail into parent attitudes because they are important. We heard from a range of principals that often homework policies at a school can be driven by parent attitudes to homework — either not enough or too much. Sometimes it changes; you get a new school council and it will change. How do you handle that from a professional point of view as opposed to being parents yourselves, and as teachers?

Mr BARR — I think it is about open communication and discussion and the expectation. I found that parents always reflected back on what it was like when they were a child, so that was where their expectation came from. As I often say to them, 'When you were a child there was not as much IT around

as there is now, there were not as many other activities. You might have been a scout or a guide or something like that, but there was time in a day. Now we are not talking about what it was like when you were a child, we are talking about the here and now, so we have to adjust our expectations. So we do homework in a manner that has clear objectives and is not just fulfilling your expectations of what it should be, based on your past'. That is what the message from me was always trying to be.

It was about communication and it was about saying to them, 'We will undertake to set homework if that's what you want, but we're not going to do busy work. We're going to make sure there are clear educational objectives behind each and every piece of homework'. Did I ever achieve that? I am not too sure.

Mr BROOKS — What were the mechanisms you used? Was it just one-on-one parent-teacher night explanations or — —

Mr BARR — Yes, there were explanations at parent-teacher interview nights, particularly at the start of the year, and at information nights where we would talk about all these things in about an hour and a half, there were written explanations, and I took the time to just talk to parents if they raised it as a concern. There was no separate homework meeting group or anything like that. It was all about the expectation of it and that is it. If people wanted to talk about it, I was happy to have a discussion about it and talk about it and outline my views and try to convince them about where we were going with it and that it was in the child's best interests.

The CHAIR — It was interesting for me to hear you say that parents might accept that it is a new paradigm now and how it was for you and in your school experience, as things have changed on many fronts. What is the general acceptance of that? We also deal with the people who probably are shut down on that level and are much more aspirational and driven, especially people who have chosen to come to Australia in recent years where they see it as a land of a whole range of new opportunities and they are quite driven in terms of what they expect their children to do. It is almost like an endless cycle of commitment to learning, on behalf of the children, and hardly any breathing space.

Mr BARR — Absolutely, and I applaud those parents who do that. One aspect of what you are talking about are refugee families, and often the parents have had no formal schooling. They come to Australia and the parents have been brought up in refugee camps for most of their adult life and childhood. They come to Australia, and all of a sudden they have this wonderful thing called education, and they want their children to benefit to a maximum degree, but again it is about explaining it, and one way that I used to do it — and I am trying not to digress, but this is the anecdote I used to use — I used to ask them, 'When you were a young person, how did you listen to your music?', and they would say, 'Mum and Dad's stereo at home' or, depending on their age, it might have been one of those ghetto blasters, and I would say, 'Where are children nowadays listening to their music?', and the answer would be 'On a little iPod' like this. I would say, 'Look how far we've come just in that technology. Put yourselves 20 years into the future. What will their children be listening on? It is unimaginable, and we have to move ourselves into the future because we are preparing kids for the future. We are not preparing them based on what happened in the past', and that always seems to hit home.

The CHAIR — It is a terrific message.

Mr BARR — It works. They used to look at it and say, 'You are absolutely correct. Where will our children be listening to music in 20 years time?'. A principal once said to me, 'Hats off to the past but coats off to the future'. We have to prepare people for the future, and is homework one of the tools we need to use?

Ms KELLEY — I think parents who have an interest in seeing homework have an interest in educational outcomes. They want to know that their children are achieving at school or succeeding at school, and for them homework is the evidence of that. But we know as educators that it is not. What that suggests is that the evidence they need is missing. They are not getting it so their kid is coming home and not telling them about school or not showing them what they did in their lessons. They are talking about things like 'We had a lapathon today' or 'We had the Mother's Day stall today' or any of those

non-learning activities. Reports are not giving them what they want so they are looking to homework to fill a void because they are not getting it from the channels that they should be getting it from.

The CHAIR — And perhaps there is a crossover where children are less giving in terms of their communication as they course through the secondary school life, and it is almost a perfect storm situation happening. Do you think that this is exacerbated, too, by the language that is used in reporting? There is a lot being said that people find they need some sort of companion document to help them interpret what is being said about their children and what sort of criteria their children are satisfying.

Ms KELLEY — I think reports have become very vexed. I think they are vexed with schools and with parents, and in trying to please both they are probably not pleasing anybody. So from a teacher's point of view they are a lot of work and it is work they are doing to try and please parents, and from a parent's point of view they are reading those reports and they end up, having read it, still not understanding how their kid is going at school. I am not sure why it has got to that. I understand that there is a commitment to move away from a grade or a number or whatever, which is essentially what parents would prefer but educators know that that is not useful in terms of genuinely talking about educational outcomes. The sort of narrative that comes in reports such as 'Johnny understands place value' or 'Johnny understands number bonds 1 to 10' is meaningless to a normal parent.

The CHAIR — Hence the intensity of seeing something that they can actually understand or deal with. That is something they relate to from their own experience. Amanda, would you like to ask your questions now?

Mrs MILLAR — Yes, I would. Thank you for being here today. I was really pleased to hear your presentation because it certainly aligns very closely with my own experience of being a working parent all my life and the very limited time you have with your children between after-school care and going to bed. I am very pleased to see that reflected in this inquiry because it is a key aspect for me — the working parents — and they are many people in our society.

To pick up the Chair's point around the reporting, I do think there is potentially an aspect that parents like or seek the homework as some type of feedback system, and I am interested in exploring that a little further as to what is your experience of alternative forms of communication to parents. Some of the witnesses have talked about portals and those types of systems that may give parents the information they are seeking and therefore remove some of the need for homework that is causing such stresses.

Ms KELLEY — I will tell you the mechanism I like most. I personally hate the portals because I sit on a computer all day and the last thing I want to do is go home and open up a computer to find out how my kid is doing at school. So I am not a user of it. My son will say to me, 'You have to pay for this', and I will say, 'Well, open it up. I'll get my card out and we'll do it'. I do not like the portals for that reason. The most useful alternative that I have had was at my son's primary school. Once a term they would do, for example, a diagnostic maths test and send the test home, marked. I could have a look at that. It always came with a letter from the principal saying, 'We want you to have a look at it and see if you can help your child with the areas that they cannot do'. I have some concerns about that, because I do not think normal parents are equipped to fill in those gaps, and that goes to one of the points we made. But from my perspective, seeing the test, seeing that it was not just marked but corrected was very useful for me, and it was a quick way of me knowing that my children were progressing okay in maths.

The CHAIR — You said that that was when he was in primary school. Was that a government school or a private school?

Ms KELLEY — It was a local government primary school. I thought it was great. It was quick and it was efficient. You got a little bit of an insight into what the tests were and what they were covering in maths. It was a standard test. A lot of those books will have a diagnostic test once every X number of chapters. I thought it was useful.

Mr BARR — That is an interesting question. I left in 2010, and I have no experience of the portals. I know they are around. They were just starting to come in as a tool when I left, so that is only four years

ago. But in terms of communication, you are right. A lot of parents say, when the kids hit secondary school, 'We don't know what is going on in their school life'. Do you know what? That is perfectly normal because, as teenagers, they want to distance themselves from you. We all know that if we have had teenagers. The prime focus of information moves from their parents to their peers, and that is most important. They eventually come back to you, but they want to distance themselves from you. Anything they do not tell you is perfect for them. I think that, provided parents understand that sort of process, it is not too bad. But that probably does not help your inquiry.

Anecdotally I used to have people whose kids were okay say to me, 'We only hear from the school twice a year, so we have to assume that everything is okay', whereas others wanted to know exactly what was going on, what homework was being set and this, that and the other thing. They attended sports days or whatever. But, as I said, with many parents, both are working or, if it is a single parent family, the parent is working and they cannot do it. They do not have the time for it. I am not so worried about the children not telling parents what is going on, because I just see it as part of their normal adolescent growth and having their peers.

The other thing is that we talked about communication before, so let us have a look at how communication between children has changed. When I was growing up, if somebody wanted to contact me, they would ring me at home. Mum or dad would answer the phone and say, 'It's Johnny'. They would know who had rung, what we talked about and for how long we talked. Nowadays the communication is directly between the children and a lot of people do not understand that. Children will contact each other by social media. Anecdotally I know that just as I was leaving teaching what was coming up was that a lot of assignments would be the same, because the kids just emailed them to each other. If you take that into the context, how can you be assured that homework, if you do set it, is the kids' work? I know that there is software now that universities use that can check for plagiarism and things, but are schools doing that? Probably the years 11 and 12 people are, but not further down the school.

Ms KELLEY — The other mechanism I find very useful is the parent-teacher interview. Despite working full time, I have always attended those interviews, and I quite like the secondary system where you get 7 to 10 minutes. You book in. My son knows how I do it, because I did it all the time for my daughter. Last time he booked me in one, two, three, four, in a row just like that. I just went in, sat down, talked to the English teacher for 7 minutes, and went to the next one and heard from them. It is long enough. They have their book in front of them; they will say, 'He hasn't done this piece of work. He did that piece of work well. I think he is struggling with this and I recommend you do this'. They encourage the children to come. My son came to the first one; he did not come to the most recent one. I find that really useful. That is sufficient for me. Essentially all the report is doing is confirming that conversation.

The CHAIR — In your experience with the written report, the take-home report, for people for whom literacy is a problem or who are members of the CALD community, how do they interpret those results? Do they have to wait for an interpreter to sit with them and interface with you?

Ms KELLEY — I do not think it happens, to be honest.

The CHAIR — What comes through? Does it just go over their heads?

Mr BARR — I will give you an example that just came up. I was in a parent-teacher interview once, speaking to a woman for whom English was not her first language. Her son came along to interpret and I finally realised halfway through the interview that she would ask me, 'How is my son going?' and he would say, 'She wants to know how I'm going'. I would say, 'Pierre, you are not doing very well, blah, blah, blah' and he would then translate that to his mother as, 'I'm doing brilliantly'. I finally twigged to this, sent him out of the room and we managed to get by. It was quite funny because she was saying, 'He was just telling me everything is fine. He does all his homework. He's got good grades and he behaves'. I said, 'Ugh' and she said, 'I thought so'. I imagine that in a lot of CALD families that exact same thing would happen.

I do not know what the solution to that is. How many times in our public lives — in public hospitals, in public schools, in public venues — do the children of refugees or migrants accompany their parents to translate? Last year or the year before I had a very difficult time with my brother who was dying. So many times in the oncology ward I saw young children, 10 years old, having to translate to a parent what the doctor was saying about a relative. I think it is the same in education and I do not know what the solution is, if reporting is going to remain.

The CHAIR — Do you have a view on the children whose families cannot support the technological revolution in terms of the assumption that children should have all the devices, be they high-end calculators in the senior years, iPads, tablets, laptops?

Ms KELLEY — It is not just the technological revolution, when you are talking about homework, in my view. Before we had the technological revolution we still had parents who could not support children's homework needs for whatever reason. It may have been that their schooling finished very early or they were not adept at school; there is a whole range of reasons why parents have been unable to support children's homework needs and that further entrenches any inequality that is going to come out of school. I am educated, I am good at certain subjects, but I will say to my kids, 'If it's science, forget it. Don't ask me about it, because I don't know anything about it. I can't help you. You are on your own'.

As a teacher, as we said in the submission, very often you will receive homework that has clearly been done by mum and dad, and there is no educational value in that. At the other end, you will have those kids with parents who either do not help them because they do not believe that is correct or cannot help them because they do not have the means or they do not have the skills and those kids are further disadvantaged and further marked out. That just flows through to the technological revolution. It is a similar cohort that will not have the technology available. I think the stat Michael recommended for our submission was that still 20 per cent of homes do not have internet and certainly do not all have a computer to devote to the child.

From my point of view as a parent, the whole computing thing is a little bit of a nightmare. I do not want my kid on a computer after school either, because once they are on the computer you either have to police their use or they can do anything when they are on there with the World Wide Web. A lot of it is not school work.

We are in a local area where there are two government schools that are pretty much of a muchness. They are both big schools with 1300 kids. Half of my son's cohort would have gone to one, and the other half would have gone to the other. One school put their kids on iPads in year 7, and my son's school did not. The parents of those kids are very unhappy because they feel they are now battling the computer to get their kid to do the homework, because once they are on the computer they are playing games, they are surfing the internet, they are corresponding with their friends and they doing anything but homework. After a 3-hour stint on the computer they have still not done their homework, and the parent has gone on into the night saying, 'Get your homework done'. Again, the technological revolution is not really helping us.

The CHAIR — I wonder how many iPads become frisbees in secondary school!

Mr BARR — To follow up on that, I think the census found that 20 per cent of Australian homes do not have internet access. There are probably a lot more that do not have functioning or up-to-date technology. I would love it if schools did not rely on technology to get things done, because the printer is always broken, and it can put the kids at a disadvantage. Technology has a place in learning, but it should not be the be-all and end-all of it. I was just thinking about communities that cannot afford it or homes that cannot afford it. If you go to the City of Hume's global learning village — I do not know if you have been there — —

The CHAIR — I know it well.

Mr BARR — It has a beautiful set-up. I love the concept of the global learning village. It has homework clubs. It has time set aside at the computer room for the kids to go to. If you go there between

4.00 p.m. and 5.30 p.m. or 6.00 p.m., you will see so many different children in there doing their homework. I reckon that is fantastic, and it should be encouraged.

The CHAIR — It is the perfect civic hub as well, because you have the station. It is the best way to use a civic precinct. It is fantastic.

Mr BARR — Yes. I cannot remember the exact year, but it would have been in the late 1990s that I was with a working party that introduced laptop computers at the school I was in, and this was going to be the educational revolution. I then spent the next nine years trying to get them out. I succeeded in the end because they turned into, as Yvonne said, a plaything. The kids would waste time on them, they would access pornography and they would not do their work.

The CHAIR — And this was before the days of social media.

Mr BARR — And this was before the days of social media. Seriously two years into the program, I spent my time trying to get rid of it. I actually succeeded, and everybody went back to being happy.

The CHAIR — I am fascinated by your comments.

Mr BROOKS — The evidence we have received has been clearly that, particularly in the primary years, homework is of no significant benefit. That was a bit of a shock to me as someone who is not an educator. I had assumed it would have been of some benefit. I am wondering what sort of training you personally received as teachers around homework instruction at your pre-service teacher training or professional development, and if you know what the current situation is for other colleagues and where that is at.

Ms KELLEY — I do not know, but I certainly do not recall it. In fact, we were having a conversation out the front. I did a diploma of teaching, primary, as my undergraduate degree. I went and did some teaching, and then I came back and did a bachelor of education and then a master of education. I taught in primary schools and in secondary schools, and I taught adults. I do not recall ever talking about homework in any of that training.

I have a friend who has been teaching in the state system for about 40 years in secondary schools. He says that homework is most significant in years 7 and 12. It is there in year 7 because parents think, 'My kid is at high school now and they should be doing homework', and schools pander to that perception. It is there at year 12 because of VCE. I have to say that has certainly been our experience; last year my son would have had as much homework as his sister, who was doing year 12. They were at years 7 and 12, and it has completely tailed off this year. I do not recall it being on the agenda for pre-service training.

The CHAIR — It is interesting the term you used — 'pandering'.

Ms KELLEY — It is loaded.

The CHAIR — It is the management of expectations.

Mr BARR — Can I just say, Colin, that I do not know. I did not have it as such, and I do not know what the teachers colleges are using nowadays and whether they mention it.

The CHAIR — Coming back to teaching institutions, in your experience, in your education to become teaching professionals, were you given any insight into identifying students with learning difficulties?

Ms KELLEY — The short answer is no.

The CHAIR — Say, dyslexia, for example.

Ms KELLEY — No. In fact I started in 1978 — 1978–81 was my undergraduate training. Essentially you needed to be part of a stream that was looking at special education to get any sort of learning around

that. I would hope that has changed, because the whole emphasis on individual learning plans we have now we did not have then.

The CHAIR — And yourself, Michael?

Mr BARR — No, we did not receive any training in that, but it is a huge issue in the community.

The CHAIR — How would you have identified students with learning difficulties? You are on the front line in primary education in the first instance.

Ms KELLEY — I will tell you a story. I was teaching in grade 6 in Darwin, and Darwin is like South Australia in that primary education finishes at year 7. I had a student who came into my class, and he had very beautiful handwriting. He never wrote in cursive. He wrote in print. It was very beautiful, but it was very slow. You would get to the end of a lesson and he would still have only done a small portion of the work. He was a lovely kid, and I would always be saying, 'You have to work faster. Your work is beautiful and neat, but you have to do it quicker'. I would say that I would have had that kid for about three months before the penny dropped. The penny that dropped was that he could not read. What he was doing was copying the words like doing a drawing, which was why he was so slow. So a 'B' is a line here and a line here. He was not reading the words and writing them down. I encountered that boy at grade 6. He had gone right through his primary school learning and no-one had said, 'This child can't read'.

The CHAIR — Wow!

Mr BARR — We were never taught how to identify them. My youngest son had a learning difficulty when he was at school. Because I was a teacher and my wife was a teacher as well, we were able to identify it, but the school did not accept that we were correct and that it was a reading difficulty. We had to undertake our own remedial measures. Now he is fantastic, but if we had not been teachers we would not have been able to do that.

I was talking to Yvonne outside. I think people with disabilities or learning difficulties add a huge amount to a school community — do not get me wrong; I think they are fantastic. I was saying to Yvonne that I taught a blind boy geography and history for three years, and it was the greatest thing I have ever done for my teaching, because I really had to focus on how I was going to deliver the message to a boy who had never seen mountains, who had never seen clouds and who had not seen an ancient Roman castle. That went for three years, and it was probably the most significant thing that happened to me in my entire 35-year career, because I had to focus on what he needed, and as a result the lessons were so much better for the rest of the kids, because I worked on his needs, and therefore it just flowed.

Ms KELLEY — I think both of us would say we are not qualified to speak about what pre-service training looks like now. I have not kept in touched with it —

Mr BARR — I have not either.

Ms KELLEY —I would hope that they are looking at identifying special needs and so on, but certainly back in the late 1970s it was not part of my training.

The CHAIR — Our time together has come to a close. It has been fantastic to have you here today.

Mr BARR — Thank you for having us.

The CHAIR — Thank you very much. It was great we were able to get to this level of openness so readily. Thank you very much for your original submission and interest in the inquiry and for what you have brought to it today. I really appreciate it. Thank you very much, Mr Barr and Ms Kelley.

Mr BARR — I have not been called 'Mr Barr' for years! **The CHAIR** — Yes, good. Thank you very much.

Committee adjourned.