

# TRANSCRIPT

## LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL LEGAL AND SOCIAL ISSUES COMMITTEE

### **Inquiry into the State Education System in Victoria**

Bendigo – Tuesday 16 April 2024

#### **MEMBERS**

Trung Luu – Chair

Ryan Batchelor – Deputy Chair

Michael Galea

Renee Heath

Joe McCracken

Rachel Payne

Aiv Puglielli

Lee Tarlamis

#### **PARTICIPATING MEMBERS**

Melina Bath

John Berger

Georgie Crozier

Moira Deeming

David Ettershank

Wendy Lovell

Sarah Mansfield

**WITNESSES**

Britt Holmberg, Assistant Principal, and  
Anastasia, Bendigo Flexible Learning Options.

**The CHAIR:** Welcome back. With us today we have Ms Britt Holmberg, the Assistant Principal of Bendigo Flexible Learning Options, and also a student, Anastasia.

Before continuing I will introduce committee members: Deputy Chair Ryan Batchelor is on my right, Ms Rachel Payne, Ms Melina Bath, Mrs Moira Deeming, Mr Aiv Puglielli and Dr Renee Heath. We also have got Mr Joe McCracken on Zoom. He is listening in. He will pop in shortly.

I will just read some information before we continue. All evidence given is protected by parliamentary privilege as provided by the *Constitution Act 1975* and is further subject to the provisions of the Legislative Council standing orders. Therefore the information that you provide to this hearing is protected by law. You are protected against any action for what you say during this hearing, but if you go elsewhere and repeat the same things, those comments may not be protected by this privilege. Any deliberately false evidence or misleading of the committee may be considered a contempt of Parliament.

All evidence is being recorded. You will be provided with a proof version of the transcript following the hearing. Transcripts will ultimately be made available to the public and posted on the committee website.

I will ask you to state your name and the school you represent.

**Britt HOLMBERG:** Yes, certainly. My name is Britt Holmberg. I am the Assistant Principal of Bendigo Flexible Learning Options, and we are located in Kangaroo Flat. We are connected to Weeroona College, which is one of the state high schools in Bendigo.

**The CHAIR:** Would you like to make an opening statement?

**Britt HOLMBERG:** Yes, certainly. Just for the panel's knowledge, BFLO is how I will refer to our school in short. We are a flexible learning option, and we cater for the Bendigo region. We particularly cater for the high schools within our area, including Kalianna, which is a special school. Students are referred to us on a termly basis. Students that come to our school have usually experienced long-term disengagement from their local high school and have usually experienced a range of challenges within their setting, whether that is difficulty engaging in learning tasks. Typically, there is undiagnosed disability for our students which has led to disengagement. Usually there is particularly trauma in their backgrounds. They have usually experienced disadvantage throughout their lives, usually having trouble engaging in schoolwork or experiencing challenging behaviour so there is an array of reasons why they can come to our school. They are referred to us on a panel basis and we meet every single term to look at those referrals, so getting into our school is very specialised in the sense that we go through as a panel, look at the recommendations, look at what has happened for them in their high school and how we might be able to support them at BFLO.

We are a small school. We are capped at 50 students with nine staff. We operate in quite a small building in the Kangaroo Flat area. That is a typical aspect of our school and as I am on this panel I really come from a wellbeing focus for our students. A huge part of what we do at BFLO is look at the wellbeing of our students – that holistic approach – and in particular we try to identify why they have had difficulty engaging in school and how we can meet their needs and support them to access education.

FLOs operate throughout Victoria and they usually base their success on how students come in and transition back to their local high school, the high school they were referred from. I guess the aim of FLOs is to take kids for a certain amount of time. There is no fixed time on that, but ideally if they come to BFLO we work with them and then they transition back to their high school or onto a different pathway. That is a typical overview of what a FLO looks like.

At our school, just for your knowledge, we work to the Victorian curriculum. Lots of our students are not working at their level, so they are working well below where their peers would be in a mainstream setting, so we have to offer lots of differentiation for them to be able to access the curriculum. We also do a lot of applied

learning because lots of our students have come to our school having missed extensive and serious amounts of schooling. Therefore they are well behind or they have difficulty with their stamina or being able to engage in learning tasks, so we work on a very, very flexible model in terms of how we support our students, offering not just I guess your typical academic-based classwork but also looking at giving our students life experiences outside of the classroom – that is really important – and to obviously increase that engagement as well. That is a typical overview of what we do at our school.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you. Would Anastasia like to make any comments at all?

**Britt HOLMBERG:** What do you like about what we do at school? That might be something you can answer.

**ANASTASIA:** The work is easy.

**Britt HOLMBERG:** The work is easier, yes.

**ANASTASIA:** You are nice.

**Britt HOLMBERG:** We are nice.

**ANASTASIA:** We trust you.

**Britt HOLMBERG:** You can trust us, yes. Perfect. That is something I guess that ties in nicely for Anastasia. One of our really big focuses at our school is our relationships with our students and families. Lots of our families have had long-term distrust with services, not just education but in a broad sense, seeing education connected to all departments, facilities or what that might look like for different families, so building that trust is exceptionally important for us. We work really hard to make sure we have got our relationship with our students but also our families, and we do an outreach model at our school where we go out into the community multiple times a week. We go into our students' homes; we support not just our students but we also support their whole families. It is very holistic for us.

**The CHAIR:** Thanks for that. Anastasia, what the committee is doing is we are actually going across the state and we are speaking to all the schools and all the institutions in relation to the education system, and students as well, to see what can be improved, what is needed and what they think has been successful so that we can recommend the best practice for all our students so we can help them down the track. That is what we are here for. So if during our questions you want to ask anything or add anything, please feel free to do so, okay? We are going to start off with the Deputy Chair asking questions.

**Ryan BATCHELOR:** Thanks, Chair. Britt and Anastasia, thanks very much for coming in. It is incredibly important work you are doing. As a sidebar anecdote, last night I was driving up and I stopped and caught up with some old friends for dinner. Their daughter, at 16, has just dropped out of school because for a whole range of reasons it just was not working, and that has been really hard on the family as a whole, the young woman in particular but also the broader family. Can you tell me a little bit about that side of the work you do and how you engage with families? Because it is not just the students that we are dealing with here. What approach do you take to dealing with the whole family?

**Britt HOLMBERG:** It is a story we hear so often: kids get to high school and they disengage. For us, we see a lot that for our young people there is a bit of a cookie-cutter approach to engaging, especially in high schools. They come from primary schools where they have got quite a simplistic structure and where they have great relationships with their primary school teacher. They have got that one person they engage with. BFLO sort of operates a bit like a primary school. All the kids know all the staff and they are not moving from classroom to classroom, so there is that sort of comfort, I guess, for our students. We see this. They go to high school – it is a big school environment, it is overwhelming and it is really difficult for them to maintain that sense of safety and relationship.

I guess for our kids one of the things that we always really factor in at that first point is that relationship, making sure that that is everything. There is a really good saying that comes from a doctor of teaching in America: 'Kids don't learn from people they don't like.' It is so important for us. We have to have that trust, as Anastasia said, and that relationship, not just with our students and our families. It is really about being that

dependable person for them, so they know that if we say we are going to do something, we do it. That might be something really simple like turning up at an appointment time or providing that outreach to the family when we say we are going to do it, making sure that the students know that we are going to be there when they need us. I think Anastasia would say that if she calls, we answer her calls. We are a dependable person in their lives that they trust.

What we see with our kids is that cookie-cutter approach. If you cannot access that mainstream education, if you do not fit that model of being able to go to a state high school or if you do not fit that model of qualifying to go to a special school, where do you go? Where do you access education? Especially in those years from year 7 to age 16 – you know, TAFE is not always available to you. Some of those alternative options are not available to you. It is difficult to enter the workforce. You might not know what work you want to do or what apprenticeship might interest you. It is a really vulnerable time for young people, where they can really drop out of that education system.

We see a lot of our kids who come into this space who have not been able to access mainstream education and do not qualify for a special school but have underlying disability. That disability can be intellectual disability or ADHD that has not been diagnosed and has not been picked up, and then they are unable to keep up and this is what happens. So I think for us it is really being able to identify what might be happening for that young person and why they cannot access the education and also being able to make sure that when they do come to our space that we are able to offer what they need, and that is learning at a differentiated level that meets the need of the learner.

**Ryan BATCHELOR:** Yes. Just very quickly, you have got 50 students and nine staff. I imagine there is quite a lot of demand. Any reflections on the demand that is out there for the type of service that you are offering?

**Britt HOLMBERG:** It is huge.

**Ryan BATCHELOR:** Also, what do you think is the scalability of your type of approach? It has obviously got to be quite intensive.

**Britt HOLMBERG:** Absolutely.

**Ryan BATCHELOR:** At what point do you lose that with scale?

**Britt HOLMBERG:** It is a really great question. One thing that is really important for us at a FLO is having the right staff working in that space, because if you had staff who did not have a trauma-informed approach – and I think that word gets thrown around; it is a hot topic at the moment – actual trauma-informed practice and those frameworks, if you did not have the right staff, even if you had 20 students and the wrong staff, it would not work. You have to have the right people working in these spaces for it to be effective.

At the moment FLOs are not resourced well. We do not have good buildings. We do not have access to the facilities we need, and that is not just us as a school; that is FLOs I think in most places. We are put in old buildings; we are put wherever we can fit. I think if we had access to better resources, it could definitely be expanded – but expanded with the right people with the right training and with the right personality who want to be in these spaces. That is imperative.

**Ryan BATCHELOR:** Thanks very much.

**The CHAIR:** Ms Payne.

**Rachel PAYNE:** Thank you so much to both of you for coming and sharing your experience. I would like to delve more into how school is one of those places where, as you said, the cookie-cutter approach is not for everybody and not everyone enjoys school. I would love to learn more about your experience of that wellbeing focus and that holistic approach and the responsiveness of the kids as well.

**Britt HOLMBERG:** Absolutely. I think a wellbeing approach has still got to be individualised to what a young person needs, and I think that is exceptionally important. From our perspective it is really about, I guess, firstly looking at that young person and where we can offer that support but also that utilisation of not just what is internal in a school but what is external to a school. I think that is something that we as a very small campus

do well, as we utilise the services within our community and help build that relationship beyond just school. I think that is imperative to success. It cannot just be held within a school space, because it is not maintainable and schools cannot maintain that by themselves. There really has to be that focus – and there is for us, I guess – on making sure that we support our students to build engagement for that wellbeing space beyond just what school can hold. A big part of that for us is engaging with youth drug and alcohol services, being able to engage paediatricians, being able to engage GPs for our family and also going into that NDIS space. That is exceptionally important for all of our young people, and it has to be on that individual level.

Something we are able to do at our school is case manage on a wellbeing level all of our students. We are really lucky that we have some high-level ESs that work in that social space. As a small leadership team, my colleague Nicole Campbell and I work with our social worker in that sense to case manage on a wellbeing level every single one of our students so that we know that every single week we are looking at every single student that we have at our school and ensuring that there is something happening for them and we know what is going on for them, because it is so easy for that support to drop away – one week to go or two weeks to go and there is not that movement in terms of what is happening for that young person. I think, on the bigger scale in our bigger schools, that is where students get lost. It is being able to maintain that eye on what is happening for that young person. A lot happens in a week, and if you have not got that sort of case management around that young person, it is really easy for that to be lost quickly. I hope that answers your question.

**Rachel PAYNE:** I really appreciate that. Yes, definitely. Thank you. You talked about that many kids transition back into their original high schools.

**Britt HOLMBERG:** Not many.

**Rachel PAYNE:** Just from your experience or the experience of the kids, is that by them requesting that that is an option for them? Or is it something where it just becomes that you are at capacity and for those that are in a space that is a bit more –

**Britt HOLMBERG:** Yes, it is really multilayered in terms of how that re-engagement goes, and sometimes it is very difficult to get high schools to re-engage students that have really challenged them in the past. For our young people it is also I guess a barrier for them to want to go back to a school where they have had pretty negative experiences sometimes, and so we do our best to build that capacity. But also, touching on the fact that school is not for everyone, for some of our young people going back is not the pathway that we would really want to support them with or that they want support with. There are challenges, definitely, in terms of getting high schools or schools in general to re-engage students that they have found challenging, and sometimes that can be a cultural issue around one student.

I also get the other side of it for high schools and the challenges that they face in terms of being able to support students that challenge and students that disengage in terms of their resourcing and their capacity and their capacity of teachers. That is definitely not just a challenge for our FLO, I would say it is a challenge for many FLOs. Then it is, again, coming back to what is needed holistically for that individual child. Can that be provided on a large scale? Can they cope in a school where there are a thousand students and they have got to move from class to class? Sometimes the structures of our high school just do not meet the diversity of every single learner. It will not matter how long sometimes they are at our school, how much support we put for them at a FLO; that setting is never going to be something that they might be able to cope with or they might be able to manage, so it really has to be realistic too.

**Rachel PAYNE:** Yes. Thanks for your response.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you. Ms Bath.

**Melina BATH:** Thanks, Chair. Thank you so much for being here. And, Anastasia, you have got bragging rights when you go back to school, back to FLO –

**ANASTASIA:** Absolutely.

**Melina BATH:** because no-one else is sitting in front of a lot of scary MPs. Are you proud of Britt for speaking to us today?

**ANASTASIA:** Yes, I am proud of her.

**Melina BATH:** Thank you very much for being here. Just help us understand a little bit more: the average year level – what is the year level that would come in?

**Britt HOLMBERG:** Interestingly enough, over I think the last few years it is getting younger and younger, which I do not mind, because prevention is always better than a cure.

**Melina BATH:** Absolutely.

**Britt HOLMBERG:** But typically FLOs are meant to be for 15 up. That is I guess the criteria that it has been based around, but we have taken anywhere from grade 6 up until 17 years old.

**Melina BATH:** Your capacity is at 50.

**Britt HOLMBERG:** Correct.

**Melina BATH:** And you are at 50.

**Britt HOLMBERG:** We are over 50 at the moment, yes.

**Melina BATH:** I wrote ‘oversubscribed’ here, that more people –

**Britt HOLMBERG:** I would take any student that was presented to us. We would take anyone. We would love to be able to take more students and offer more support to our Bendigo community. That would be ideal, yes.

**Melina BATH:** Also, your intensive case management – and you have just hit the nail on the head: the prevention, to positive pathways. I want to just ask: staff qualifications – what is the range there?

**Britt HOLMBERG:** It is very different for every single teacher. I have come from a special school background, so I have got my masters in special ed. But again, I think qualifications are one thing; it is about personality type.

**Melina BATH:** That is right, and engagement and trust and all of those qualities.

**Britt HOLMBERG:** Absolutely, that is right, and how you connect with families and how you connect with children and young people. But yes, quite a range. We have ESs that are unqualified. Lots of schools would have ESs at that sort of lower level. We have teachers that are studying for their masters, we have teachers from special school backgrounds and we have teachers who have also worked in a custody space, such as Malmsbury and Parkville College as well.

**Melina BATH:** Unconditional positive –

**Britt HOLMBERG:** Unconditional positive regard.

**Melina BATH:** Yes.

**Britt HOLMBERG:** I love that that has been brought up. It is absolutely essential for I think the work that any teacher partakes in. It is one thing to say it, it is another thing to practise it. I guess one thing when we work with schools and we work with students coming into our school is our young people have often damaged relationships with teachers and schools, and it is really interesting to see that some people find that really hard to practise. They find it really hard to put that unconditional positive regard into practise – to turn up each day with a clean slate. We are here for the young people, and it is essential to the work we do, because obviously the young people we work with have many complexities and present lots of challenges and being able to calm and offer children that safe space on a daily basis and know that we will still be there no matter how hard they try to push us away is essential. So we operate under unconditional positive regard always.

**Melina BATH:** It is probably a more challenging question for me to ask, but what about the ones that you cannot get to engage – that I will not say are not a success story but are really so challenged that it is hard for you and them to make inroads? Do they exist?

**Britt HOLMBERG:** Yes, they absolutely exist. I think that is why I come back to: prevention is better than a cure. I love when we get them younger, because there is nothing really worse than waiting until a student has been disengaged from school for a year or two. If we are starting from a place where they have not – yes, how do you –

**Melina BATH:** The pullback is longer and there is more effort.

**Britt HOLMBERG:** That is right. We have not got that existing relationship with them yet; we are starting from scratch. That is where we really utilise our outreach model, and that is exceptionally important in the work we do. We have an outreach car. I, myself, go out into our students' homes. We make an effort, two up with staff, to visit those students on a weekly basis to make sure we are maintaining that connection. That is how we do make inroads with our students. Some of them might never come back to school onsite; that might not be their aim with being at BFLO, especially if they are sort of at that 17-year-old mark and they are looking to transition out. We have to be realistic too about: is that the right thing, getting them back into school, or is finding a pathway that is beyond school? But that outreach model is exceptionally important.

**Melina BATH:** Do we need more FLOs?

**Britt HOLMBERG:** We need better funding for FLOs. Proper funding, proper facilities – that is what we need. At the moment I think what FLOs are catering for is that gap. We are catering for the students who do not qualify for a special school. They might have an IQ of 71, but they do not meet that 70 threshold. How does a child with 71 go and engage in a mainstream high school? They cannot. How do they go and access a year 9 curriculum if they have got an IQ of 71 and they are reading at a prep level? And that exists so consistently and so commonly. Lots of our kids at BFLO fit that model. They are just above the criteria for qualifying as having an intellectual disability, so they cannot access that special education. They have gone through the whole of primary school with the same situation, and they also cannot access the high school level of learning – not just level of learning but the set of social skills that is required to be able to operate successfully with their same-aged peers.

**Melina BATH:** To cope.

**Britt HOLMBERG:** That is right. At the moment a lot of the work that we really do for our students that are leaving our space is hunting diagnoses for them. We try and get assessments. We try and put things in place so that they have got something to leave with that might support them through the NDIS and some of those avenues to make sure that they are not left undiagnosed for the remainder of their lives, because they really do fall into that gap. That is a lot of the kids – where do they get catered for? Who is catching them?

**Melina BATH:** Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, Ms Bath. Mrs Deeming.

**Moira DEEMING:** Thank you so much. That was just fantastic. And well done, Anastasia. I can see what a beautiful relationship you have. I have got a teaching background, and it is hard to cater for kids when you have a whole big group.

**Britt HOLMBERG:** Absolutely.

**Moira DEEMING:** And I am sure that the other teachers cared about all these kids. It is actually distressing to all these teachers. Another woman who was in here this morning talked about how they lie awake at night worrying. I am so relieved to hear about this and that it is going well.

I want to just ask: in terms of this kind of program, do you think it would be able to be modelled outside within a school, as a separate program within a school, or does it physically need to be taken out?

**Britt HOLMBERG:** They do exist. Internal FLOs absolutely exist in schools. They get different names. Some are called Connect. The schools make up an array of names for their internal FLOs. So they definitely exist, but yet again, it is about having the right people within that space of those internal FLOs. For some of our young people that might be in an internal FLO some of their disengagement might come from the fact that they have had a negative experience with that school on a whole, as it is still a part of that school. Sometimes it is still not the correct space and still not the right environment for them. I think sometimes with the high schools it

is really challenging. If you have got students that are at that really challenging end of needing that support, having them still in a school still does not support those students, especially if there are social issues. Those things are still existing, so that can be a real challenge too.

It also really depends on how those FLOs are being run and how they are being structured in a school, because I guess there is no sort of predeveloped or prescribed formula for how a FLO should operate. Sometimes schools are really running blind. They are just doing these things to try to do the best they can to support, but there might not be the knowledge there or the passion from where it is needed to make sure they are successful. That is no criticism; it is just that there is nothing really to work off for people. They are doing the best they can with the tools they have got. They are just doing what feels best, I guess. Nothing has been proven or they are not working to a framework or they are not working to a model that might successfully exist. It is just about trying to create a space that caters for their kids as best they can, but they might not have the funding or resources to do that at the level they need to as well. So there are those elements too.

**Moira DEEMING:** It just does really fill that gap where a teacher has a responsibility to a whole classroom of kids and you know that the kid is acting inappropriately. You still care about that kid, but how do you look after the whole group? I think it is really great that there is all this focus on kids that need that extra help. I just want to know how you got into this school in your career.

**Britt HOLMBERG:** I think it comes back to you either love this sort of work or you do not, and I love this sort of work. I think that I would speak for any of the staff that work at my school. I have got a special ed background. I was at a school, Kalianna, which is a special school in Bendigo, for 11 years and knew this was the sort of work that I loved and was really passionate about. I think I speak for myself and my colleague Nicole, who is here: it is not our jobs. For a lot of teachers our jobs do not start at 9 and end at 5. They go as long as they need to and at any time that they need to – holidays, yes. We were down visiting our students that were in custody, that were in hospital and things like that over the holidays, because for us they always come first. I think, for me, it has just been a natural pathway, and I am really fortunate to be at the school that I am at because we have great kids and we really love them.

**Moira DEEMING:** Yes, all kids are valuable, and I just love to see that you are able to express that care that you have for the kids and their families. I think that is wonderful.

**Britt HOLMBERG:** Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you. Mr Puglielli.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** Thank you, Chair. Thank you both for coming before us today. Just following on from some of the questions that we have already had, Britt, could you perhaps share with us some of the highlights that you have experienced in doing this work?

**Britt HOLMBERG:** Absolutely. Our little campus has come a long way in the last three years, and we have worked really, really hard I guess to cater for the students that our little campus was created for. That is really focused on catering for that top tier, that top 5 per cent that gets referred to in our community and our students who really need us. When I took this role at BFLO, someone who was on my panel said to me, 'If you can even get some of these kids through the door, then you will have ticked that box.' They sort of said that that may be impossible to achieve, and I think it is not just me at all, it is the team that we have around our little school. Our attendance is exceptional in terms of the kids that we engage. We have kids that have been disengaged from learning for so long who turn up every single day. And I can say for Anastasia before she came to our school, we have had Anastasia and her two siblings, and they will stay connected to our school for years to come. We do not just shut off when they are 18. We are there for as long as they need. They are welcome back at any point for support or any way that we can help them.

But I think one of the highlights for me has been seeing that increased attendance and seeing those young people that we were told would be virtually impossible to get through the door come through the door every single day, even when they are not meant to or when school has finished or school is not on. Even when it is a pupil-free day, they see our cars there and they are there. We welcome that. That is how we want to be. We want that to be the safe place. The absolute highlight for me is seeing BFLO and seeing our little school in our really ordinary little rectangular building where we do not even have staff toilets or a staffroom or anything like that – nothing. But those little walls hold so much safety for our young people, and for me that is the best thing

that we can offer, and the most important thing that we can offer is that our students know we are there. They know where to find us and they know where they can get that support. That did not happen overnight. That took a long time with the right people around our team to make that happen. I hope all of our students know that that is not just for while they are there; that is lifelong.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** Thank you. You have just touched on this with regard to the facilities, but we have heard about funding in this session. If there were more funding on the table for you to receive – I mean, you have raised facilities – how would you like to see that directed?

**Britt HOLMBERG:** Oh, my goodness. How far can I go?

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** Go for gold.

**Britt HOLMBERG:** Well, my dream for BFLO is really for us to be a community space for our students. Being a school is not enough. It does not offer enough of what our young people need. You know, I would love us to become a community facility where we have school and we have access to outside agencies that they need. You know, at our little school we do not have an outdoor space. We open up onto a car park. Our most vulnerable students in our community do not have the basic privileges of what going to school is – having a grass area to play on, having a basketball court to go to, having breakout spaces or actual classrooms. We are talking about our most vulnerable people in our community, and we are not giving them access to a level of education that their mainstream peers and other peers in their community have. We are working at the bare minimum with the bare minimum facilities, and so I would love to see them have designated spaces that they deserve and that other schools get. For us sometimes it is really hard. We sit there and we say, ‘Oh, this school’s been given another bucket of millions of dollars, and we don’t even have toilets for our kids’ or ‘We don’t even have a grass area for them to play on.’ So it sends a really negative message to our young people of ‘This is what you deserve. You don’t deserve what other young people have. You get this.’ And for lots of our students that has been their whole lives.

So where does that change come from? Our young people deserve what other young people get and what is an absolute right in Australia – to have the privilege of going to a nice school and having access to those basic resources. For me, I would love to see BFLO become a model FLO of what that looks like and how that can be and how that can operate in a community. Also, I think, even thinking beyond that – again, coming back to how prevention is better than a cure – it is how we look at that primary school space and how we support our primary school students so that we are not looking at these interventions once they get to high school and we are not looking at these interventions once they have fallen off the rails and once things go terribly wrong, which, unfortunately, for a lot of our young people, is where intervention comes; it is when they are in the court system or when they have disengaged for so long. That is when we are saying, ‘Oh, we’ve got to do things,’ and we can put resources and funding in place.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** Thank you both.

**Britt HOLMBERG:** Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you. Dr Heath.

**Renee HEATH:** Thank you. I actually have a couple of questions for Anastasia, if she is happy for me to ask them. If you do not want to, just let me know. How long have you been at FLO?

**ANASTASIA:** I do not know. How long?

**Britt HOLMBERG:** A year and a half – about that.

**ANASTASIA:** Yes.

**Renee HEATH:** And before you just never felt right in the other school? What was that like?

**ANASTASIA:** I just never went.

**Renee HEATH:** You never went – because it was stressful or not a nice environment?

**ANASTASIA:** Just too much around.

**Renee HEATH:** Yes, a lot going on. So FLO is calmer then, is it?

**ANASTASIA:** Yes.

**Renee HEATH:** And you never went to the other school. Do you ever miss days at FLO?

**ANASTASIA:** No.

**Renee HEATH:** No. So that is a huge difference, isn't it? So what year are you in now?

**ANASTASIA:** Year 9.

**Renee HEATH:** Year 9. And what do you want to do in the future? Do you have any ideas?

**ANASTASIA:** Eyelashes.

**Renee HEATH:** Amazing. I will come and see you, absolutely. That is fabulous. Do you think that if you had stayed at the other school you would have had the confidence to try something like that?

**ANASTASIA:** Probably not.

**Renee HEATH:** Probably not, yes. And the teachers – I was very interested. It seems like you and Britt – by the way, I think you seem like a very outstanding person – have a great relationship. At your other school, was there ever any possibility of that sort of relationship with a teacher, where you could trust them, or did it seem like potentially there was a bit of a barrier? Did you feel like they were up there, or were you afraid of them? I am not trying to put words in your mouth.

**ANASTASIA:** No. I trusted one teacher, and that was all.

**Renee HEATH:** That is amazing.

**ANASTASIA:** I did not really like any other teachers.

**Renee HEATH:** What was it about that one teacher that made you trust them?

**ANASTASIA:** He was just kind to me and told me that if I needed to open up I could.

**Renee HEATH:** That is so good. And do you find that your teachers at FLO are more like that one teacher at your school that you did trust?

**ANASTASIA:** Yes.

**Renee HEATH:** That is pretty good, isn't it? Do you think you will ever go back to a regular school, or do you think that you would like to stay here ongoing?

**ANASTASIA:** Stay here.

**Renee HEATH:** Yes. Do you think other kids could benefit from it? Are there kids, when you think back, that maybe have left school because it was too much or that could benefit from something like this?

**ANASTASIA:** Mmm.

**Renee HEATH:** That is really good. Well, good luck with your eyelash business. I honestly think that is a booming business and it will be absolutely fantastic. Well done. You should be so proud. Britt, do you think that programs like this should be trialled elsewhere?

**Britt HOLMBERG:** I think it has to be a measured approach because, as I think I have mentioned a few times, you need the right people, you need the right staff. Coming back to, I guess, what Travis was talking about, who presented before me, I could not agree more around that internship and being able to have teaching. It needs to be rolled out differently, I think. It is really difficult for teachers coming into the profession to

essentially know what they are in for – to know what it actually looks like to operate in a school. And I think, yet again, to operate in – the same as special education or a FLO – something that is more specialised, you really need to have the right skill set. Like I said, it would not matter how small you started, if you had the wrong people in that environment it would not work. It has to be the right personality type with the right skill set and the right attitude and philosophy around education.

**Renee HEATH:** And probably quite calming, like Anastasia said – people that are calm and safe to be around.

**Britt HOLMBERG:** Absolutely.

**Renee HEATH:** This sort of seems like a rude question, but you mentioned how some of your students are in custody. Obviously there are some challenges there. Has there ever been a situation where there have been unsafe situations at school, either physical or any mental or emotional abuse?

**Britt HOLMBERG:** Absolutely. I think any school experiences that. To work in a school is to have those experiences. I have said a few times I was at a special school before being at FLO, and special schools present with so many challenges in that space just because of the disability and mental capacity of many of their students and their social skills. We are not too dissimilar. However, I would actually say that at our school, because of the relationship we have with our students – the students that we have in custody, the students that we have operating at that level – we would never have an issue with those students.

**Renee HEATH:** You are their trusted person.

**Britt HOLMBERG:** The level of trust and relationship is so extensive that we are able to offer that real guidance and support for our young people. But they also would not want to treat us like that. They are really proud of their school. They are really connected, and that is something we have worked as a team to really develop over the years for our young people. Again, it comes back to that safety. But young people that are in custody and that people would think would present with exceptionally challenging behaviours and would be the most challenging students to work with in our space are the most beautiful, trustworthy, dependable young people you can find. They are so loyal because we show that loyalty and we show that trust and we show that respect to them. They return it tenfold. I think that is something that is so vital to any school's success. It comes back to that UPR, that unconditional positive regard, and it comes back to those relationships. Kids do not learn from people they do not like. We really make sure that the first thing we do is build that relationship. We definitely have challenges, we definitely have challenging behaviours, and that is something we work on really as a team to make sure we support that young person. But behaviour always comes back to avoiding or obtaining something, so it is really making sure that we are meeting the need of that young person. For a lot of our young people it is that they need trust and they need a relationship, and we are able to offer that. I hope that answers your question.

**Renee HEATH:** Yes. Thank you so much, and just keep up your outstanding work.

**Britt HOLMBERG:** Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you. Mr McCracken, have you got any questions?

**Joe McCracken:** Yes, I do. Just a few quick ones, because I know we are short on time. Firstly, congratulations on all the work you do. It is a big undertaking, and you should be 100 per cent totally proud of everything that you have achieved so far. I cannot wait to see if we are back here in five years time what we might be talking about. You seriously need to be acknowledged for your good work. Well done.

You made a point before about the criteria for young people to get into special education, special schools, and you said that sometimes it does not always support that young person, because, for example, with an IQ of 70, if someone has got an IQ of 71, the criteria can be rigid. What do you think we could do for the eligibility criteria to ensure that a young person is supported in the best possible way? Because I get the sense that perhaps it is not just the IQ that is the only factor there. There are a whole number of different factors that go into assessing someone's eligibility or suitability for special education, and given your background I would be interested to hear your thoughts.

**Britt HOLMBERG:** It is a really longstanding debate, I guess, because that criteria has been something that has been discussed for a very, very long time. To be into a special development school it is under 50, and to enter that special school space it is 50 to 70. So you can imagine for young people that are just over and who do not have that number, they will not get into a special school, or it is very challenging for them to access that support – absolutely. I mean, there are great things happening. There is DIP funding, which is a program for disabilities which is offering a broader range of funding to students who do not meet that criteria, but it still comes back to what that looks like in a high school and how schools are able to access that funding, and you are still relying on schools having the knowledge to put those strategies and interventions in place to be able to then get the funding they need for those young people.

Special schools are not necessarily the entire answer because some of our young people would not engage in a special school. They would not want to attend a special school. Your special schools – I have an enormous amount of respect for the work they do and who they look after and who they support, but no matter if that criteria is changed or what that looks like, there is still a massive gap of young people that are not being catered for and that is, I think, where a lot of focus needs to go. Like I said earlier, the students who do not meet the criteria to access that special school but cannot access mainstream education, what happens to them?

**Joe McCracken:** I guess the point I was trying to get to is that it is probably a system that we are dealing with which is sort of in a way living in the past, because whatever the young person's needs are, it is probably more about the assessment of what those needs are, whatever it might be, as compared to meeting a particular criteria and therefore you are allocated into a specialist school or development or whatever the case might be. So I guess the point I am trying to make is that perhaps we need to look at the system in terms of supporting the young person in their individual circumstances as opposed to 'You meet the criteria – tick, tick, tick, tick – you are in that box now'. Is that a fair way of looking at it?

**Britt HOLMBERG:** I think so, but I think you have still got a huge discrepancy between young people who might be attending a special school and young people who do not meet that criteria, so it is really, really broad. I think it is a really challenging space to look at how you would redefine that criteria and what that looks like for that special school enrolment, because while I am talking about some of our students who are just above that criteria, a special school would not be the right place for them. That would not be the right setting either. Besides FLOs and maybe some internal FLOs that high schools are operating – but there is such discrepancy between those too – there is really not a space that caters for their needs, and a special school might necessarily not be that.

**Joe McCracken:** I think that is where the challenge is. It is finding out what the assessment is and what would be the best for that young person. The last thing I had to say is we have to make recommendations to the government. What are some of the things you think we should be recommending that would make your life in your role to support young people a lot easier?

**Britt HOLMBERG:** I think it is really looking, again, at that space of what happens for young people who are not able to access that high school mainstream education and that do fit within that gap, and looking at FLOs and looking at that model and how they are funded and what that looks like, because they exist in lots of communities within Victoria, but I think they are really at a very infant stage in terms of their development and how they are operating and how they are catering for young people. There is I guess not a lot of knowledge about them and not a lot for us to work on. We are all sort of working on our own models and working on our own pathways. There is not a lot of guidance. I think it is around those pathways for those young people in those teenage years and what is available to them in that space before they are 16 and disengaged and before they can access employment. I think it is not just about offering more funding. It is not just about pouring more money into different situations. It is really about looking at the frameworks that also exist in schools to support people when they are there.

One thing that we talk a lot about at school is the professional development that is offered to teachers, but then again that accountability of what that actually looks like once that professional development has been completed and also around not just labelling things with trauma-informed practice but how that actually operates in a school and how teachers are accessing early knowledge to put into their practice when they are first coming into the teaching practice and where we are getting our teachers from and who is entering that teaching force. I could not agree more with that internship and looking at that space around how teachers are trained in that really, really early space to equip them better for what is to come later down the track.

**Joe McCracken:** I am a big believer in the apprenticeship model too, so we are on a unity ticket there. But anyway I think my time is up. Thanks very much.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, Joe. I am mindful of time. I just want to say congratulations for the service you are providing. I want to make this very short. I know that we have been throwing around the words ‘special school’. I think it is more appropriate with what you have set out here to say ‘flexible learning’. I do not think this is special, because everyone has different types of learning levels and they learn differently. There is a saying that good education outcomes at times are more important and valuable than good economic outcomes, so I think what you are providing is more valuable than solving economic outcomes. One question I want to ask you is: with all the kids that come to your service and your institution, do you actually have to look into why they disengaged and what the causes are for that?

**Britt Holmberg:** When students come to us through that panel process and we are looking at the referrals from the high school there is usually some information provided around that disengagement in terms of what they are struggling with at their school. But usually the reason for disengagement is much more long term than just some naughty behaviour that has existed in the classroom or not completing schoolwork or the school is struggling to manage the behaviour or how it is presenting. I think that is actually something that we need far more knowledge about – why young people are not actually engaging – because while we have little bits and pieces of the puzzle and the story, it is usually far bigger than the behaviour that is presenting at that end point. It is the tip of the iceberg and what is actually going on for that young person underneath is far more profound and far more widespread. Usually for us it takes a long time to discover where that disengagement has come from, but also I think it comes back to how those young people are operating in schools and it is how they are able to be catered for. It comes back to their level of learning and it comes back to how they are able to access those high school models, speaking purely from that high school perspective. It is very extensive, and we are usually working off a very small bit of that puzzle.

**The CHAIR:** I think that is why it is so important to have your centre as well as the normal education system that we are looking at at the moment for the range or the level the student can access as well.

Again, I want to thank you so much for coming in. Thank you, Anastasia, for sharing your experience as well with us. Hopefully we can gather what you have provided and put it in some recommendations towards improving and enhancing what are providing at the moment.

**Witnesses withdrew.**