

TRANSCRIPT

PUBLIC ACCOUNTS AND ESTIMATES COMMITTEE

Inquiry into the Victorian Auditor-General's report no.253: Managing School Infrastructure

Melbourne—Tuesday, 10 March 2020

Members

Ms Lizzie Blandthorn—Chair

Mr Richard Riordan—Deputy Chair

Mr Sam Hibbins

Mr Gary Maas

Mr Danny O'Brien

Ms Pauline Richards

Mr Tim Richardson

Ms Ingrid Stitt

Ms Bridget Vallence

WITNESS

Dr Lea Campbell, Acting President, Our Children, Our Schools.

The CHAIR: We will call the meeting open, and we are pleased to welcome Our Children, Our Schools. For the benefit of the people in the gallery that might not have been here earlier—I cannot exactly see—we welcome you to the public hearings of the Public Accounts and Estimates Committee follow-up Inquiry into the Auditor-General's Report 253: Managing School Infrastructure.

We ask that phones be turned to silent if they have not been already. All evidence taken by this Committee is protected by parliamentary privilege; therefore you are protected against any action for what you say here today, but if you go outside and repeat the same things, including on social media, those comments may not be protected by this privilege.

You will be provided with a proof version of the transcript for you to check, and verified transcripts, PowerPoint presentations and handouts will be placed on the Committee's website as soon as possible. If we have any media present, we welcome you and we remind you of the following guidelines. Cameras must remain focused only on the person speaking; operators must not pan the public gallery, the Committee or witnesses; and filming and recording must cease immediately at the completion of the hearing. Broadcasting or recording of this hearing by anyone other than the accredited media is not permitted.

We thank Our Children, Our Schools for appearing today, and we invite you to make a 15-minute presentation.

Dr CAMPBELL: Thank you for the opportunity to give evidence today. We are very much pleased to be part of this review. I am the Acting President of Our Children, Our Schools, and I would like to make the first three points and then elaborate accordingly.

Our Children, Our Schools, as you may know, is an alliance of 33 parent campaign groups. The formation started in 2013, which interestingly enough was exactly when the graph that we saw this morning went up in terms of demand in enrolment, in particular in the public school sector, so we were right at the point at which it became an obvious problem that we had too few schools for too many kids. We have had since 2013 various interactions with various players, but our main purpose is to lobby for the planned provision of State schools and for the equity and the level playing field to be established so that there is no preparedness by communities that affects the provision of such infrastructure—i.e. if you have lobbying power in a community or particular expertise, you should not get more than other communities. So that equity and that level playing field is what we would like to see.

Our goals are the transparent, equitable and published provision of schools in the long term and for both upgrades and benchmarks to be established, prioritised, ranked and ideally automatically addressed for the needs that have become apparent. As schools have become community hubs we very much would like to see them being adaptable, and not just safe and secure sites but also adaptable to the climate in which we are seeing the changes—so climate justice, climate change adaptation.

The second point apart from equity is governance, and here we want to see not just the long-term and planned provision of schools but also a more depoliticised space of funding provision. We want to see that there is the removal of conflict of interest, which we very much see as the department of education regulates three sectors and it also runs one sector, and that provides a very obvious conflict of interest. The point of the Catholic Education Office and the stark contrast with public schools is probably evidence for the fact that we do not have independent leadership of public schools. They are very much part of the political process, and so what we would like to ideally see is to have an independent statutory authority actually running public schools, independent of the department of education, which should just be concerned with regulating the three sectors—so the inherent conflict of interest is being removed and we see proper leadership and independent decision-making for this very important school sector.

Thirdly we want to resonate very much with what has been said earlier around workloads for school staff and principals—that we have a separation of what is a core task for the school to do and what is a core task for the

system to do. We are concerned with the workloads, and we want to see the system learning being increased and not just be the relentless focus on children in schools' outcomes but also to present more of a focus on the system leverage that we have which we currently think is underutilised.

To elaborate further I would like to go back to the public purposes of schools, and I would like to remind us of the democratic functions which schools perform. I cite here a very renowned educational researcher who says:

A democratic society gives freedom to all its citizens. They forget that a democratic society asks from all their citizens to use that freedom in a grown-up way ... Tomorrow needs education, not just learning because this learning can happen everywhere ... The task of educators: We have to arouse the desire in the new generation for wanting to be in the world but in this special grown up way ... Tomorrow indeed needs the school as a special place that is not the same as society, that is "out of place" ... It is precisely the [free] time that we as a society give to the next generation to practice, to figure out what it means to live together in the world. For me that would be the ambition for the schools of tomorrow.

So what we are seeing is that schools is not just an infrastructure; it is one of the infrastructures that help us to create centres of wellbeing, belonging and world-centredness and that help the young generation to inhabit spaces and learning areas that are actually meaningful to them—and I think we should never lose sight of that. The research is quite limited in the sense that there is not much longitudinal data that we can draw on on how schools ought to function. In fact the 2018 review by Melbourne University clearly stated that there are:

... few robust and valid instruments that assessed the impact of different spatial layouts on student learning in the 21st Century learning domains of creativity, critical thinking, communication, collaboration and problem-solving.

So we need to build those instruments.

The most recent study that we found was a World Bank report, and it talks about the key aspects that schools should provide for their students. It lists 'good "natural" conditions such as lighting, air quality, temperature control, acoustics, and links to nature'. It lists the age and developmentally appropriate 'learning spaces that offer flexible learning opportunities' for students to adapt and to personalise. It mentions 'connections between learning spaces that are easy to navigate and that ... provide additional learning opportunities', a 'level of ambient stimulation using color and visual complexity' and 'schools that are designed from the inside out', so from the classroom to the school, 'so that each space meets the needs of its inhabitants'. Lastly, the World Bank summarises that a school needs to have a design that takes into account the 'climatic and cultural conditions'.

So, to be very specific to this review and what VAGO's report has looked into, we want to see a level playing field, and that also presumes a cap on the school size. We do not like the very large schools—3000 plus. Even with different educational models, such as schools within schools, we would like to see a cap. There is now a cap on permanent buildings but there is no cap on portables, so we need to sort of see where the caps are applied and where they are not applied. Therefore we want to see a balance between schools not being too small but also not being too big. We would also like to see that all current school stock is actually heritage listed so that we never lose sight of that. I think the community is still very much aware of the many school closures that happened in the 90s and how that affected our communities. We would like to see a review of the regeneration projects from 2011. We are not aware that there has been a proper oversight or review of those regeneration projects. And we would like to see when schools are being sold: is that investment actually going back into the local communities or not?

The best way in which we can sort of think about schools and benchmarking is to know and be really public and transparent around: what actually is a Victorian school? What does a school come with that we fund? Because we are just not talking about buildings only; we are also talking about what is inside those buildings. You know, a playground, shade cloth, solar cells—what is the minimum that we, as a standard, have and can account for? We would like to see that be published and included in an annual report—a sort of benchmark report with tick boxes—so it is really clear for communities what they are getting and when they are getting it. We would also like to see schools as sites for multi- and interdisciplinary specialists. So, for example, acoustics can be well implemented for kids with all learning needs or poorly implemented. So what kinds of specialists are actually contributing to the design of schools is very important to communities.

We would also like to see things like water and air quality, environmental and urban design principles, passive housing, sustainability, disability, wellbeing and gardening, to name a few of those disciplines, which could

contribute to better and long-term school provision. The social, natural and built environments need to be working in sync with one another, and as we have seen in this summer, it is probably a good time to think about how climate ready our schools are, and if they are becoming refuges in bushfire situations and other crisis points, what do we see that essential infrastructure of schools to look and feel like?

The other areas which we would like to see are, for example, planting and maintenance of gardens being included in the benchmark so that it does not rely on individual fundraising, and that minimum standard requirement should fall under the Department of Treasury and Finance *Asset Management Accountability Framework*. So here we refer in particular to things that we can see as site characteristics—how many portables? Many headlines and schools have already talked about the fact that it is a minimum requirement for free-range chickens to have per square metre, but there is no such thing as that for our children, so we do need to think about how those schools look when they are overcrowded. What is the definition of an overcrowded classroom, an overcrowded space et cetera? And we do not really have the kind of benchmarks in place, and they are certainly not transparent—if they do exist—for communities, so we often find ourselves being just very much dependent on our relationships to the principals, the school councils and the communities at large. Whilst there is a lot of progress and we congratulate and commend the department on its progress, we would still like to see much more transparency, especially in the five-year cycle and not the annual funding cycle, occur. Are our school-funded buildings coming with furniture? Are they fitted out? What is the sort of state of each of the stages that the master plans actually encompass? How many schools are then relying on future funding campaigns to fund the next stage of their master plan? All of that is still being negotiated.

I have pretty much taken up my 15 minutes, so I will just conclude in the last minute with things that are specific around asbestos. We have heard of some asbestos funding being only partial, and whilst we generally congratulate the Government initiative of making asbestos-free schools, we would like to see some sort of assurance of the rollout. For example, when schools close in school holidays we would like to have that announced much earlier so that local parents that rely on school holiday programs to be using those buildings normally have more time to plan when such upgrades and removals occur, and also to have assurance that there is not a partial removal of asbestos—or if there is, what the rationale is for such action and/or delayed addressing of that infrastructure.

Lastly, greenfield estates: there seem to be some projection difficulties in that sometimes the schools initially were with a prep volume of four classes, but that already reached six classes in three years, so what is our projection and how true are those projections when they are actually implemented? Is there a real meeting of minds when those school buildings are rolled out? Is, for example, interstate enrolment taken into account?

We have talked a lot about the five-year plan in infrastructure, but we would like to see that plan very much for upgrades and new buildings to exist, not the annual announcement of funding decisions. And the playground delays—sometimes new schools are being opened and then the playground comes about much later. Obviously that impacts on the everyday usage and our children's ability to be active citizens and literally move. So I will leave it at that, thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you so much. If I could, I will start the questions just in relation to the comments you made about effectively benchmarking every school. We heard this morning that we are fortunate in a way, here in Victoria, that schools are still bespoke compared to the templates that are often rolled out in other jurisdictions. Obviously you can have a basic benchmark, but if you have too prescriptive a benchmark, how do you then maintain flexibility as well in terms of responding to the individual needs of communities?

Dr CAMPBELL: So we very much understand that the principle of subsidiarity is a good one—as local a decision as possible. So we like the bespokeness of the proposals, but we would like to still see—and again if you have a bit of the decision-making depoliticised you probably arrive at—a fair standard of what the minimum requirements are. Then if there are curriculum changes and/or adding of different subjects or, you know, a VET kitchen or whatever, then we would see that as just that school needing to provide or deciding to provide that level of resourcing and building standards and equipment. But some schools seem to still come with a kitchen and some do not, and there is no transparency for the community on how that decision was made and who made that decision. Was it the principal? Was it the school council? So I think we need to make it transparent. We do not want to detract from the bespokeness of some of the educational responses, but we want

to see the level playing field so that parents in better suburbs with more capability and time to invest in schools do not get the advantage over communities where that is not the case.

Mr RIORDAN: Does Our Children, Our Schools, as a collective of organisations, have a firm view on the sort of growing approach of trying to share community infrastructure in our schools so that they are—for example, a joint-use library where you might have members of the public in the space the whole time. Do you see that as a worthwhile way of growing infrastructure or opportunities for the school and to fill the need in a community as well more broadly?

Dr CAMPBELL: Yes, we are very much in support of shared facilities, co-location, co-use and shared lease agreements with local government with infrastructure such as libraries et cetera. So we very much see schools as local employment centres, as local community spaces, that should be shared as much as possible.

Mr RIORDAN: And just finally, as a group do you have a position or view on a community where families and students might have a couple of choices of where they can go or what is closest? When schools have those more innovative things and more opportunities, do you think that more students should have access to that, or do you support the zoning of schools so students who do not fit in that cannot take advantage of those better facilities?

Dr CAMPBELL: I think that it is not either/or. I think you can support local zoning and more even enrolment across the schools, but you can also share the facilities easily and even across sectors. Like, you know, what is to stop us using independent or Catholic infrastructure if that is nearby and can be arranged? I think that is great.

Ms STITT: Have you got a view about how we are tracking in growth areas in terms of infrastructure improvements compared to, say, middle and inner-city areas or regional areas?

Dr CAMPBELL: So, I have only available to myself what I have, and therefore I can say that our 33 campaign groups have very much met the sort of donut—the established areas' need for new schools or campaigns have essentially been funded now, which is great. And of course our view is that we should not exist. There should not be a need for advocacy for the provision of State schools; they should just be planned. We know when a child is born and five years later what they will need, so we can do sophisticated data management and provision planning without parents knocking on MPs' doors and saying, 'We can prove we need a new school'. Yes, the inner city and established areas needs have been met, as have some regional and rural needs, but we can only tell what we can tell, so that is as far as I can answer your question. Very much I would like to see things like special schools included in future audits and that sort of thing, while at the same time obviously trying to make schools more inclusive in general. There is always a tension between specialised support and the generic and mainstream setting, but yes, we very much agree that every school should be getting its fair share.

Ms STITT: In your organisation's experience is there a connection between improved infrastructure and educational outcomes, or the way in which a school is performing when it gets those upgrades?

Dr CAMPBELL: I am not aware of any local data that would make that crystal clear. As I said, there is not enough research, longitudinal or short-term, that would prove exactly what that relationship looks like and should feel like. Anecdotally I think we can all agree that nicer facilities are better and increase the sense of belonging, especially if you have had student voice and community voice already part of the discussion. Sometimes the consultation does not happen as thoroughly as we would like to see. Sometimes the consultation is in name only, like, 'Let's all vote on a school name' or something like that, rather than how it looks and feels. For children the mulberry tree in the school grounds might be the key thing for them to relate to the school grounds and then it is removed when we build a new school building, so I think community voice is always important when you make that belonging to infrastructure and a site increase.

Mr HIBBINS: You just earlier touched on a point which I was going to ask about. A number of your member groups are actually community groups that have campaigned for new and upgraded schools. Often it takes a lot of resources and a lot of angst for communities, so can I just ask you to comment on the experiences of those community groups who are campaigning for new and upgraded schools and also ask you to comment

on the level of transparency that there is from the department around the allocation of funds for new schools and what the effect of improving that transparency would be?

Dr CAMPBELL: Yes. We have had to basically lobby across and advocate across levels of government, so the more stakeholders we could manage to get involved the better the outcome of the campaign was. We have always got this lingering doubt around marginal seat status—without putting too fine a point around pork-barrelling—so again, depoliticisation would be one of our main aims. The campaigns have certainly expended a lot of energy around their local MPs and around the department of education. It is fair to say that initially our provisional study discussions were not harmonious—as you might imagine when you literally come with data from .id et cetera and you have a discussion with the department around needing a new State school and proving that there is a need. They were certainly very unnecessary and very unfortunate conversations that we had to have. We were managed by PowerPoint.

Mr HIBBINS: So the community is getting their data and going to the department and not the other way around?

Dr CAMPBELL: That was happening a lot in the early days, yes. That is why again we do not want to exist—we do not want to be here. We want to, as parents, have our energies expended in the real teaching and learning space rather than in the maintenance, upgrade and benchmark spaces.

Mr HIBBINS: And in terms of transparency now from the Government, in terms of, you know, there have been recommendations for example from Infrastructure Victoria that the Government should publish its five-year investment pipeline.

Dr CAMPBELL: Yes. So I mean, again we would love to see—the longer term the better for us. So if there are 20-year discussions or ongoing funding certainty—as much as we can possibly influence politically for that funding certainty to occur and then to be published. I think there was an earlier point raised around the fact that the VSBA could say to us, ‘This is what we’ve recommended to be funded’, and then it is up to Government to fund it or not.

But I think yes, there should definitely be a five-year plan if not longer. And we have had the 20-minute city sort of aspiration, which some of us—you know, it is sort of a thing of the past almost because it is not really made reference to any more, but we would still like to see that sort of infrastructure rationale implemented.

Mr HIBBINS: Yes. So that would actually factor in adding in an element of, you know, having a school within 20 minutes of every person or something along those lines?

Dr CAMPBELL: Again I do not have the statistics I wish we had about a 3000-student school or an 800-student school and how they compare for feelings of belonging, of wellbeing et cetera. But anecdotally certainly we have those stories about, you know, bigger schools just being really difficult to manage and to feel like you matter. And again that is why I am saying schools are democratic infrastructure, not just a matter of a machine where you have certain inputs, you get certain outputs in learning et cetera.

The CHAIR: What has been your experience of principals and school councils working together? Have you had experiences of conflicts at times, or do you think that it has largely been a positive experience? And how do you think we can better support that relationship?

Dr CAMPBELL: I would love to see feedback loops between the VSBA, the department of education, principals and school councils. I think the fact that we have very little knowledge, and only anecdotal, on how they are feeling—

I mean, the workload is probably the only thing we can all agree on—that there is too much of an impact and always on them. But in general I think it depends on each school. Sometimes the conflict lies with the department and sometimes the conflict lies with the school council’s capacity to get the master plan happening et cetera. So that, for example, could be a thing of the benchmark: that every school has a master plan and it is funded and has the right expertise.

In terms of conflict, obviously a school council can respectfully disagree as well, but the conflict is more with the level of funding not coming about rather than the school community not being able to reach a compromise or agreements.

Mr RICHARDSON: Thank you, Dr Campbell, for joining us today. A question I asked Anne-Maree and Andrew in the previous witness presentation was around school pride and the Education State target related to that—by 2025 a 20 per cent increase in school pride, in community pride. How interconnected is school infrastructure and maintenance with community and school pride across our communities' schools?

Dr CAMPBELL: So again, I think we have done very well with the huge increase in capital spending to enable our children to get better facilities, to do the necessary upgrades and maintenance. So as I said, we commend that initiative very much. In terms of the pride and sense of belonging, I think we will see that data pretty much in the school annual reports coming through, that communities are feeling more acknowledged and recognised for wanting to build better teaching and learning spaces. To which degree that pride could be enhanced through more student voice, certainly there is departmental recognition of student voice needing to become more of a feature. There are always some schools that have a lot more curricular choices and appointing of teachers and various other peer support programs that will all feed into confidence building and pride building, but I do think it is a matter of local relationships predominately. The school building is very much part of that mix, but it is certainly not everything.

Mr RICHARDSON: I am looking through the Our Children, Our Schools website and some of the member associations that underpin your organisation. The Beaumaris school community group I have great familiarity with in terms of saving a site and then building a new school site. There are a number of organisations listed across various suburbs and municipalities, but what do you find is a consistent theme that these organisations establish and then seek the support of Our Children Our Schools, and what has been the catalyst for that lobbying to occur? There might be a deficiency that they might perceive or concerns that they might have.

Dr CAMPBELL: Initially we were very much concerned with the current sales of land going on, and the minute we became aware local newspapers would cover those sorts of campaigns and they would start to build momentum. But we are all parent-run, volunteer efforts, so whatever our school needs were we would lobby for. Basically we found out through newspapers and word-of-mouth that we all existed, and we thought, 'Well, really, we shouldn't all exist, plus we should lobby at the right level of government'. So we then formed in 2013 on a very cold winter night.

It is fair to say that we are still not a stakeholder in any reasonable fora or regular meetings, but we certainly have our touchpoints with various authorities and the VSBA and DET. But I think that in general the campaigns have lobbied for the stop of the sale of the site and then to enhance, however possible, through partnerships, through funding cycles—whether that is capital or otherwise—to improve the school's attractiveness, particularly for Government schools. It was very much State schools that got together, because we could see other school sectors building their schools and we were not getting ours. So that was a central tension in all the parents.

Mr RICHARDSON: Fantastic.

The CHAIR: Thank you so much for coming along today and for your informative evidence. You will be provided with a brief transcript to verify, and then that will be made available on the Committee's website. Thank you, Doctor, for taking the time to meet with us today.

Dr CAMPBELL: Thank you, Lizzie.

Witness withdrew.